

Roses in Concrete: A Perspective on how Agency and Grit can Foster the Success of All Students, Especially those Most Disadvantaged

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You see, you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We would all love its will to reach the sun. Well, we are the roses, this is the concrete, and these are my damaged petals. Don't ask me why...ask me how!

This poem by legendary rap-artist Tupac Shakur illustrates true resilience despite adversity. Tupac is right that such an extraordinary rose deserves recognition for beating the odds and flourishing amongst the challenges of the concrete. Instead of focusing on its damaged petals, we should celebrate its will to reach the sun.

In the United States this notion of “rugged individualism”²² is accepted as a mainstream value believed to be linked to success. The longstanding concept implies that Americans reap what they sow and that individual effort is the key determinant for future outcomes. Recent research in psychology has reinforced these premises, bringing forward the idea of “grit” as a characteristic observable in successful stu-

dents.²³ Some popular interpretations of the grit framework have taken this concept further, supporting the ideology that the onus of academic achievement should rest upon the individual student.²⁴ However an overemphasis on this lens can also cause failures to be considered a result of a deficiency on the student or their culture.²⁵

Surely individual aptitude, determination, and grit are important to scholastic success and mobility, but should they be viewed as the primary components necessary for greatness? If schools are gardens, such a narrow focus on American individualism might impede the process of growing as many roses as possible. Instead of standing alone, we may be surrounded by plenty of rosebuds which simply need more fertilizer to bloom. The American concrete is a formidable force that can stand in the way of many students' success. As such, it remains critical to acknowledge that systems of support are also needed for success.

To fully consider the possibilities of grit, one should also consider the social context and lived experiences of students. Grit research itself does not explicitly tout grit for explaining achievement by itself. Preeminent scholar of grit, Angela Duckworth, herself says, “Of course, your opportunities— for example, having a great coach or teacher— matter tremendously, too, and maybe more than anything about the individual.”²⁶ Without also considering these outside forces, we may have a limited understanding of goal formation and social mobility.

This paper presents real examples applying the sociological concept of agency to complement grit, to offer a broader understanding of

²² A term first coined by Herbert Hoover during his presidency, also associated with “Social Darwinism.”

²³ Duckworth, Angela. *Grit: Passion, perseverance and the science of success*. Random House, 2016.

²⁴ Tough, Paul. *How children succeed*. Random House, 2013.

²⁵ McWhorter, John H. *Losing the race: Self-sabotage in Black America*. Simon and Schuster, 2000.

²⁶ Duckworth, Angela. *Grit: Passion, perseverance and the science of success*. Random House, 2016.

factors that facilitate academic achievement, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this paper I will first explain what agency is and how it can be a useful concept to increase collective responsibilities in education. Then, I will give a quick overview of my research on agency: an independently-conducted investigation which examines 50 exceptional students who exhibit agency *and* grit, through their success, despite immense challenges early in life.²⁷

The American Concrete and the Marginalization of Students

In the American concrete, disadvantages are concentrated. Instead of an *achievement* gap problem, which reinforces individualism, acknowledging an *opportunity* gap could better address disparities that limit children's success. Schools and teachers are often left overburdened to effectively combat all of the social factors that influence underachievement—many of which come from outside the classroom. The U.S. continues to have the highest rate of income inequality among first-world nations²⁸ with sociological research consistently showing that public school students from wealthier backgrounds attain higher and more quality levels of education than others.²⁹

Today, one in five American children grow up in poverty; in New York, the number is one in every four. Out of New York's 1.1 million public school students, 80,000 children were homeless in 2013, and 11,000 kids were in foster care in 2014. Brown University's Annenberg

Institute for School Reform found that in 19 of New York City's poorest neighborhoods, only 10% of seniors graduated from high school college-ready.³⁰ These neighborhoods are made up of close to 100% black and Latino residents. In contrast, in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Manhattan, the vast majority of students were college-ready. Less than 10% of residents in these neighborhoods are black and Latino. These roses need collective cultivation.

Through fostering both individual-level traits like grit, and taking into account social context through fostering agency, educators can work to holistically understand their students' situations and individualize pathways for their success.

Poor students need schools to be the positive institutions where they can have their basic needs for food, shelter, and supervision met. In fact, policies that look to equalize opportunities, such as offering universal free breakfast for all students regardless of income, have been proven to increase attendance and increase academic achievement.³¹ The problem with traditional "roses-in-concrete" stories is that they can keep us from realizing these collective responsibilities in education.

²⁷ Kundu, Anindya. "Adding A Social Perspective To Grit: How Students Navigate Disadvantages And Gain Agency". (Ph.D. New York University Print, 2017).

²⁸ Marsh, John. *Class dismissed: Why we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality*. NYU Press, 2011.

²⁹ Ransaw, Theodore S., and Richard Majors, eds. *Closing the Education Achievement Gaps for African American Males*. MSU Press, 2016.

³⁰ Fruchter, Norm, Megan Hester, Christina Mokhtar, and Zach Shahn. "Is Demography Still Destiny? Neighborhood Demographics and Public High School Students' Readiness for College in New York City. A Research and Policy Brief." *Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (NJ1)* (2012).

³¹ Leos-Urbel, Jacob, Amy Ellen Schwartz, Meryle Weinstein, and Sean Corcoran. "Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes." *Economics of Education Review* 36 (2013): 88-107.

Education remains the arena with possibly the largest payoff for considering social context and fostering the success of all students. Underachievement harms economic growth. A McKinsey study showed that if America could narrow the achievement gap between white students and black and Latino students, G.D.P. would go up between \$310 and \$525 billion.³² In our recent recession, more educated populations recovered faster than less educated communities.

While grit research does not explicitly tout grit as wholly accounting for the complexity of scholastic achievement by itself, popular applications of grit can fail to fully understand what causes the social mobility of students, especially for those who are disadvantaged.

As the number of social problems in this country grows—the requirement of an increasingly expensive college degree to gain entry to the middle-class; the dwindling strength of social security where fewer active workers support the pension of recent retirees; the proliferation of mass incarceration and the amount of tax dollars spent annually on prison inmates—it becomes necessary to acknowledge that systems of support are needed for success. Only then will we be confident that subsequent generations will be well equipped to tackle the many challenges we leave for them, from a collective and unified front.

Through fostering both individual-level traits like grit, and taking into account social

context through fostering agency, educators can work to holistically understand their students' situations and individualize pathways for their success. Without employing this type of comprehensive approach, the desire for children of all backgrounds to academically succeed may remain a vision unfulfilled.

The Perspective of Agency to Complement to Grit and Broaden the Scope of Success

From a sociological standpoint, popular *applications* of grit may have certain limitations in explaining academic success: First, they may not address the social contexts (families, networks, demographics) or structural challenges of the young people whose achievements they assess. Second, they may not necessarily be rooted in a dynamic understanding of these students' cultures, which can change and adapt under different environmental contexts.

While grit research does not explicitly tout grit as wholly accounting for the complexity of scholastic achievement by itself, popular applications of grit can fail to fully understand what causes the social mobility of students, especially for those who are disadvantaged. Without a more holistic approach to academic achievement, many issues students face can go ignored and students may fail to develop practical and challenging passions and goals to strive for.

Used by social scientists, the concept of agency, or the potential individuals have to enact free will and impact their own lives, is context-specific. It is related to the unique circumstances and social position of each person which helps to assess their specific capacities for change.³³ Thus agency also considers one's

³² Auguste, Byron G., Bryan Hancock, and Martha La-boissiere. "The economic cost of the US education gap." *The McKinsey Quarterly* (2009): 1-2.

³³ Noguera, Pedro, and Kundu, Anindya. "Why America's Infatuation with 'Grit' Can't Solve Our Educational Dilemmas." *Virginia Policy Review*, Summer Issue (2014).

demographics, networks, class-position and race to assess their subsequent power.

My research on agency adds two dimensions to grit research. First, an observation of how individuals navigate opportunity structures (schools, higher education, and enrichment programs) and exhibit help-seeking behavior. Second, an investigation of the role of various support systems through identifying the role of social and cultural capital in these individuals' lives.

Successful students from troubled backgrounds benefit from both personal and social factors that facilitate their upward mobility and allow them to set realistic and challenging goals. Studying these exceptional cases can hopefully serve to generate hypotheses on the interplay between individual and social factors that can constitute educational success. We can then think about creating better-tailored pathways for disadvantaged students to take advantage of.

As such, my definition of agency stems from interdisciplinary considerations between the fields of sociology and psychology: Agency must be context-specific and understood as a function of the system of which it is a part.³⁴ While it can manifest through action and outcome, agency can be promoted by internalized qualities like self-efficacy.³⁵ Agency can exhibit resistance to express individualism,³⁶ but more importantly, *successful* agency benefits from critical thinking on one's social position and deliberate efforts taken to change one's circumstances for the better.³⁷ The cases presented in

this paper work to exhibit how agency works dynamically through each of these characteristics.

Independent, Qualitative Research on Agency

My research, involving students in New York, asks a simple question: How have disadvantaged students, who experience levels of success, navigated obstacles to succeed? Within this question there are broader implications and sub-questions that may include: How have they obtained support and developed networks? What role can educators play to facilitate and help shift students' mindsets positively towards education? What pedagogical tactics can help to foster the realistic goal formation for disadvantaged students?

My analysis shows that success is possible over a wide range of disadvantages, including, but not limited to: students coming from very low-income and single-parent households; parents who have struggled with substance abuse, or participants who themselves have struggled with substance abuse; and subjects who have been previously homeless, incarcerated, or suffered from ongoing trauma.

Individuals included in this project also possess high levels of grit. However, because marginalized students experience greater threats to forming academic identities,³⁸ grit alone is unlikely to account for their surprising upward mobility. This research indicates that these students have also benefit from a range of support systems which enable them to think critically about disadvantages and act accordingly to overcome them.

³⁴ Geertz, Clifford. *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Vol. 5019. Basic books, 1973; Sahlins, Marshall. *Culture and practical reason*. University of Chicago Press, 1976.

³⁵ Bandura, Albert. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Macmillan, 1997.

³⁶ Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, roll: The world the slaves made*. Vol. 652. Vintage, 1976.

³⁷ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 1968; Kundu, Anindya. "Adding A Social Perspective To

Grit: How Students Navigate Disadvantages And Gain Agency". (Ph.D. New York University Print, 2017).

³⁸ Ransaw, Theodore S., and Richard Majors, eds. *Closing the Education Achievement Gaps for African American Males*. MSU Press, 2016.

Interestingly, modern grit research has largely been quantitative in nature, based on surveys and datasets that monitor the achievement and persistence of students over time. At the same time, Angela Duckworth's early work on grit involved interviewing people in various fields about success, which eventually helped her to define and operationalize grit.

Ultimately, by helping to increase students' capacities for positive change towards desired ends, their grit also increases as well.

Similarly, my early work on agency has been serving to inform my own definitions of what agency can look like in real contexts. Putting these two investigations in conversation with one another allows for the type of mixed-methods, interdisciplinary approach necessary in understanding success more broadly, all while taking a holistic approach to education.

As agency is directly related to social life and one's ability to act within it, it can be fostered on multiple levels, by multiple stakeholders in children's lives. Ultimately, by helping to increase students' *capacities* for positive change towards desired ends, their *grit* also increases as well. Students become better suited to achieve specific, passion-related goals through tailored strategies they may not have formed earlier.

The following two themes from my research on agency highlight how certain considerations can either advance or impede agency. The manner in which students are treated, with respect to their individuality, can foster their growth and hope for the future. This can be accomplished through practical and replicable means, on different levels, by different influences in students' lives. These themes primarily showcase how youth must start with an understanding of their own position in the world to

then be able to improve their circumstances through gains in grit and other behavioral changes.

I am highlighting the stories I collected from my research participants—"Joe", "Imperial", and "Liz"—through addressing two themes uncovered in my work. These students were chosen because they exemplify how certain supporting structures and pedagogical relationships worked to increase their agency. That is to say, these individuals were not chosen because their stories were more colorful than my other participants'. The following data and analysis is a simplified, yet representative, of my findings in this project as a whole.

Theme 1: Strong Roots lead to Branching-Out: Passion is fueled when Origin meets Opportunity

Subjects in this research on agency have exhibited a strong sense of their roots and where they are from. These mindsets are found to be incredibly important, serving as strong foundations for individuals to stay grounded, but also as platforms from which to grow.

From a very early age, Joe learned what was important in life through necessity. The majority of his life before young adulthood was spent homeless, moving from place to place without a permanent address to call home. He described growing up without any kind of safety net, where basic needs like shelter were not always expected:

I was in second, third grade and I had to miss two, three weeks of school to watch my sister whenever she got sick. That aspect shaped a lot of my sense of having to fixate on what's important. You had to pick between what's most important: Going to school or having a house to live in? Watching out for family. For those type of things.

I feel like I had a reality check much earlier than most kids. A lot of people don't usually have to go through that.

Having experienced this level of struggle, this early, fostered Joe's grit; he was determined to make something out of himself, but he also knew that hard that work was not necessarily enough to overcome these basic obstacles. In this case, grit alone could not level the playing field.

Joe knew that he also needed opportunities to take advantage of, to navigate between, which is an aspect not currently investigated in grit literature. Interestingly, though, since childhood, Joe has exemplified gritty behavior by seeking opportunities, which can increase his agency. His primary goal has been to better his situation and grow as a person. This background is perhaps the most influential factor, which allows Joe to be brave and engage in things like networking, a simple practice, but one which poor students are sometimes afraid of.

Imperial adds depth to this idea. Also having grown up in a very poor neighborhood, he credits his middle school's approach and academic culture for shaping his identity and mindset for success:

I think, overall, what really helped me was the fact that I went to a school that was a small, all-black private school in the Bronx. It was the last one in New York City. It closed down. It really influenced me. We learned about black history, we learned about different black innovators. We were taught from a young age, "You need to be like these people. You need to be as professional as them." We had a headmistress who was pretty much on our ass—to be very straightforward—to be on our learning. So that helped a lot.

Through real-life examples, Imperial learned that while the odds may have been stacked against him, achieving goals was not out of reach. As Paulo Freire contended, students need to use schools as a place to critically reflect on their social positions so as to be liberated from them.

This type of acceptance and recognition helped to foster resiliency and grit, through identity and agency. His school crafted curriculum and relationships that were built upon this premise—not to be disheartening, but rather, to be motivational. It worked.

You had to pick between what's most important: Going to school or having a house to live in? Watching out for family. For those type of things. I feel like I had a reality check much earlier than most kids. A lot of people don't usually have to go through that.

The school's approach of identifying role models tied to identity helped immensely for goal formation, from an early age. Imperial started to formulate his goal to become his family's first college-goer. Today, Imperial is a U.S Fulbright Grantee and MPA Candidate, in Italy.

While Liz also came from a school and community with very few resources, she turned to her church for structure and to fortify her identity:

A big part of my childhood or my teenage years, I was part of a church. I was helping [with] a lot of the stuff there. I helped teach an English class to Spanish-speaking adults. I did simple things, like plan menus, to sell [food on Sunday], to fundraise money for

different events that we had. Just being in that environment and being able to do something as simple as give up your chair for an older lady, and to see their smile on their face, that's nice

Here, Liz's church not only taught her moral and civic responsibility, they also taught her skills related to teaching, planning and fundraising. Upon seeing her efforts foster community and happiness, Liz's grit and passion for service increased.

One of those groups was the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. They taught me how to organize, work in the community, how to properly protest. It gave me those civic values that I had not really known before, because growing up where I grew up, you're not necessarily taught how to organize or anything like that.

The church provided her an explicit pathway that neither her school nor home could, but one that she was able to relate to academic success. Even though she lived in a building that she characterized as riddled with gangs, she was able to stay on a better path, eventually becoming the salutatorian of her high school and receive a full academic scholarship to attend NYU.

When such community-minded interests are able to intersect with career visualization, students can start to see themselves thriving in any situation. With slightly tailored opportunity structures, a person's origin can truly become a building block for excellence. Says, Imperial, on a community group that helped him in this fashion:

One of those groups was the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. They taught me how to organize, work in the community, how to properly protest. It gave me those civic values that I had not really known before, because growing up where I grew up, you're not necessarily taught how to organize or anything like that. So seeing this organization, organizing the Bronx, I think I did magnificent work, on school closing, on different development. It helped me out a lot. I was actively involved in these campaigns. It was very empowering for me, because I was taking a hand in my community, and I knew I could do something

This passage highlights the unison of grit and agency, a harmony that can develop deep passions. Building professional skills atop students' near-and-dear interests can allow these passions to serve as lifelong motivators. This takeaway can be applied to after-school programs or groups for youth: programs should be interest-driven, but they should also remain versatile enough to allow for students to pursue multiple activities and crafts to see what really engages them.³⁹ With routine support and structure, these initial interests can be reinforced and become expertise.

Students may be astutely aware when this type of community-minded approach is handled *insincerely*, causing them to possibly retract and disengage instead. An example of this can occur regularly in school settings, through a pedagogical tactic which is ironically meant to incite participation. This is an example of an

³⁹ Kundu, Anindya. "Digital After School Programming as Prevention: Positive Outlets for Youth Expression in an Increasingly Hi-Tech World." Published by Center of Applied Research Solutions, Prevention Tactics, February, 2014. <http://www.cars-rp.org/publications/Prevention%20Tactics/PT09.11.14.pdf>

incorrect approach that was intended to get Joe to participate in school, by making assumptions about his identity:

In this new school, anytime something came up on Hispanics, my teacher would ask me for my opinion. I was like thirteen years old. They put me on the spot. While back home, in New York, I never had to worry about that, because everybody was Hispanic.

Joe seldom, if ever, told his teachers about the types of challenges he faced at home. As such, teachers at school could not always connect with him on a personal level.

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Thus, without knowing his teachers out of the classroom, he felt that when they overreached, that they were pretending to care. In the above example Joe recounts how some teachers in New Jersey tried to interact with him on a superficial level, on the basis of race, making him feel like more of an outsider than being included. This type of cold-calling could easily dampen a student's immediate grit and subsequent agency, as it is not a genuine understanding and celebrating of origin. To use the Freirean term, this shows a lack of respect for a student's *praxis*, or their specific loci of action and reflection,⁴⁰ and would not serve to enhance their potential for learning.

Liz is a good example of the power of praxis. She went to NYU bright-eyed and eager to excel, but found herself struggling to stay afloat once there. College felt like a desolate place; she tried to juggle commuting for hours between school and home, a full course load, and her own shyness towards asking for help. This was a low-point in her life and she was placed on indefinite academic probation. After losing her scholarship, Liz worked as a parking lot attendant in the Bronx. But that whole year off, she reflected on herself and the shortcomings that she saw in her community. She began to refocus on her goal, which was to go back to NYU and do things the right way. This shift in mindset, along with tremendous grit, eventually led her to reapply and receive back her entire, full-ride scholarship for a second chance.

When asked why she reapplied to NYU and did not consider other college options, Liz replied:

I guess, I like to finish what I start—what I always start. So I just *have* to come! It wasn't an option for me to go anywhere else! I *had* to get this degree from NYU. I spent time thinking about what I wanted to do. Because what was the point, if I was just going to come here, and let the same thing happen again?

This passage embodies how students can become grittier, if agency is cultivated by first embracing one's origin as a point for reflection. When one's roots and a sense of where they came from are fostered, failure might not seem like a viable option.

Before her probation, Liz was simply following a path she thought was necessary without much attention to purpose. This caused her to burn out early. Liz was forced to reimagine her future and formulate her college goals on her terms. After reflection, only NYU would do for her. She was then able to exhibit an almost stubborn adherence to her previously set goals,

⁴⁰Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum, 1970.

making for a keen example of how grit can be enhanced by agency-related considerations. As such, opportunity structures that are able to treat background and identity with respect tend to beget strong results.

Theme 2: Expectations Feed Help-Seeking Behavior: Positive Reinforcement Waters Growth

Still, without explicit structures and occasional social support, even the grittiest of individuals might not find a pathway to success. The American concrete is perhaps too rigid to penetrate by resilience and self-efficacy alone. Sometimes disadvantages can keep students from realizing their specific potential for success.

Generally, participants in my research project have all pointed to experiences where teachers, adults, or schools supported them towards forming their goals through setting high expectations. For instance, because Liz seemed naturally bright to her teachers early on, they often worked to scaffold her work and keep her challenged:

My teachers had a big influence in shaping my growth. My middle school teachers really pushed me to do well. My experience was different compared to other people. They would give me separate projects to keep me engaged.

Liz highlights the importance that pedagogical strategies, specifically differentiated instruction, can have in fostering lasting academic mindsets. Liz is also aware that teachers could not necessarily give special attention to all students, especially in a school with less resources, like the ones she attended. Still, a level of individualization for students helps them to stay engaged and feel important.

When this basic push, built on a mutually understanding relationship is missing, there can

be negative effects. This is a primary factor that was missing for Liz when she got to college. She felt isolated, an aspect which seemed to multiply over time, as she became less and less able to reach out to her teachers for help:

I was in a class called “Gentrification and the Inner City,” and I really liked it. But I barely went and did the work. I had a group presentation and I let these two girls down. I was just so *angry* at myself. Everything happened so fast. When I asked for help, it was too late. I had to withdraw from two of my classes, and I got two F’s in the other two. That’s how bad that semester was.

Though it is difficult to speculate all of the reasons Liz failed this semester, this example highlights an instance where a teacher could have intervened. Though in college the onus is generally on the student to self-advocate, in earlier stages, teachers have various opportunities to step in by monitoring students’ progress. Even simple efforts can help students avoid monumental failure, as academic success slips further away as mistakes built up. Non-existent or low expectations can be detrimental in fostering and maintaining academic cultures that are suited for success. If mentors are able to build time for semi-regular check-ins with students, as well as establish expectations early on, students feel the support they need to thrive.

And though many of Joe’s teachers did not necessarily help him grow his own achievement mindsets, he was fortunate enough to learn from his friends’ families, and receive structured guidance from them. When Joe went to New Jersey to live with his aunt, he was introduced to a wealthier community that exhibited different cultural values through different norms. They often had Joe over for dinner and included him in family activities:

I learned so much about Indian and Asian culture, and their differences. One of my

friend's parents wouldn't allow him to watch TV. For every hour he watched TV, he had to study for two. I'm from a family where you can watch as much TV as you want if you get the homework done. With him, it's not like you can just get the homework done; the homework has to be done *correctly*.

Joe cites these experiences as monumental in conceptualizing success and how to achieve it. He sought to learn from these families and emulate their practices, almost by proxy. Even though his own home and school did not always hold the highest expectations for him, Joe held them for himself. He used these experiences as examples to push himself constantly, learning from other families how grit and agency were being instilled in children. Joe is currently majoring in International Business, while triple minoring in Philosophy, Economics, and Global Studies. It is safe to say that he is still interested in all things financial, philosophical, and cultural.

They were students of color; they looked like us, they sounded like us, and they were in college, they were doing big things, they were adults, and they were cool, they were suave, and we wanted to be just like them.

High expectations and cultural capital can be provided to students from most role-model individuals: students benefit from seeing relatable success in action. In fact, when mentors are closer to mentees in age, background or race, their effects can be even stronger. This is a piece from Imperial talking about older students who had a formative impact on him, even though their high expectations were delivered softly and informally:

There was one program where we had students from NYU come teach us the SAT's. They were students of color; they looked like us, they sounded like us, and they were in *college*, they were doing *big things*, they were *adults*, and they were *cool*, they were *suave*, and we wanted to be *just like them*. And we didn't see that. I didn't see any kids from college or anything like that. So just seeing these kids was amazing. And they were really amazing individuals. And, at least for me, Mr. Smith would take me to this NYU event called The K.I.N.G.S. event, where it was students of color getting praised for doing community work. He'd take me every year. We would be right there, interacting with the students. They received their awards, they spoke to us and say things like, "I can see you guys coming here." And for us kids coming from kind of nothing it meant the world.

This example shows just how simple words of encouragement can go a long way, if delivered meaningfully and genuinely. Imperial even acknowledges that, at the time, he did not actually explicitly see that these older students were serving as examples to follow.

This highlights that these processes often occur invisibly, on a mindset level. The college students who came to Imperial's school to teach the SAT's also exhibited examples of kindness, determination and intellect, which the younger students absorbed. The other college students, who also impacted Imperial's life positively, were strangers he did not meet more than once. If a stranger can hold high expectations towards a student they do not know in-depth, and make such a lasting impression, a stable mentor can perhaps do even more.

And such is the influence of Mr. Smith, a great example of mentorship, mentioned in this passage. Mr. Smith, who was Imperial's principal at the time, still has a strong relationship

with Imperial today. According to Imperial, Mr. Smith exuded what could be considered visionary leadership, through relatively simple means:

He's an amazing individual. The best principal anybody could have had—the type where he'd be in the main hallway, everybody coming in, and he'd be there. He'd know *everybody's* name. *Everybody's* name, this man knew, "You're supposed to be in the 8:30 class! I know where you're supposed to be right now—you'd better get there!" He knew everyone's schedule in his head.

While it is difficult for every school leader and educator to be held to these standards, the fact remains: when these influences are present in the lives of youth, they make immeasurable impacts.

Outside influences in children's lives are particularly critical because young students need to learn to take advantage of resources. Youth raised in lower-income households are found to exhibit less sense of entitlement than wealthier kids.⁴¹ This means taking advantage of opportunities might be harder for them without some kind of push. In Liz's case, she had to learn the simple value in being allowed to ask for help:

That second half of the year, where I was dismissed from the school— I don't know what led me to finally realize that I needed help, but I did ask, and there were so many people willing to help. To me, it's like, "Why didn't I do that before?" That's something that I definitely embody now. Also giving help. It's hard to be here at NYU for a lot of students. It's really emotionally-straining, for people of all backgrounds, here. I've learned that it's really helpful to be there for each other. Even talking. I've learned to reach out to my ad-

visor a lot of times, and let him know what's up, even though he would always be checking anyway.

In short, other students might find it more natural than others to reach out for help in college.

When Liz realized she, too, could ask, she started to do much better at NYU. The effects started to multiply. She started to leverage relationships with her classmates, professors and even her academic advisor to keep her accountable to succeed. College can feel like a foreign land, even for students who have been successful in their k-12 educations. Support to succeed is something that individuals need at all levels, but they need to be taught to seek it out as well.

***If grit is the water that allows
flowers to show bursts of
growth, agency might
be the sunlight needed
to regularly nourish
hope and fulfillment.***

If and when students are active in seeking help, their requests should at least be met with positive and pinpointed reinforcement, even if the help is not explicitly possible. In Joe's case, his high school was underfunded and could not help him apply for an American Ambassador's program. The program allows high schoolers to travel to other countries with peers from all over the country, for a lofty price. Joe decided to approach his principal and ask for help:

"Is there any way the school, since I'm top of the class, can fund me or help me out?" My principal said, "Actually, we have a new affiliation with this program called Summer Search, and they're going to come here and interview students. They may select a couple of students. If you get accepted, they

⁴¹ Lareau, Annette. *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. University of California Press, 2011.

have a similar program like that, where they'll send you to places over the summer. It may or may not be abroad, depending on the student and their circumstances." Then, I made sure I stayed in touch with them, I filled out the application, went to the interview, and then I ended up getting accepted. From there, I made sure I did whatever they asked of me, and then I ended up being able to go to Spain, and doing all that while I was in high school.

Joe's principal was both honest that the high school could not help him apply to the Ambassador's program, but also encouraging towards Joe's interests. Even though one opportunity was not possible, he offered another one. This initial spark allowed Joe to utilize his grit, shown through his determination to apply to Summer Search, get accepted, and excel in that program. This simple story highlights a simple theme: that if adults are receptive and even listen to students' requests, students can feel empowered.

If mentors—parents, teachers, peers, and educators of all kinds—can work to think of all students as rosebuds ready to soak up positive influences and experiences, the hope for growth can become unlimited. Agency and grit can be fostered, as long as attention is given to the vast realm of possibilities. Fostering the success of all students simply requires paying attention to who a student really is, while taking into account where they are from, to create opportunity structures for where they can go. Coupled with high expectations and structured encouragement, the sky is the limit for young scholars to tap into their potential to bloom.

Breaking the Concrete and Planting Flowerbeds for All Students to Thrive

So far embedded into American culture is the concept of "rugged individualism" that Tupac's "Rose in Concrete" poem was adopted as the narration for a Powerade commercial. The ad featured NBA-star Derrick *Rose*, and celebrated his coming out of Chicago's concrete, and eventually earning himself an MVP award.

There is something to be said about the sociological and psychological prowess of advertisers to tap into our mainstream values and make us buy things. And in this case, the message seemed to be that with enough persistence (and Powerade), immense success is possible for every kid. But when some roses grow from concrete, and others from nurturing flowerbeds, blanket approaches can be ideologically oversimplified with false advertisement.

Fortunately, through collective and individualized strategies, success for all kids is possible. The egalitarian hope remains that students will develop into contributing citizens through the means of their education. But for education to work for them, it must respect and try to understand their individual empirical realities, and the circumstances of their origin, to then be able to foster their unique growth. While grit is immensely necessary in the formula for achievement, its ability to fire on all cylinders is not fully possible without also considering agency. If grit is the water that allows flowers to show bursts of growth, agency might be the sunlight needed to regularly nourish hope and fulfillment.

With too much water, plants can be overburdened and drown, as their roots become bogged down and are therefore unable to take up the nutrients they need. Likewise, too much grit, without a strong sense of purpose and agency, can lead to overwork and eventual burnout. We see this in the case of Liz, who had spent her entire young life reaching for the goal of attending NYU, only to be immensely fatigued and confused when she got there. She needed to reevaluate her motivations, as most people need to, from time to time. People need

to retool and frequently self-assess whether their passions still stem from a genuine place and interest them.

In essence, this is the power of having a real passion in the first place. In her best-seller, Angela Duckworth states, “What I mean by passion is not just that you have something you care about. What I mean is that you care about that same ultimate goal in an abiding, loyal, steady way...Most of your actions derive their significance, from their allegiance to your ultimate concern, your life philosophy.” The social dilemma is that for some students, being able to develop this type of deep passion, grounded in a life *philosophy*, is a luxury. Recall Joe, whose first concerns revolved around meeting basic needs, like food or shelter, for his family.

Surrogate grit, or the idea that a mentor can be gritty on behalf of a student and help push them towards excellence, is gaining validity in the field. On a basic level, this further highlights that the art of teaching and learning is fundamentally a social processes.

Yet even in these cases, passion can still bloom as long as young people are provided simple support systems. His peer network of middle-class, immigrant families helped him receive a structure to which he applied his own grit—which he then honed into his interests. Interestingly enough, experiencing the different cultures and worldviews of these Asian families peaked Joe’s interest in global affairs and international business.

Duckworth continues, “That said, I don’t think most young people need encouragement to follow their passion. Most would do exactly that—in a heartbeat—if only they had a passion

in the first place.” Students can more easily find their passion if their needs and their circumstances are recognized, and then delicately and deliberately catered to. Then, it’s off to the races.

Fortunately, agency and grit can each be fostered on multiple levels. Joe gleaned self-discipline techniques from his friends’ parents. Then, through his own grit, he sought opportunities like Summer Search and advocated for himself on an individual level. Liz heavily relied on her church group for support and hope. At college, she was unable to find immediate replacements for that comfort and encouragement, factoring into her eventual probation. And Imperial benefitted from the influence of fellow students to whom he was able to relate as well as from the strong mentorship of his principal, Mr. Smith.

For young people taking cues for adulthood, the benefits of having examples to follow, along with guided expectations, can be immensely significant. Grit research itself recognizes the supplemental importance of outside influences—like parents, teachers and coaches—in children’s lives. Surrogate grit, or the idea that a mentor can be gritty on behalf of a student and help push them towards excellence, is gaining validity in the field. On a basic level, this further highlights that the art of teaching and learning is fundamentally a social processes.

And when these social elements are acknowledged and the needs of students are taken seriously, all students can thrive. Policies which look to equalize opportunities, such as offering universal free breakfast for all students regardless of income, have been proven to increase attendance and academic achievement.⁴² Last June, Baltimore took charge by putting its

⁴² Leos-Urbel, Jacob, Amy Ellen Schwartz, Meryle Weinstein, and Sean Corcoran. “Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes.” *Economics of Education Review*, 36 (2013): 88-107.

money where its mouth is, becoming one of the first districts in the country to adopt a universal free meals program that offered both breakfast and lunch to its students—everyday. These practical considerations allow teachers to better focus on teaching and build relationships without worrying about the factors outside of the classroom that affect their students' abilities to learn.

The hope remains that we continue to perfect our vision for public schooling, not simply relying on issues of access to create educational equity. We can work to have a system where volunteer groups and afterschool programs are better utilized to distribute resources to schools. We should work to send more counselors to poor schools where there is an increased likeliness that students suffer from trauma. And we can also work to one day have a system that encourages the best teachers to go into the neediest communities and lend their talents.

And in the meantime, homegrown efforts which address agency and grit can suffice. We can see the power of these strategies through students who have demonstrated unique triumph over disadvantages, and disseminate what we learn from them. Even though New Jersey was not a perfect situation for Joe, he explained why he chose to go: "I wanted to live there because my mom always expressed to me that education was the *only* way that I was going to be able to make it out of the ghetto and do something with myself. I felt that school was the only place I had control over." It is good to know that success is possible for anyone in schools. The school's critical function in society cannot be understated.

Thus, ironically, public education remains our nation's most egalitarian promise—with access mandated for illegal immigrants and homeless populations—but there remain challenges between the vision and its reality. Since schools work for some, we might not always question why they are unable to work for others. A clash continues in our classrooms be-

tween two of our most core American values: an idealization of democracy versus an idolization of the individual.

But if our options are between having to wilt separately, or learning to grow together, the choice should be an easy one. Hope is the best motivator to realize our collective responsibilities to try harder for each student.

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