

The Radical Middle: The Limits and Advantages of Teaching Grit in Schools

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We live at a time when we're constantly asked to pick a side: Public or Charter, Trump or Clinton, Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter.

When thinking about the potential impact of teaching grit to students, it's easy to feel like one has to pick between teaching grit or sheltering students from the realities of adulthood. On the one hand, being able to demonstrate grit and resilience is an important component of adulthood. As such, it stands to reason that educators should spend time exposing students to opportunities for grit development. At the same time, it is important to recognize that grit is not always the best response when faced with a difficult undertaking. Quitting, dissenting, and seeking assistance may all be completely reasonable reactions to a challenging task.

The conversation about whether grit should be taught in schools does not have to result in an *either-or* response—there is a radical middle ground that exists. That space is between teaching that every challenge can be overcome with the right amount of grit and the recognition that the obstacles students face may be the result of conditions that they cannot control. Choosing the middle, seeing the validity of both sides of an argument is a relatively radical notion.

The goal of this piece is to encourage an embracing of the radical middle through a dialogue about the complexities of infusing char-

acter education, focused specifically on grit, into the curriculum.

The Goodness of Grit

Grit is not a new topic, but it has gotten new life in part by research conducted by Angela Duckworth¹³ and others who posit that the difference between those who are able to achieve their goals and those who are not is the willingness to apply the appropriate amount of effort and time to see their quest through to the end.

In many ways, Duckworth's work builds upon that of Carol Dweck who posited in her 2006 book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*¹⁴ that people who believe in their ability to learn, grow, and develop, are better off than those who believe they are endowed with natural talent or disposition but decline to work hard. Both psychologists implied that those who are not successful in accomplishing their desired goals have not applied the appropriate amount of continuous effort.

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Dweck argued that individuals with a fixed mindset quit when they encounter challenges where they feel inept. Instead of believing that applying more effort will result in a successful outcome, they assume that they will never be successful, and, thus, continued effort is not worth their energy. Folks with a growth mindset believe that any difficulty they face is tem-

¹³ Duckworth, Angela. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

¹⁴ Dweck, Carol. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success: How We Can Learn to Fulfill Our Potential*. New York: Ballantine, 2006.

porary and that, with the right amount of time and effort, they will eventually be able to overcome whatever difficulty they are facing and successfully accomplish their goal.

As both an educator and a mother, I see the

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importance of not only exhibiting grit for my children and students, but also encouraging the development of grit among children in the wider society. Duckworth and Dweck are not incorrect. It is important for everyone, children and adults, to have the capacity to start a task and stick with it—even if it becomes difficult. Particularly true in education, the confidence that comes with learning new material can take both time and effort. Without grit or a growth mindset, individuals who are used to having the completion of tasks and the accomplishment of goals come to them easily, find themselves frustrated and disheartened about the difficulty associated with completing an especially challenging task. The difficulty can lead them to internalize their struggles and believe that they are fundamentally flawed.

Bandura¹⁵ described *self-efficacy* as the belief that individuals have in their action to produce their desired results. Since our self-efficacy is connected to our ability to feel that our actions can help us achieve our desired outcomes,

when we lack self-efficacy, or when we have low or no hope in our own abilities, we might not try as hard to be successful in our endeavors.

Hope is tied to grit, and grit is tied to self-efficacy. Like self-efficacy, people develop the capacity to hope through their own lived experiences, hearing about the experiences of others, and by being encouraged by others. Parents and educators should encourage the development of grit among the young people over which they have influence. We must encourage grit, while simultaneously acknowledging that individual differences and life circumstances do impact the level of grit one must exhibit in order to achieve desired outcomes.

I was recently speaking with an individual who is quite used to having most things go her way. Her personality and natural talent contribute to her ability to succeed in just about everything she tries to do. A slight change in her job description forced her to learn a new skill, one that she needed to show students in her class. After a few weeks without any sustained success, she felt dejected and disempowered.

As we were talking about her plight, she said "I'm just not made for this." With the topic of grit and hope in the forefront of my mind, I gently, but firmly, corrected her assumption. I reminded her that she had repeatedly demonstrated her ability to be successful. I challenged her to dig deep, and work just a little bit harder to produce the results she desired. I also provided her with a few small ideas about how to enhance her skill development as well as her confidence. I told her that I believed that she could do it; she just needed to believe it too.

A few days later she called and told me that the efforts she had put forth produced the results she wanted. She thanked me for encouraging her and for challenging her to be better than she ever thought she could be. This story provides a wonderful example of why grit is important. Of how past success can actually lessen grit in certain situations, when we haven't yet

¹⁵ Bandura, Albert. *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman, 1997.

learned how to “fail well”. Of how we can influence each other to keep going even when we want to quit.

Grit in Schools

Elliott Eisner¹⁶ famously argued that there were parts of the curriculum that were formal and obvious, like reading, writing, and math, as well as other topics that were more implicit or “hidden” such as rituals designed to produce competitiveness and compliant behavior. Indeed, there is a benefit to having schools socialize students into the behavioral expectations of society. Some level of conformity is helpful when it comes to order and safety.

There is also, however, a disadvantage associated with implicitly teaching “common” values and expectations via the compulsory school system. That disadvantage occurs because the values presented are not always an accurate representation of the human experience, nor are they always moral or just.

The historical foundations of the educational system ignored the pluralistic nature of the United States. The current system of education also aims to move individuals from the margins or fringe sections of society by ignoring the uniqueness of each person's experiences and forcing them to assimilate to the dominant culture. Teaching students to simply demonstrate more grit when faced with any type of difficulty leaves no room for them to critically reflect upon and respond to situations in which a different response might be required.

We cannot teach students to demonstrate more grit without also giving them an understanding of the civic and societal responsibility

we have for one another. Stitzlein¹⁷ explained how new requirements for teachers in the areas of reading and math resulted in a reduction of time focused on social studies. Historically, social studies, government, and other civic content were where students were explicitly educated about their roles and responsibilities as citizens.

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The most disturbing part about less time being spent in civically-oriented classes is that some populations of students are more impacted by the reduced time than others. Stitzlein noted that students enrolled in underperforming schools—which typically face increased pressure to raise scores on standardized test—are disproportionately poor and of color. The lack of intentional transmission of knowledge about the power and promises of citizenship disenfranchises these already marginalized students and limits their ability to “access the skills and knowledge they need to secure their own justice and equality”.¹⁷ Anderson¹⁸ shared a similar sentiment when he articulated that “another generation will lack societal analysis that would provide them with the tools to defend democracy and work to ensure that our society is living out

¹⁶ Eisner, Elliott. *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs (3rd ed.)*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994.

¹⁷ Stitzlein, Sarah. *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism* (Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 168.

¹⁸ Anderson, Gary. *Advocacy Leadership: Toward a Post-Reform Agenda in Education*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47.

an authentic allegiance to its cherished ideals”. Teaching children with marginalized identities that the key to success is to demonstrate grit ignores the social realities in which many of them exist. In doing this we encourage students to believe that they and others are always personally and solely responsible for whatever negative occurrences they face. Without any context or ability to discern what situations need grit and what situations need a different response, student may find themselves trying to overcome scenarios of systematic inequality that they were assigned to or inherited.

When we consider teaching grit in schools, we assume that everyone is responsible for their own behavior and outcomes. This aligns with the flawed belief in a just world, which basically presumes that we live in a world where people get what they deserve. The just world belief rewards people for the good things that happen to them and punishes people for the bad things that happen to them.

The most quoted words from the Declaration of Independence are “all men are created equal.” followed quickly by “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Many people in the United States, regardless of their political persuasion, love to recount both of these line, and conveniently forget that each of these statements, when written, spoke of a very specific and narrow group: white men. Author Ta-Nehisi Coates¹⁹ reminded readers that at the very time the country’s founding fathers were promoting liberty, they were enslaving an entire race of people:

Slavery is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes its love on essential text, a world in which the same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a

slave, and when this women peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved.

Like the founding of the United States, the educational system made assumptions about who would be participating in schooling. Although the makeup of who attends school has changed, many of the assumptions and practices have not. It is no wonder that certain populations’ tendencies align more closely with the expectations and experiences of schooling. Despite the flaws in the original design, the actions and behaviors of students from marginalized populations are frequently used as rationale for why the gap between them and white students persists. In education, we treat all students as if they have equal opportunity to be successful, and that is simply not true.

Marginalization excludes entire populations from access and opportunities specifically because of their membership in a social group. Young Black and Latino men have difficulty finding employment because of the stereotyping associated with their social identity²⁰. The ability to marginalize a group of people is not restricted to negatively impacting their ability to access material possessions, as individuals can also be marginalized by restricting their ability to participate in social gatherings or other human experiences, which may require them to exhibit grit more frequently than their majority counterparts.

Not that long ago, I was engaged in a conversation with a Black colleague who was experiencing some difficulty in his workplace. He began telling me a story about how some basic interactions with his supervisor had gone poorly. He kept having interactions that seemed to be inconsistent with the treatment that his fellow team members were receiving, including being disciplined for everyday actions like asking questions and sharing his opinion.

¹⁹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 70.

²⁰ Young, Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

When he spoke with his supervisor about his concerns, the supervisor explained that she had found his general demeanor aggressive and that he seemed angry all of the time. This feedback alarmed my colleague. He feared that his supervisor was making racial assumptions about his motivations and demeanor. I explained to my friend that his experience sounded like this could be related to harassment and discrimination and that he might want to consult with people in his organization's equal opportunity office.

Situations involving harassment and discrimination cannot be redressed by having the harassed person try harder not to be harassed. It would have placed an undue burden for my colleague to try to tolerate unequal treatment on the basis of race from his supervisor. As we look to using the educational system to create a better present and a more prosperous future, we cannot promote the idea of infusing the educational system with grit development without acknowledging that sometimes the answer to a problem is not more grit—sometimes the answer is a much needed adjustment to inequitable practices.

The appropriate place to demonstrate grit is in a specific task, where the obstacle is more internal than external. Internal obstacles are barriers people put in place for themselves, like lack of motivation. External obstacles exist when systems and procedures give an advantage to certain populations, while disadvantaging another population, like discrimination.

In those situations, the disadvantaged population should not be just expected to demonstrate grit in order to get over the injustice. The inequities of the system must be addressed through making an adjustment to practices or allocating additional resources. A student who has the intellectual capacity and access to appropriate resources but is performing poorly because of a refusal to complete the appropriate assignments has created his own in-

ternal barrier to success. That student needs to exhibit grit in order to succeed.

Simultaneously, a student who has the intel-

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lectual capacity, but does not have access to appropriate resources, and, thus, is limited in her ability to complete the appropriate assignments faces an obstacle to success that is external to her control. In that instance, she should receive assistance to address her lack of resources, and not be further disadvantaged because of something that is beyond her control. It is of the utmost importance that educators and policy makers be able to determine the difference.

Education as a Solution for Societal Problems

Our belief in the ability of the compulsory educational system to address and/or solve many of the problems we face in our society is the best demonstration of both grit and hope. We are hopeful for educational experiences that enhance the present and the future of the citizenry, and we demonstrate grit through our willingness to repeatedly address the flaws we identify in education.

It is much easier to ask the question about what we should be teaching children in school and much harder to figure out the answer. Currently, we find ourselves dissatisfied at the latest approach of standardized testing. Despite all of the scare tactics, closed schools, and threats, the performance gap between white students and students of color has not been significantly al-

tered.²¹ Faced with our continued disappointment, we return to a space where we once again began to think about what children should learn in school. As a nation, we stake the future of our civilization on how well our children learn what they are supposed to learn in school. When the results are not up to our satisfaction, we panic and change course.

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Whether we're talking about infusing grit, increasing standardized testing, or teaching cultural literacy, educational reform will never successfully accomplish goals associated with equality and inclusion simply by changing the curriculum. This is because our educational system exists in a society that regularly advantages some people while it disadvantages others.

The reality is that conversations about educational reform are a constant game of trying to design circumstances where some students, generally those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and/or racially underrepresented, catch up with the rest of the group without fundamentally altering the system. It is likely that students will benefit from the inclusion of character education, specifically focused on developing grit, into the curriculum. This addition must occur simultaneously with an understanding that the life many students have to navigate

outside of school requires a constant demonstration of grit.

Early exposure to violence, poverty, and injustice forces some people with underrepresented social identities to create grit in order to successfully operate in the world. The recent publicity on the shooting of unarmed Black men has had an effect on others holding a similar social identity regardless of their proximity to the victims and/or the location where the shooting occurred. When we refuse to acknowledge the different lived experience students have due to a variety of factors that are beyond their control and insist that they need more grit, we do them a tremendous disservice while perpetuating systems that are innately unjust.

Final Thoughts

Educational leaders and policymakers do not have to decide between teaching grit in schools and fixing a broken educational system. As leaders reflect on the role that character education specifically surrounding grit has in the curriculum, they should keep a few things in mind.

First, educational reform, regardless of approach, cannot totally rectify the injustices that exist in our society. Attempts to address injustices must occur beyond the population of the citizenry that are ages 5 - 18.

Second, there is goodness in grit. Exhibiting effort to accomplish a task, even in the midst of that task being difficult, is a good thing to do. People are not always able to complete tasks in an easy manner—sometimes they need to persist through to the end, even when it is hard.

Third, it is important for individuals to be able determine the difference between situations in which more effort needs to be applied and scenarios that are designed in an inherently unjust way. Educators and policymakers have to commit to not allowing grit to be used as an

²¹ Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

excuse to ignore the inequities that exist in our society and educational systems.

There is a closely connected relationship between individuals and the society in which they live. People are responsible for the society that is produced and systematic environmental design makes society responsible for the people that are nurtured within that society. The nature of our school system does not give us the appropriate amount of time or access to know the unique circumstances for each individual student and adapt our expectations of them appropriately.

In lieu of being able to identify which students are not achieving academically because of internal barriers, from those students who are not achieving academically because of external barriers, we must create schools and systems that are designed with the goal of removing all barriers to academic success, while instilling in students the value of hard work and grit. We must embrace the radical middle.

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