

Intellectual Aggressiveness



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“Grit” and the New Character Education

Researchers study how certain performance traits may help students learn
by LAURA PAPPANO

On a recent Monday, students in Jeff Thielman’s advisory at Cristo Rey Boston High School crowded into his crimson-walled office to take a test. These juniors, like their schoolmates, answered questions aimed not at measuring academic skills but at something that has captured educators’ attention lately: their grit.

The test—the 8-Item Grit Scale, developed by psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania—asks respondents how they approach goals and handle setbacks and yields a Grit Score (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 as “grittiest”). It aims to assess character traits like resilience, self-control, and persistence—traits that research shows may matter more to academic performance than native intelligence (see sidebar “What Is Grit?”).

What Is Grit?

What is “grit” and where did it come from?

Credit for coining the current usage in education circles goes to University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth, who said in a 2009 TED Talk that her archetype was Mattie Ross, the 14-year-old protagonist of *True Grit*, the 1968 novel by Charles Portis, which has also been made into two movies.

“It is really about this young girl who against all odds pursues a very long-term, almost impossible goal and eventually, eventually—with the emphasis on “eventually”—succeeds in that goal,” she says.

For Duckworth, whose research connects noncognitive skills like self-control to school success, “grit” captures something educators recognize but had not named or tried to teach. To help, she’s developed tests, including the 8-Item Grit Scale for children, which gets at qualities like diligence, hard work, sustained effort, and the ability to focus on a goal without getting discouraged by setbacks.

Grit, though, is context specific. “By definition,” says Duckworth, “you cannot be gritty at everything.”

The word “grit” risks being overused, but the suggestion that how students approach learning may be as critical as what they learn is resonating with educators. Consider it a quest for the “new” character education. This is not to dismiss teachings about moral and community values, but to frame, name, and share qualities hidden in plain sight, so-called performance character traits.

The traits are not new and actually seem old-fashioned: hard work, delayed gratification, curiosity, open-mindedness, and perseverance, among others. While educators have long noticed students whose drive—not just brains—determined their success, mounting research and a push from journalist Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), have educators wondering, Can you learn grit? And how do you teach it?

Reframing Beliefs

It is one thing, researchers say, to link grit to school performance and another to help students acquire more. “We have some really good research showing the correlation between perseverance and grit and student success—academic grades, graduation rates,” says Scott Seider, an assistant professor of education at Boston University and the author of *Character Compass* (Harvard Education Press, 2012). “But there is very, very little research that demonstrates that we can take the level of grit or perseverance that a kid has and

increase it.”

Yet researchers are intrigued. “Probably, yes,” answers Duckworth when asked if you can teach grit. She’s not sure yet how but says, “We are literally chalkboarding ideas to see if we can test them out.” One thought, she says, “is that kids may have the wrong beliefs [and] have misunderstandings about skill development,” beliefs that stand in the way of tapping into performance traits. When students struggle, she says, they may believe they lack ability and give up. What if they could instead understand that “feelings of confusion are the hallmark of learning?” What if messing up or taking a long time to write a paper was seen as a normal part of learning, not a sign of failure?

It’s an interesting idea. Research shows that how students conceive their abilities in relation to a task can shape the outcome. “Much of intellectual performance is more malleable than we thought,” says Geoffrey Cohen, professor of education and psychology at Stanford University. He and colleagues conducted a randomized study in which two groups of seventh-graders were given a structured writing assignment at four stress points during the year (at the beginning of school and on three days when tests were scheduled). Half selected core values from a list and reflected on how the values mattered to them and helped in their lives. Other students wrote about the values but as unconnected to themselves.

The results were stunning. African American students in the first group earned higher grade point averages than their same-race peers in the control group. The effect persisted through middle school. It looks like magic, but David Scott Yeager, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and a Carnegie Foundation fellow, points out that “a small change can have a big effect, not because the intervention taught you math, but [because] it allowed you to learn the math that you were being taught.”

Removing a barrier to success by cueing students to their strengths in a setting where they feel unsure of themselves “sets the tone and changes their trajectory,” says Cohen. He cautions that the intervention works, in part, because performance traits don’t exist in isolation but in relation to a specific situation. “When we are often at our best, it doesn’t depend just on what’s inside of us but on being in the right circumstance with people we trust,” he says.

Intellectual Virtues

No one is quite sure how to turn grand ideas about character into tools for teachers, but Jason Baehr is trying. Baehr is so convinced these traits have a place in classrooms that he started the Intellectual Virtues and Education Project at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and holds seminars for teachers. He is working on a classroom handbook and is helping to launch a charter school, Intellectual Virtues Academy of Long Beach, to open next fall. Baehr, who uses “intellectual virtues” to label what others might consider performance character traits, says they can be amplified “through repeated action and practice.”

Teacher Augustin Vieyra is also using intellectual virtues in his third-grade classroom at Holmes Elementary School in Lakewood, Calif. Posters featuring different virtues like “Intellectual Aggressiveness” along with examples of their use—“Use Evidence to Support Your Ideas”—hang in the classrooms, and each morning his students chant out their promises to practice intellectual virtues as they pursue schoolwork. Vieyra, who grew up in a drug- and violence-ridden neighborhood as the son of industrious Mexican immigrants, has long encouraged grit in his students. Now he has a vocabulary to use.

“I can say, ‘Talk to your neighbor and let’s be intellectually aggressive about this,’” he says. “It allows me to name it and define it and attach it to their very own struggles or behaviors that might take them away from being successful.” It is also helpful when students misbehave, which he interprets as masking a lack of knowledge. He looks through such behaviors to give students the message that “you can fight through this and you can be successful.”

This sort of reframing also attracts Peter Deeble, a math teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, Calif. He has been frustrated by the cycle in which teachers teach and students learn long enough to take the test and then forget. So this year he recast his lessons. Instead of showing approaches to a geometry problem, he lets students struggle until they uncover the principle themselves. “When I phrase it as, ‘Let’s be curious about this,’” he says, “[for] those kids on the sidelines with senioritis, it is interesting now. It’s not because of the grade that they want to learn. If the question is framed correctly, it spurs something intrinsic inside of them.”

Looking for Tools

The quest to inject performance character into classrooms is both optimistic and slippery sounding. Teachers are left to freelance, trying approaches that may or may not yield results. Cohen says some expert teachers naturally foster growth of traits in their students. But Yeager, a former middle school teacher, cautions that “our intuition about how to promote grit and tenacity can be totally off.” Research, for example, shows that trying to boost students’ self-esteem with words is less effective than asking them to persevere on a hard task.

So what, exactly, *does* work? Seider says his study of three Boston charter schools suggests “a two-part recipe: establishing a common vocabulary around character strengths and then utilizing the vocabulary in very specific instructional moments.” If a student is struggling with an essay, he says, a teacher might say, “Let me show you the steps to be really gritty.”

It’s also important to practice. It may not be possible to actually increase one’s grit, but practicing behaviors like persistence may yield gritty results. Just because something is cast as a character “trait,” says Duckworth, “doesn’t mean it never changes”—or can’t be drawn out and amplified. Much as we hide Halloween candy to stop overindulging or lower the room temperature if we struggle to fall asleep, Duckworth suggests we find strategies that allow us to practice character traits such as persisting in the face of difficulty.

What could those strategies look like? If a student gives up too quickly or lacks self-confidence to persist in math, Baehr suggests the student and teacher might reflect and discuss: “How does that feel? What does it look like? How does it affect me?” Together, he says, they can make a plan to “challenge the idea that [the student] can’t figure out problems or is inclined to give up quickly.” If he gives up after one try, he can decide that “next week I will try three times before I give up or I will commit to getting help after school from a tutor or one of my friends.”

Similarly, a student who struggles to be open-minded toward people who hold alternative political beliefs might decide “to watch [a] presidential debate and say ‘what I think are the five strongest points the opposing candidate had in the debate.’” Doing such exercises repeatedly, argues Baehr, “could make the student more and more comfortable” with new ways of behaving.

Baehr emphasizes that the quality of interactions and interventions—not the strategies themselves—matters most. “Human change occurs more readily in the context of caring and trusting relationships,” he says.

Practicing Character

At Cristo Rey Boston, Elizabeth Degnan, director of wellness and counseling, thinks they have an ideal vehicle for building performance character. The school, part of a Catholic school network, requires each student to split a full-time entry-level job with three others (60 percent of school revenues come from student paychecks). The work-study program provides students with detailed feedback, and Degnan this year added a 20-minute weekly advisory curriculum focused on 10 traits: openness to growth, self-control, persistence, initiative, teamwork, reliability, curiosity, gratitude, classroom contribution, and active studying.

After Thielman’s advisees take the grit test, for example, he leads a lesson on persistence. Students read about how Walt Disney’s cartoon ideas were rejected and stolen, how it took 16 years to persuade the author of *Mary Poppins* to let him make a movie of her book. Students are stunned by his struggles (particularly that he resorted to eating dog food). When Thielman, the school’s president, seeks a definition of persistence, Estephania Cayetano, dressed in a black suit and white blouse, has it: “continuing in the face of adversity.”

Estephania knows something about the trait. After a freak childhood accident that lodged a nail in her brain, interrupting her speech development, she “had to push harder to do everything.” Her mother, a Honduran immigrant, didn’t finish high school; Estephania plans to go to medical school. Not working toward that goal is unthinkable, she says. “If I gave up now, what’s the point of all the effort I have put in up to now?”

It doesn’t seem that Estephania (Grit Score 4.25) needs help with persistence. It’s true that researchers don’t know if the grit she exhibits now will be there if she faces challenges later. Out of your element “it’s hard to be completely confident in your purpose,” says Yeager. Understanding how to aid students like Estephania is a research goal, he says. “How do you help a kid draw an analogy between how they survive in their neighborhood and the grit they would need to survive the complicated bureaucracy of a community college?”

Degnan, though, isn’t waiting for studies. She believes reflection plus work experience will let students identify strengths and areas for growth and fortify them against hardships in their homes and neighborhoods. The aim, she says, is to be explicit. “The students may not be aware of how these skills are being developed in themselves.”

Is it working? “It’s too early to tell,” says Thielman, but Estephania credits discussions about self-control for deciding recently that when people say things she doesn’t like she will “look above it.” “I wasn’t really lacking self-control,” she says, “but before, I let a lot of things bother me. Now, I stop and think, ‘Is it worth me getting upset?’”

Laura Pappano is an education journalist based in New Haven, Conn. She is the author of [Inside School Turnarounds: Urgent Hopes, Unfolding Stories](#) (Harvard Education Press, 2010).



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