

Amy Neff

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Dr. Peter Gibbon

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Grit: Teaching strategies to encourage student effort

“You get good grades because you are smart,” a classmate said to me during my senior year of high school during our Economics class. While this sounds like a compliment (he was calling me “smart” after all), I was offended by this statement. Yes, I do consider myself to be intelligent, but what this statement completely discounted was my hard work. This comment was made while receiving test scores from a recent assessment for Economics. I had earned an A on this test, while my classmate received a C. In that moment I tried to explain how much time I had spent studying for this test and that he was only seeing the results of all my effort. Maybe to him it seemed as though I had just shown up in class, taken the test, and received an A. In fact, I had spent weeks in class listening and intently taking notes, doing the required reading, then going home and studying for hours after school every day. My success on that test was a result of my *effort*, not my intelligence.

Fast forward 16 years and now I am the one giving the tests and determining grades. After teaching for 7 years, I find myself continually perplexed by this question of student success. Why do some students, and not necessarily the “smartest” ones, succeed while others fail? Motivation is a word that gets thrown around pretty regularly, usually in the teacher’s lounge or a parent conference with a statement like “Smart kid, low motivation.” There are many factors that affect student motivation – interest in the material, peer/parent support, teacher

expectations, long-term goals for college/career, intrinsic love of learning, etc. One voice among many weighing in on this discussion of success (for students, athletes, professionals, etc.) is Angela Duckworth in her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. While *Grit* is not a manual for educators on how to help students succeed, there are some valuable insights that may be useful for teachers in the classroom. *Grit* also relates to broader educational philosophy and the ideas of people like John Locke, William James, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who all wrote about grit in different ways. Bertrand Russell claims that “Children, like grownups, enjoy the sense of achievement derived from mastering a difficulty, but this requires a consistency of effort of which few are capable without some outside encouragement” (23). So the question is... how? How, as teachers, do we encourage a “consistency of effort” to master a difficulty?

A Brief Summary of Educational Philosophy as it relates to Grit

Duckworth defines grit as passion and perseverance. Synonyms for grit could include words like resilience and fortitude. John Locke discusses character education in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of The Conduct of the Understanding* when he explains “True fortitude I take to be the quiet possession of a man’s self and an undisturbed doing his duty, whatever evil besets or danger lies in his way” (86). He also mentions that “Dangers attack us in other places besides the fields of battle” more specifically fear of “pain, disgrace, and poverty” (86). While in the modern classroom, we are not too concerned about students facing danger or evil, they do face challenges and setbacks. Disgrace could relate to shame or embarrassment, which is definitely a concern for students today and “doing your duty” while facing possible failure takes a great deal of effort.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his famous work *Émile*, says:

When we consider the fleeting nature of human affairs, the restless and uneasy spirit of our times, when every generation overturns the work of its predecessor, can we conceive a more senseless plan than to educate a child as if he would never leave his room, as if he would always have his servants about him? If the wretched creature takes a single step up or down, he is lost. This is not teaching him to bear pain; it is training him to feel it. (10)

Rousseau's words ring true today as concerns about entitlement and helicopter parenting make us wonder if kids are prepared to deal with the challenges of life in the real world. Can students step out of their comfort zones to conquer difficult situations or will they be "lost"? Horace Mann in his *Twelfth Annual Report* explained a goal of education "as the result and reward of all, a race of men and women, loftier in stature, firmer in structure, fairer in form, and better able to perform the duties and bear the burdens of life, would revisit the earth" (53). Mann was specifically discussing the importance of physical education in a very idealistic sense, but being strong and able to "bear the burdens of life" relates to mental strength as well as physical health.

William James discusses pugnacity and explains: "Pugnacity need not be thought of merely in the form of physical combativeness. It can be taken in the sense of a general unwillingness to be beaten by any kind of difficulty. It is what makes us feel 'stumped' and challenged by arduous achievements, and is essential to a spirited and enterprising character" (37). Pugnacity, like fortitude or resilience, is basically that "never give up" mentality which James says is "essential."

So character education and the encouragement of resilience and fortitude is not a new concept, but is it still relevant today? Do parents in the 21st century want their children to have these traits? A Pew Research study in 2014 that examined "Child-Rearing Values Across Ideological Groups" found "hard work" ranked as the second-highest attribute that parents

wanted for their children, with responsibility as the number one (“And the Quality Most Parents Want to Teach Their Children Is...”). Whether we call it hard work, resilience, fortitude, or grit, the overall goal is the same. Philosophers, parents, teachers, society – we want to produce students and citizens who will put in the necessary effort to succeed, who will fall down seven times and get up eight. The problem is that we can see the results since we admire successful athletes, artists, and entrepreneurs but question how to help our children get there. Locke, Rousseau, and Mann discuss the importance of these attributes but do not explain the methods to encourage the character traits of fortitude, resilience, and pugnacity in our students.

The Role of Interest/Passion in Success

In the years she spent researching *Grit*, Angela Duckworth studied people in many different fields. She looked at athletes like Steve Young and Rowdy Gaines, West Point cadets, National Spelling Bee champions, and artists like Robert Mankoff (cartoonist for the *New Yorker*). Duckworth also spent time with Pete Carroll, head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, and Joe Leader, a senior vice president at NYC Transit. These are people of different ages, careers, socioeconomic backgrounds, etc. They didn’t all achieve the same type of success, but they all had the passion and perseverance to achieve great things in their individual areas.

What this means for educators is that focusing on the whole child is important. Not all students will go on to get advanced degrees and devote their lives to academia- actually most of them won’t. As educators, we hope that students will find success in some area whether it is athletics, the arts, business, technology, etc. The character development, skills, and habits that students learn in the classroom can and do translate to these other areas of life. We can reframe the concept of success and encourage students to discover their own passions. We all can’t be professional athletes or National Spelling Bee champions, but we can set individual goals and

work hard to achieve them in whatever area is most exciting or interesting to a specific individual.

Intrapersonal Intelligence

Intrapersonal intelligence is one part of Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and another theme of Duckworth's book *Grit*. Duckworth included the "Grit Scale" that she developed as part of her research. This scale includes 10 statements like "I am a hard worker" and "I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge" with a rating and a formula to calculate "how gritty you are" (55-56). In a later chapter, Duckworth discusses self-talk and optimism (176-177) along with the concept of a growth-mindset. She states: "With a growth-mindset, you believe you can learn to do better" (180). Howard Gardner said that "knowledge of self (intrapersonal intelligence) can be developed and strengthened" and that "accurate self-knowledge will be the most important characteristic of successful learners in the twenty first century" (qtd. in Sellars).

In education today, this often falls under the heading of social and emotional learning (SEL) or character development. Some schools include specific curriculum in SEL and others pay for programs on character development. These lessons often include activities on self-awareness and self-control to help students learn about their own values and habits. While these organized programs can be great, any teacher can find ways to work on intrapersonal intelligence with his or her students. Angela Duckworth lists examples of encouraging phrases that teachers can use to help promote grit and a growth-mindset, for example: "That didn't work. Let's talk about how you approached it and what might work better" (182). This kind of language helps reinforce the idea that failure doesn't have to be debilitating and the value of trying something

again instead of giving up. Having students do the Grit Scale, learn about positive self-talk, practice good habits can all lead to greater success in school and life.

Goal setting is another exercise to help students increase their self-awareness, challenge themselves, emphasize perseverance. Paul Tough discusses research done by Gabriele Oettingen at NYU about strategies for goal setting and explains that “mental contrasting... means concentrating on a positive outcome and simultaneously concentrating on the obstacles in the way” (120). This strategy is more effective than “indulging” which is favored by optimists and “dwelling” which pessimists tend to do (120-121). This directly relates to success in achieving goals because having a goal is only step in the process. You need to have a plan for dealing with obstacles as they arise. Teachers often have students set goals at the beginning of the school year, but how often do we help students make a plan to achieve that goal with emphasis on dealing with setbacks? How often do we reflect on that goal at the end of the school year? Part of success is not just working harder, but working smarter, and self-awareness is a key aspect of working smarter.

Another aspect of working smarter is the concept of deliberate practice. Duckworth states: “Rather than focus on what they already do well, experts strive to improve specific weaknesses” (121). She also phrases this concept as “working outside their comfort zone” (127). This relates to intrapersonal intelligence and self-awareness, since you have to know what your comfort zone is. For students, this can be beneficial in many ways. Studying for a test, for example, is very applicable to deliberate practice. Successful students don’t spend time reviewing the material that they already know, they focus on their weaknesses (what they *don’t* know) in order to improve. This also involves figuring out what is lacking in a particular skill, like writing. Writing skills don’t improve by continuing to make the same mistakes. Becoming

a better writer involves recognizing where the deficits are, then working intently to improve. Getting feedback from a good writer or a teacher is an important part of that process. The difficulty for many people, not just students, lies in the potential embarrassment or shame of admitting they don't know something or need help. If you know you struggle with writing, it can be even more challenging to ask for help.

Fear of Failure

One crucial aspect of Duckworth's study of grit is how often successful people had to FAIL on the way to high achievements. Steve Young, for example, faced setbacks at every stage of his football career and wanted to give up multiple times but didn't (202-203). Bob Mankoff eventually became a contract cartoonist for the *New Yorker* after being rejected about 2,000 times (73). Duckworth includes many other stories like this – people who faced setbacks, rejection, and failure but didn't give up.

Fear of failure is a hot topic in education and society currently as there is concern about many students who go off to college and can't deal with failure. Jessica Bennett recently wrote an article for *The New York Times* called “On Campus, Failure Is on the Syllabus” and she states that “Nearly perfect on paper, with resumes packed full of extracurricular activities, [Smith College students] seemed increasingly unable to cope with basic setbacks that come with college life: not getting a room assignment they wanted, getting wait-listed for a class or being rejected by clubs.” This lead to higher rates of depression and anxiety for students and the problem is recognized by schools like Stanford and Harvard as well. How do we as educators encourage kids to be more gritty, make mistakes, take risks, etc. when they are so afraid to fail? Duckworth discusses the embarrassment, fear, and shame that children are taught from a young age when they experience a setback (141). One way to help alleviate this is by having teachers “*model*

emotion-free mistake making” (141-42). Smith College started an initiative called “‘Failing Well’ that aims to ‘destigmatize failure’” (Bennett). One component included submissions from students and faculty about their “worst setbacks” which were projected onto a large screen during fall orientation. Teachers can do this in the classroom as well, discussing personal failures or mistakes or even using examples in literature and history that relate to resilience. Hearing stories about people who persevered through difficult times, including their own teachers or literary figures, may help students understand that failure is part of the learning process and no one is perfect. Reframe the narrative from “Wow, you really failed that test” to “What did you learn from that experience? How can you do better?” Framing feedback from the perspective of “I know you can improve” versus “There is something wrong with you.”

Duckworth also discusses a study of written feedback on student work. In one study, seventh-grade students who were given essays to re-write that had a note saying “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them” as opposed to a generic note, were twice as likely to turn in a revised essay (219). If students receive feedback that is more positive and encouraging, they may be more willing to put in the time and effort to improve their work. Grades can be very emotional, but support and encouragement can lead to positive results. Be a “psychologically wise teacher” who is both “demanding” but also “supportive and respectful” (218). Teaching students to be resilient doesn’t mean a ridiculous workload or creating impossibly difficult tests so that they fail more often and therefore *must* learn to get over it. Duckworth discusses the importance of challenging students and having high standards but with support and encouragement to help them succeed.

Positive Influences

“Over time and under the right circumstances, the norms and values of the group to which we belong become our own” (Duckworth 247). Of course, this can have negative consequences depending on the group that you belong to, but the gritty people studied by Duckworth had coaches, parents, mentors, and teachers who helped them succeed. Pete Carroll and the Seattle Seahawks are a great example of the culture of grit. He describes it as “the mindset that they’re always going to succeed, that they’ve got something to prove. They’re resilient, they’re not going to let setbacks hold them back” (243). This sounds exactly like the characteristics that produce success, so how does Carroll instill this in his football players? One example is Competition Wednesdays, practices that mimic the “destroy-the-enemy intensity of a real game” (262). Transparency from the coaching staff with messages like “Always compete. You’re either competing or you’re not. Compete in everything you do. You’re a Seahawk 24-7. Finish strong. Positive self-talk. Team first” (265). The Seahawks coaches clarify the term “compete” to mean “strive together” so competing isn’t necessarily about winning and losing, it is about excellence and teamwork (265). With a Super Bowl win in 2014 and a close loss in 2015, the Seahawks have used their collective grit to become a successful football team.

Creating a culture of grit in the classroom won’t look exactly like the NFL, but there are some potential lessons. First reframing the concept of competition, along with success and failure. Reminding students that they can all get high grades if they work hard enough. They don’t have to compete against each other for the top grade in the class, they can help each other be successful and focus on improving their own learning. Positive self-talk definitely applies to the classroom. Students can learn to encourage themselves and see setbacks as temporary. Remind students that a low grade is not a reflection of their value as human beings or an inability

to do the work, but feedback that can be an incentive to work harder and smarter. Give students time to reflect on what didn't work on an assignment or test and advise them on what to do differently next time. Remind them that asking for help isn't a sign of weakness.

Conclusion

Grit, as described by Angela Duckworth and others, is not a new concept. Philosophers, coaches, educators, and parents recognize the importance of hard work, resilience, and fortitude. How to instill those characteristics is a difficult question to answer, but one that is gaining more attention in contemporary society and education.

Based on *Grit*, and other texts related to education and psychology, here are a few suggestions to increase student effort and success:

1. Develop intrapersonal intelligence in students through activities involving self-awareness, reflection, and positive self-talk. Remind them that intelligence can increase and to focus on a growth mindset.
2. Have high standards for students AND provide support to help them meet or exceed those standards. Practice goal setting with a specific plan for dealing with potential setbacks.
3. Reframe the concepts of success, failure, and competition for students. Success is something that is personal, so define what it means for YOU. Failure doesn't mean you are incompetent or stupid. Everyone experiences failure, so let it be a learning experience and figure out how to do better in the future.

Competition can be positive so compete against yourself to improve your areas of weakness and see your classmates as teammates all working together to become their best selves.

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