

The Buzz on

GRIT & Agency

What you should know before applying the concepts to your school and classrooms.

By Alan Richard

With plentiful books, articles, and professional learning offered on the behavior theory, “grit” has surfaced as a hot topic in the discussion about how to address the achievement gap by nurturing behavioral conditions for student success. University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth has emerged as the godmother of the term. The author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* defined it in an interview with NPR as “the quality of being able to sustain your passions, and also work really hard at them, over really disappointingly long periods of time.”

Duckworth insists enough study has gone into grit and “noncognitive” skills to make it a worthy endeavor in classrooms and schools. She cites evidence that developing students’ non-cognitive skills broadly can make a difference in their achievement and motivation.

“Research has shown that we can teach children the self-control strategy of setting goals and making plans, with measurable benefits for academic achievement. ... This is exciting progress,” she wrote in a 2016 column for *The New York Times*.

Soon there will even be ways to measure students’ grit. Duckworth developed a simple test that educators can use, although it has limitations. And the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the exam that lets us compare achievement by state and all student groups, will begin to include questions about students’ non-cognitive skills on the questionnaire portion of the test in 2017.

Critics, however, contend that more serious issues in education are being virtually ignored as grit becomes the latest trend.



New York University education professor and author Pedro Noguera writes that he has met plenty of students—and educators—in the Bronx with grit. But he contends other hurdles contribute to the achievement gap and college-attendance rates.

Instead of schools reinforcing “the idea that individual effort is the key factor determining differences in outcomes ... we might do much more to address the disparities that limit the ability of children to learn,” wrote Noguera, who was a keynote speaker at NAESP’s national conference in July 2016.

Taking students’ noncognitive skills and development into account may be valuable, but Stanford University and University of Texas at Austin researcher David Yeager writes that students cannot learn on grit alone. “Children will always need safety, security, and adequate resources at home and in school,” he and colleagues wrote in a paper, as quoted by education writer Mikhail Zinshteyn in *The Atlantic*.

What Grit Means for School Leaders


How can principals make sense of the debate about grit? Here are a few considerations, based on the latest research and writing on the topic:

- **Interpret grit and perseverance for yourself.** How might your students—and teachers—learn from what’s known about grit and how might you put it to work? Perhaps your students are from mostly affluent, educated families and need to develop the discipline to try harder. Or maybe your students often get discouraged and need the right kinds of support to achieve more.
- **Recognize hard work and creativity.** Even if you don’t subscribe to the grit concept, it’s worth studying how to encourage students to give their all in class and in life. Teacher blogger Vicki Davis, who uses Duckworth’s grit scale test in her classroom, wrote in the journal *Edutopia* that she encourages educators to share some of their own journeys with their students—and to talk with students about their goals and what concepts like grit and perseverance mean to them.
- **Make it safe to keep trying.** Some students get embarrassed when they speak or show their work before their classmates. Teach that it’s OK to swing and miss—and to learn from it. Remind students that it took Steve Jobs and other innovators many failures before they found breakthroughs. Encourage students to keep making progress—even if they’re way behind, ahead of their peers, or, like most people, someplace in between.

Alternatives to Grit

Instead of overly focusing on grit, schools should focus on student “agency,” suggests Noguera. “Unlike grit, agency is about empowering young people to use education to take control of their lives,” he wrote for MSNBC.

Noguera cites a school in New York that’s overachieving not only because of students’ will to succeed, but also “by expanding access to health services, building partnerships with social services agencies, extending the school day, and working with community-based organizations to address parent needs.”

“Teach a kid to catch fish and you’ve taught him how to feed himself. But don’t stop there,” he continued. “Help her to understand why the river is polluted so that she and her friends can organize to get the river clean and make it possible for the entire community to eat, too.” 

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REFLECT ON THIS

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