



Focus: School Perseverance & Grit

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Grit and Non-Cognitive Skills – Framing the Narrative

by María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., and Hector Bojorquez

A growing chorus of academics, administrators and policymakers are steering educational research, money and the public’s imagination to conversations around resiliency and non-cognitive skills. Words like *grit* are now consistently being used to describe a student’s ability to persevere, to face challenges and to overcome failure.

One reason for looking into these non-cognitive skills may be rooted in a search for why – after years of high-stakes testing, standards reform and progressive pedagogy – flat academic results persist. It is, of course, necessary to reassess decades-long efforts. Maybe, the voices behind non-cognitive research say, we now need to look at social-emotional factors that contribute to success. Maybe, just as we teach addition, subtraction, decoding and writing, we need to identify non-academic skills that are necessary for success.

These may be fruitful paths. Too often though, questions are being framed in ways that yield little but negative attitudes, defeatism and deficit practices in the education of young people.

The research dealing with non-cognitive skills concentrates on the importance of *resiliency*, an umbrella term for a person’s ability to persevere and overcome obstacles. Grittiness, goal-setting, self-discipline and motivation are non-cognitive skills that increasingly are the focus of current research, with resiliency as the unifying factor.

Tools, surveys and questionnaires, such as Duckworth’s Grit Scale, are being used as a way of predicting a student’s ability to persevere. The logic is as follows: Intelligence and talents may be important markers of success, but one’s ability to shake off failure and try again – on a test, a challenge, a class – may be more important.

Unfortunately, this logic and the hypotheses that follow from it may not frame things in a manner that is relevant to educational practices.

Students’ apparent intellectual or socio-emotional characteristics cannot be the basis for questions as to how schools and educational systems categorize, teach and assess our youth. From the outset, indicators of these characteristics have not been practically nor conceptually shown to be valid.

Also, the questions surrounding either one of these issues concentrates on what student’s “lack.” Metrics of student strengths or school effectiveness are rarely considered.

Almost by definition, concentrating on student characteristics yields a list of “skills” they must possess in order to succeed. Nowhere is this more evident than with the field of non-cognitive skills. After all, non-cognitive skills, such as perseverance and resiliency, border on being defined as psychological traits that are popularly viewed as inborn.

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“We need to shift the conversation from student traits that are deemed by some as hindering student success to helping schools develop their own perseverance and grit in ways that ensure the success of every student.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Grit and Non-Cognitive Skills – Framing the Narrative, continued from Page 1)

You either have grit or you don't. And what is a school to do with that idea?

Simply stated, the basic framing around these socio-psychological traits in education concentrate on students lacking certain attributes rather than the school's role in shaping experiences that leverage student strengths instead of blaming perceived weaknesses. Regrettably, school administrators and researchers around the country are thinking only about assessing students' grit and resilience. They are already assuming that students are lacking, rather than exploring how schools must change.

There are, however, voices out there that are questioning the wisdom behind these new inquiries. In 2012, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) published, *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners – The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review*. The CCSR review of the literature and research found that studies concentrating on grit and resiliency, viewed as psychosocial traits, show little conclusive evidence of being malleable.

For example, studies on grit have been limited because they (1) concentrate on "high achieving" students as a means of defining this trait among (2) populations like West Point cadets. Unfortunately, this has steered the conversation into how students in high-need groups must lack the traits found in high achieving cadets from West Point.

This not only presents a research problem but also casts high-need students as fundamentally lacking psychological traits needed to succeed. The CCSR report explicitly sees this as a problem because it views high-need students as "broken" and leaves schools with no actual approaches to

strengthen non-cognitive skills.



They conclude that research must address the role of schools in developing resiliency. IDRA is currently framing empirical and experiential paths that will assist schools to find their role in creating school environments that, themselves, are resilient and encourage resiliency.

Resources

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Institutional Grit and Perseverance

Valuing Students and Supporting Academic Success in the Era of the “Grit Gap”

by Laurie Posner, M.P.A.

Lately, almost everywhere you look, new research about children and “grit” crops up, like the proverbial rock in the shoe.

The global Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development cites research suggesting that 3- and 4-year-olds develop and follow play plans to foster self-regulation. Edutopia blogs that students should self-administer the grit scale that asks adolescents whether they’ve faced setbacks or been excited about an idea but gotten distracted. Angela Duckworth’s 2013 TedTalk on grit has attracted more than 5.5 million views. And author and journalist Paul Tough’s book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2013), has been featured by the *New York Times*, NPR, the *Washington Post* and *Forbes*.

Deficit as Default

Concerning as some of the strategies may be, all this focus on children and grit is not surprising – or new.

An emphasis on character development for low-income children and children of color is baked into American history. Since the 1700s, American maxims on becoming a self-made man and the promise of industriousness have been in circulation (Swansburg, 2014) and have shaped social reform, child development and psychological treatment for children (Little, et al., 2007).

Lightner Witmer, founder of the nation’s first psychological clinic, wrote in 1896, “An important aim of clinic work with ‘slum children’ was to ‘discover mental and moral defects and to treat the child in such a way that these defects may be overcome or rendered harmless.’” (Fagan, 1992)

This is not to suggest that grit research and advocacy necessarily sets out to impugn the character of children living in poverty. Its authors would, almost to a person, argue that

the opposite is true. Nonetheless, a grit narrative aimed at children in poverty almost always calls forth the notion of a grit or character “deficit.”

And this is underscored both by a cultural history that conflates economic poverty with moral impoverishment and by the relative lack of focus on persistence and empowerment in teaching and school systems.

Paul Thomas wrote: “Children living and learning in abundance are not inherently smarter, and they do not work harder than children living and learning in poverty. Again, abundance and slack actually allow children to work slower, to make more mistakes, to quit, and to start again (and again).” (2013)

But he also wrote: “Children in poverty line up at the starting line with a bear trap on one leg; middle-class children start at the 20-, 30-, and 40-meter marks; and the affluent stand at the 70-, 80-, and 90-meter mark. And while gazing at education as a stratified sprint, ‘no excuses’ reformers shout to the children in poverty: ‘Run twice as fast! Ignore the bear trap! And if you have real grit, gnaw off your foot, and run twice as fast with one leg!’” (Thomas, 2013)

Regardless of the intent, where the narrative starts with grit, it almost always winds up conceiving of wealthy children as fleet – if spoiled – sprinters and poor children as leg-gnawing brutes.

Grit in Teaching

The book, *True Grit: Trait-Level Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals Predicts Effectiveness and Retention Among Novice Teachers*, by University of Pennsylvania researchers Claire Robertson-Kraft and Angela Duckworth (2007), is a notable exception in that it focuses on the link between personal characteristics in new teachers and teacher turnover rates and effectiveness. Did grittiness
(cont. on Page 4)

“People don’t realize how much influence or impact they have on other people, young or old. They don’t even think about how their words or actions can affect a person.”

– Andre Merritt, Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Tutor, Fuller Performance Learning Center, Cumberland County Schools, North Carolina

(Institutional Grit and Perseverance – Valuing Students and Supporting Academic Success in the Era of the “Grit Gap”, continued from Page 3)

in teachers predict effectiveness and retention? The researchers say yes.

Looking for evidence of grit (“perseverance and passion for long-term goals”) in novice teachers’ experiences and resumes, they found that teachers with higher grit scores were more likely to complete the school year and outperform their colleagues in improving academic outcomes of their students.

As the researchers recognize, the idea that having a track record in facing challenges could show up as helpful to a novice teacher should not surprise us. It is, after all, a primary reason that any prospective employer asks, “How did you handle a challenge like x?”

What is useful, however, is the finding that traits can be identified based on the kind of information a school administrator or teacher training program typically has when reviewing the resumes of teacher candidates.

Still, a focus on personal characteristics – whether to describe aspirations for teachers and children or the way in which teachers can impart traits for student success – has its inherent limits, and risks. Not only can the model communicate to teachers and children that they are inherently short of “the right stuff,” it can miss key school-based factors that create long-term conditions for persistence and the valuing viewpoint to recognize true grit when you see it.

As a team of teachers and outreach directors at Educators 4 Excellence Los Angeles (E4ELA) found in *True Grit: The game-changing factors and people lifting school performance in LAUSD*, true grit was not a trait but an “unwavering pursuit of growth” (2001). It was not a single quality but a collective “determination that permeates our classrooms, the ambition we show in the face of angst, and a belief in what is possible.” (Note: The report features gains achieved by the New Open World Academy – Open World Academy is the lead partner with IDRA on the implementation of the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program at Los Angeles USD).

Looking across 35 schools in Los Angeles USD to learn from campuses that had increased their Academic Performance Index (API) by 40 points or more, the educators examined data

and conducted interviews and focus groups with more than 400 teachers, administrators and other school-site personnel. They found that five factors were associated with school success and grittiness: (1) strengthening school culture; (2) making data dynamic; (3) working smarter together; (4) building smarter systems; and (5) partnering with families and the community.

Los Angeles USD teacher, Pamela Amaya, stated: “We improved our professional development systems by empowering teachers to design and facilitate trainings, creating an open dialogue for the sharing of best practices.” (Educators 4 Excellence, 2001)

IDRA research on the qualities of school systems that produce strong holding power – the capacity to hold onto every student and prepare them for graduation with college readiness – reveal similar findings. IDRA finds six characteristics of good programs: (1) All students must be valued; (2) At least one educator must be totally committed to a student’s life; (3) There must be extensive, consistent support so that students can learn; (4) Teachers can teach, and parents can be involved (4) Programs that produce results must focus on both equity and excellence; (5) Solutions must be institution-based; and (6) Solutions must build on strengths and contributions rather than try to “fix” students or families (Robledo Montecel, 2006).

At its best, research and experience suggest, grit is not an endowment but a process. And as Avi Kaplan, of Temple University’s College of Education, notes, even if it were, in teaching or learning, grit in isolation is not always good: “Grit has to be balanced with intelligent flexibility.”

Resources

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Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- *College Bound and Determined*, IDRA publication
- Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program winning essays
- Equity Hub video: “Ensuring High Teaching Quality to Tap Into Students’ Strengths”
- Info about the upcoming Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute
- “Key Points of Increasing School Holding Power for All Students,” teleseminar
- *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners – The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review*, University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research
- Podcasts about asset-based solutions in education

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

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Gauging Grit – Gouging the Poor

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Competing views of students and their families have great impact on education results. If one holds a culture-of-poverty perspective, the traits (and deficits) of students become the focus. But IDRA's *culture of possibility* frame recognizes the assets of students and focuses on the responsibility of the institution. Similarly, when one looks at a poor neighborhood with an asset lens, they see the strength and potential that is there in talents, skills and funds of knowledge.

We expect schools to have grit, drive and prudence, to set high expectations for all students, and to support them to meet those expectations. And we can point to a school district that is doing just that (Bojorquez, 2014), as well as to examples within schools (Robledo Montecel, 2009).

From both a practical and pragmatic point of view, the asset-based approach does not ignore reality, but rather acknowledges the very real fullness of a community. And it yields much more positive results whether in organizing a community to help itself or in teaching the children in that community.

In order to be successful, our schools and our educators must value and nurture the gifts and strengths all children bring. And we as a nation must demonstrate that valuing by funding public schools fully and equitably and by expecting that our schools governed effectively.

Negative Bias

Old models that are deficit-based and lead to institutional failure unfortunately are getting new energy. What was known as the “culture of poverty” is now appearing under the guise of students’ lack of “grit plus talent” and their lack of the “character factor.” Poverty is seen as both inevitable and the result of a culture that perpetuates poverty for itself.

While poverty does affect families, it does not signal inherent frailties. But biased research perpetuates biased attitudes that support classist

and racist claims and strategies. Dressed up in new clothes, these modes of thinking exclude the role of institutional inputs, efforts and responsibilities.

Co-opting Progressive Language

The phrases “no excuses” and “excellence for all” appear to bring in the concept of institutional accountability. Yet this language of progressive education advocates is sometimes co-opted by sinister caring-only-for-profit forces effectively because within poor neighborhoods and among people of color there is a strong reaction to the stigma and labeling of children.

Our neediest schools in the poorest neighborhoods are being shut down and evangelized with “choice” offered by charter schools, many of which are cold business enterprises. Efforts to dismantle at-risk schools succeed when those schools were set up to fail through underfunding and inequitable systems.

Rather than embracing research and speeches that implicate a perceived paucity of language in poor families, we must acknowledge institutional silence about disparate resources and needs. The true *lack of stamina* to be addressed is not students giving up on institutions but institutions giving up on students. The *culture of poverty* resides in the poverty of understanding and expectations in the institution. The *work ethic* that really matters is how hard schools are working for the success of all students.

Educator Accountability

So when some of those who are fighting against privatization and are immersed in defense of teachers say “It’s the poverty, stupid” or “College is not for everyone,” we must beware. Following through on such beliefs is likely to infringe the civil rights of students.

At the same time, teachers are being attacked by forces that often are hypocritical about caring for students and that may really be fueled by the
(cont. on Page 6)

“Our future depends on us having an excellent public educational system where all students graduate from high school prepared for college or the world of work, no matter what the color of their skin, the language they speak, or where they happen to be born. And this is a goal I believe we can achieve.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel,
IDRA President & CEO

(Gauging Grit – Gouging the Poor, continued from Page 5)

goal to privatize public education. Such criticisms often are misplaced. But educators still need to be taking a clear, realistic look at their work because they do have a significant role in student success. And that role becomes much more powerful when based on the wisdom of the culture of possibility.

And by extension, this draws on the persistence of millions of families who continuously support their children through great odds and defies institutionalized low expectations.

Resources

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Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate. Comments and questions maybe directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

Contrasts of Incongruities

All schools must have high expectations for all students, coupled with the appropriate supports to attain them. We at IDRA proclaim the *culture of possibility*: our schools must have the grit, drive and the prudence to meet those possibilities.

In our current educational debates, we face some incongruities...

...Recommendations for teaching work ethic to those who are actually working the hardest for the lowest pay.

...Diminishing the persistence of millions of families who continuously support their children through great odds while ignoring the institutionalized low expectations of schools.

...Highlighting paucity of language while avoiding institutional silence about disparate resources and needs.

...Ascribing lack of stamina to families and students while consistently giving up on those students and their families.

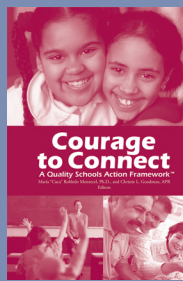
...Citing the culture of poverty of families or communities while ignoring the poverty of understanding and expectations in the institution.

...Demonizing the children of the barrio and the urban ghetto while ignoring the examples of blessed success in some schools and school districts serving those very children.

...Attempting to teach grit, drive and prudence or to build character as if those qualities are inherently present in middle-class White children while refusing to adapt teaching so that children do learn and imprudently over-assigning students of color to alternative settings for minor behavior problems.

It doesn't have to be this way

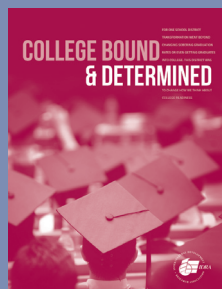
Resources



Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework

This book presents IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework™ and shows how communities and schools can work together to strengthen their capacity to be successful with all of their students. The Quality Schools Action Framework is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. It gives a model for assessing a school's conditions and outcomes, for identifying leverage points for improvement, and for informing action.

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College Bound and Determined

IDRA's report shows how the Pharr-San Juan Alamo school district in south Texas transformed itself from low achievement and low expectations to planning for all students to graduate from high school and college. This transformation has resulted in the district doubling the number of high school graduates, cutting dropout rates in half, and increasing college-going rates. In fact, half of the district's students are earning college credit while still in high school.

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FREE ONLINE AT WWW.IDRA.ORG.



Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Winning Essay

Editor's Note: IDRA sponsored a national essay competition among participants in the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, a nationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program. Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors wrote about how the program helps them do better in school and how they help their tutees to do better. Six students received prizes. Below is one of the winning essays. Others are posted on the IDRA website (www.idra.org).



High School Second Place

**Nicholas
Alderete**

9th grade, South San
Antonio High School, San
Antonio, Texas

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me see people differently. In this program, I have seen that they actually care for me. I used to have a very bad attitude, and my grades are not the best. I have never been a good student. I have difficulty in math, reading, science, and basically mostly every subject there is. This program has made me realize that grades are important to keep

up. The program is the reason my grades are passing, and my life has gotten better.

I had always heard about this program, but I have never would of guessed that it would be this life changing to me. The thing I do in this program is tutor kids, which is actually not bad. I would always think that it would have no effect, but it turns out that it does affect my life. The kids all love me because I help them succeed in school. I tell them that it is fun and not that bad as you think. This program is amazing. The best part about this program is that I get to tutor three tutees from the elementary school. They are the best when it comes to learning, they actually enjoy leaning when I tutor them.

When I go to the school, they are excited to see me. When I start to tutor them, they know everything now. When I got there on my first day, I saw that they struggled, but throughout the year I have taught them a lot. Well, the only reason I know that is that every day I go, they get better. These third graders have made me feel special. They welcome me every day I go tutor with a jump of cheer and scream my name "Nicholas!" It's amazing how they do that and make me feel important.

I have tutored them in math, reading and spelling. They have learned a lot and come to school every day. Attendance was a problem with them, but now they show up every day. I am so proud

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Meet Hector Bojorquez

Director of IDRA's Student Access and Success Department

This year, the *IDRA Newsletter* will highlight our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. As of January 2015, Hector Bojorquez, was named to lead IDRA's department of Student Access and Success. This department conducts and disseminates research to educators, policymakers and families concerning early child education, STEM, dropout solutions, and high school to college transitions. It also provides technical assistance to expand opportunities for systemic reform in our community schools. Mr. Bojorquez is the principal author of IDRA's newest publication, *College Bound and Determined* (see box on Page 6).

His talents and background, however, also are deeply rooted in the arts. On October 31, 2013, Mr. Bojorquez put the final touches on his first feature film, *Borderlands*, which he co-wrote with his brother, Gerald Pettit. This was a major step along the path to a larger goal of seeing *Borderlands* become a cable television show. Mr. Bojorquez has been writing poetry, short stories and scripts for 20 years. His written work has been published in *Viaztlan*, a poetry quarterly, but it is the film work that has reached large audiences. *Borderlands* was accepted to be screened at the San Antonio Film Festival and Cinefestival. The film also won the 2014 Best in Show award from the Accolade Global Film Competition.

Borderlands is a love song to Mexican American mothers along the South Texas border and a tribute to their unwavering devotion to family and their hard-earned heroism. That said, it is unlike any portrayal audiences

are likely to have seen in other Chicano or Mexican American films. The heroine, María Lara, a 74-year-old Mexican American woman, is hell-

bent on having the last word, fiercely protective of her family, and dysfunctional as can be. She is not a gentle, Zen-like grandmotherly woman. She is loved as well as feared and will go to extremes to get her way. This is not a pastoral view of Mexican American mothers as long-suffering women in their oppression but a flesh and blood portrayal of the toll taken by everyday heroism. The film stars his mother, Sandra Bojorquez, a veteran actress and radio personality. *Borderlands* was dedicated to Gerald Pettit who passed away before filming took place.

Mr. Bojorquez's film career is now taking him to different artistic endeavors in short films, comedy and a new script, tentatively titled *Homecoming*, a psychological crime thriller. He has a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Texas at Austin. A former bilingual teacher, Mr. Bojorquez came to IDRA in 2003.





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Focus: School Perseverance & Grit

(Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Winning Essay, continued from Page 7)

of them. My attendance used to be off. I never wanted to come to school, but those kids made me come to school every day. They are also the reason my grades are up, so that they can look up to me and say "He is really smart."

I would have never guessed that I would become the person I am today. It is still surprising to me. My grades were not the best, but ever since I joined this program I stay for tutoring and have picked up my grades for them. I am still struggle with algebra, but I am working my hardest to get it and keep it up. The program has made me feel important to those kids. I was even interviewed for the Channel 4 news and was on TV. I even came out in the newspaper for working hard at tutoring those kids. I told them that my life has completely changed since I have started the program, and nothing will make me go back to the way I was.

Contact IDRA for more information or visit www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html.

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April 23, 2015

Whitley Theological Center, San Antonio

9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.



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