


Teaching 'grit' is bad for children, and bad for democracy

adapted from an article by Nicholas Tampio

- 1 According to the grit narrative, children in the United States are lazy, entitled and unprepared to compete in the global economy. Schools have contributed to the problem by neglecting socio-emotional skills. The solution, then, is for schools to impart the dispositions that enable American children to succeed in college and careers. According to this story, politicians, policymakers, corporate executives and parents agree that kids need more grit.
- 2 The person who has arguably done more than anyone else to elevate the concept of grit in academic conversations is Angela Duckworth, professor at the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In her new book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, she explains the concept of grit and how people can cultivate it in themselves and others.
- 3 According to Duckworth, grit is the ability to overcome any obstacle in pursuit of a long-term project: 'To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down seven times and rise eight.' Duckworth names musicians, athletes, coaches, academics and business people who succeed because of grit. Her book will be 15 for policymakers who want schools to inculcate and measure grit. There is a time and place for grit. However, praising grit as such makes no sense because it can often lead to stupid or mean behaviour. Duckworth's book is filled with gritty people doing things that they perhaps shouldn't.
- 4 Take Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology and Duckworth's graduate school mentor. In a 1967 article, Seligman and his co-author describe a series of experiments on dogs. The first day, the dogs were placed in a harness and administered electrical shocks. One group could stop the shocks if they pressed their nose against a panel, and the other group could not. The next day, all of the dogs were placed in a shuttle box and again administered shocks that the dogs could stop by jumping over a barrier. Most of the dogs who could stop the shocks the first day jumped over the barrier, while most of the dogs who suffered inescapable shocks did not try, though a few did. Duckworth reflects upon this story and her own challenges in a college course in neurobiology. She

decides that she passed the course because she would 'be like the few dogs who, despite recent memories of uncontrollable pain, held fast to hope'. Duckworth would be like one of the dogs that got up and kept fighting.

- 5 At no point, however, does Duckworth express concern that many of the animals in Seligman's study died or became ill shortly thereafter. Duckworth acknowledges the possibility that there might be 'grit villains' but dismisses this concern because 'there are many more gritty heroes'. There is no reason to assume this, and it oversimplifies the moral universe to maintain that one has to be a 'grit villain' to thoughtlessly harm people.
- 6 A second grit paragon in Duckworth's book is Pete Carroll, the Super Bowl-winning coach of the Seattle Seahawks American football team. Carroll has created a culture of grit where assistant coaches chant: 'No whining. No complaining. No excuses.' She also commends Seahawk defensive back Earl Thomas for playing with 'marvellous intensity'. Duckworth has apparently not read any of the articles or seen any of the movies or television programmes detailing the long-term harm caused by playing professional football. President Barack Obama, among others, has said that he would not want a son, if he had one, to play football. Duckworth might have talked with football players who suffer from traumatic brain injuries.
- 7 Why don't these people ever stop to reflect on what they are doing? We should not celebrate the fact that 'paragons of grit don't swap compasses', as Duckworth puts it in her book. That might signal a moral failing on their part. The opposite of grit, often enough, is contemplating, wondering, asking questions, and refusing to push a boulder up a hill.
- 8 Right now, many Americans want the next generation to be gritty. 19, school districts in California are using modified versions of Duckworth's Grit Survey to hold schools and teachers accountable for how well children demonstrate 'self-management skills'. Duckworth herself opposes grading schools on grit because the measurement tools are unreliable. But that stance overlooks the larger problem of how a grit culture contributes to an authoritarian politics, one where leaders expect the masses to stay on task.
- 9 Democracy requires active citizens who reason for themselves and, often enough, challenge authority. Ordinary people who demand a say in how they are governed. Duckworth celebrates educational models that weed out people who don't obey orders. That is a disastrous model for education in a democracy. US schools ought to protect dreamers, inventors, rebels and entrepreneurs — not crush them in the name of grit.

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