

Grit vs Resilience – Ideas for Parents and Teachers

Grit (as defined by Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania as the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals) does not now appear to be the robust predictor of academic success previously claimed by its current promoter (see my previous blog [The Problem with Grit](#)).

I must say I am not surprised. The whole concept of grit to me has simply borrowed from a long history of research into resilience and given resilience a new and somewhat trendy name. As far as I can see grit does not exist as a phenomenon distinct from resilience but is rather a sub-set of resilience and resilience is not a great predictor of academic success.

It is true that academically successful students often are quite resilient but resilience itself is not a necessary condition for academic success. Useful but not necessary.

The problem is that a student can be very resilient but their most resilient reaction to school may not include high academic achievement. If a child is in a situation that they feel is threatening to their self-confidence or self-esteem or if they find the experience of schooling to be unengaging, uninteresting or simply not challenging enough they may well choose to opt out rather than work hard at academic tasks. In this way they protect themselves, they are demonstrating resilience in a difficult situation but they will not achieve high academic results.

If you are interested in the academic research into a connection between resilience and academic achievement you are welcome to access it here <http://taolearn.com/articles/article28.pdf>

Some of the key findings of resilience research are that resilient learners:

1. Take a process-focused view of their own learning. This means they focus on learning goals rather than performance goals. Resilient students are learning at school to improve their knowledge and skills rather than to get “A” passes or “Excellence” grades.
2. Want to master their subjects for their own sake rather than to gain someone’s approval or avoid someone’s disapproval

So at home and at school it is important to reinforce the intrinsic value of every subject children learn, emphasising the relevance to today’s world and their future lives.

Also help focus children on the usefulness of understanding and eventually mastering the particular academic discipline they are engaged in, and downplay the grade or mark as the aim of learning. Children need to be learning for personal benefit rather than learning in order to achieve a certain score or the approval of others – be that from parents, teachers or peers. And if grades and scores are important to you be reassured that the best grades always come from gaining a complete understanding of any subject – gaining mastery.

Resilient learners are also

3. Challenge seeking rather than challenge avoiding

What has been found in some studies is that the less resilient students actively plot a path for themselves through school that avoids all significant challenge in order to avoid ever having to experience failure. The reason being that they feel that their performance is most significantly judged by others – approval seeking or disapproval avoiding – and so the thing which is most significant for them is avoiding looking bad. Girls universally show more resilience than boys in primary and intermediate years but much less resilience than boys in secondary years due, it seems, to the developing concern with girls to *look good* as they get older.

To get past this we need to help all children to rely more on their own judgement of their progress and success rather than the judgement of others. To compare themselves with themselves rather than with others and to be proud of their own growth, development and ability to handle new challenges. To do this we need to make sure that children can always generate new challenges in their own lives and we need to help them to take on these new challenges and to test themselves always with something that they think is more than they can do.

Lastly, the single most consistent factor running through all the research I have read on this topic was the presence, in every resilient child's life, of at least one committed, concerned, totally supportive adult. One adult who did not make their approval conditional on the behaviour of the child but who unconditionally supported and approved of that child because of who they were not because of what they did.

I think this is very significant because how many children have at least one adult in their lives like this? It may be a parent, a grandmother or other relative, it may be a coach, teacher, church leader, older sibling. Whoever it is does not seem to matter but the support of their unconditional regard appears to be very important for the development of resilience.

Interestingly enough most resilience research has been conducted in seriously disadvantaged populations where extremes of vulnerability produce examples of resilience most notable by their scarcity. It is in these situations where the effects of uncontrollable, external forces and the urgency of simple survival can be so overwhelming to the majority that the resilient are easy to identify. The key themes that seem to pervade virtually all resilience studies are those of people actively taking control of their own life where they can, to reduce the randomness and helplessness of their situation and at the same time maintaining an optimistic view of the possibilities that could be available for them.

The unintentional bias in all the resilience research however is that there are no studies (that I have found), on similar developments in middle class and privileged populations. This might suggest that resilience is a characteristic only of the impoverished or the disadvantaged but common sense would suggest that it is not socio-economic factors that produce resilience it is something else. Resilience development appears to involve a conceptual change, a change in thinking away from helplessness towards inner strength that sometimes occurs in situations of significant risk but may also occur in situations of minimal risk.

The development of resilience is absolutely vital for all children. Resilience confers on one the ability to cope with all of life's difficulties, to see them as challenges to be overcome, situations to be

mastered and mistakes to be learned from. The development of resilience protects children from helplessness, enables them to take control where they can and helps them avoid the predation of depression.

For today's school students the development of the attribute of resilience is vital, and if it can be built into a framework of effective learning then we have the possibility of developing the resilient learner, one who can not only cope with every problem they face but learn from it, take advantage of it and profit from their own mistakes.