

The Problem with Grit

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.

A new study by researchers at King's College London, suggests that 'grit', defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, adds little to the prediction of school achievement.

The study authors point out that previous research, indicating small associations between grit and academic achievement, has relied on highly selected samples such as spelling competition finalists and teachers, which may have led to stronger associations between grit and achievement in later life.

This new study, which used a sample of 4,500 16-year-old twins*, found that aspects of personality predict around six per cent of the differences between GCSE results and, after controlling for these characteristics, grit alone only predicted 0.5 per cent of the differences between GCSE results.

According to the researchers these findings, published today in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, warrant concern given the present emphasis placed by education policymakers on teaching grit to pupils, both in the UK and in the US.

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 itself as 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>

Grit is not, and has never been, the answer but there is one characteristic or attribute often associated with or found in resilient students that is absolutely correlated with academic success. That is an individual's tendency to either "fail well" or "fail badly".

This assertion comes from evidence gained initially from my own study of 100 students at a New Zealand high school and subsequently by my work in the last 10 years with over 100,000 students, teachers and parents of school age children.

Using my definition of failure as “*the state or condition of not meeting a desired or intended objective*” I have found that reaction to failure situations is an excellent predictor of academic success at school.

In failure situations students performing at the highest academic levels all practice failing well whereas students performing at the lowest academic levels universally fail badly.

<i>Failing Well</i>	<i>Failing Badly</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging your failures, taking responsibility for your own actions, working out what you did wrong, making changes, going back and doing it again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaming the school or the ‘system’ • Blaming other people • Pretending you never have any failures • Adding drama to failures to avoid dealing with them • Avoiding any activity that could possibly result in failure • Dropping any activity after the first failure • Making the same mistake over and over • Universalising failure

- Students who *fail well* do better, much better, than students who *fail badly*.
- Teachers who *fail well* do better.
- Parents who *fail well* do better.

The key to *failing well* seems to be in the reprocessing of failure.

I suggest the following steps:

- 1) Get over your emotional attachment to the word failure. Failure is just feedback. Feedback on what you aren’t doing right, yet
- 2) Second, admit every failure – immediately. Remember that the definition of failure is simply not reaching a goal
- 3) Take responsibility for your own actions in not achieving that goal
- 4) Make changes
- 5) Have another go

The secret seems to be in re-working any failure. Making sure you have another go, whatever the situation is, but making sure you change something first.

To help with this both teachers and parents need to reframe the word ‘failure’ and help children to understand that failure is a necessary part of growth and learning and there are two distinctly different ways to fail.

In the school situation the greatest challenge may well be to de-stigmatise the word failure and to create a classroom climate where children feel safe to fail. Only then will students be able to examine their own reactions to failure and practice building up the skills of failing well.

If you adopt this model in your own life then from now on every task, every goal, every performance has not two but three possible outcomes – *Success*, *Failing Well* and *Failing Badly*, and two of those are positive. By adopting this model you instantly increase the potential for a positive outcome by at least one third.

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