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Beyond ‘Grit:’ Where the Character Conversation Is Going Wrong

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“The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education.” - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King knew what he was talking about. Character education has again emerged as a front in the effort to prepare our children for college and beyond.

So we need to stop getting it wrong every time we talk about it.

This is not the first time we’ve focused on character, but what makes this go-round unique are two things: first, there’s a new body of research analyzing the non-academic skills kids need to be successful; second, a slate of [pop psychology reporting](#) has brought that research into the public discourse.

So, for example, we can look at UPenn Professor Angela Duckworth’s work on measuring student “[grit](#)” — think long-term academic perseverance — and read some really [compelling reporting](#) on it. (“Grit” falls under a broader body of work on what is being called non-cognitive skill instruction: the way schools teach students *how* to learn.)

But translating research into public discussion can have a serious drawback: it tends to [isolate concepts like “grit” in inauthentic ways](#) — as though they are separate curricular add-ons that have little to do with the rest of what happens in a school.

That move can lead us to suggest false dichotomies and make dangerous declarations, such as [claiming](#) that that grit is more important than academic achievement.

We can have a healthy debate about the most valuable actions for developing student character.* Right now, I’m working with a group of New Jersey educators through the [VIVA teachers project](#) to try to pin down a few we think are helpful.

But the first thing we need to do is recognize that we are not talking about either-or scenarios. As my school likes to say, we're talking about "yes-and" ones.

When we invent dichotomies between "non-cognitive" and "cognitive" skills, we create a supposition that one might need to be sacrificed for the other.

Hogwash. According to the [University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research](#), one of the keys to developing so-called non-cognitive skills is creating a rigorous academic program:

Research from the learning sciences shows the tight interconnection between cognitive and noncognitive factors in shaping student learning and academic performance...Teachers can design their classrooms so that they build mindsets, skills, behaviors and strategies in pursuit of handling challenging content knowledge and developing core academic skills. (76-77)

The same could be said for school climate. In a [2011 report](#) on Chicago Public Schools, the group found that academic achievement determined school safety even more than a school's location.

The lesson? For kids, the secret to success is... experiencing success. If we try to tease out character education (or school safety) as being unconnected to a rigorous academic environment, we'll never be able to craft solutions that best serve our kids.

We need to talk about developing character traits, study habits, and academic mindsets as things that are integrated in a school's educational plan. We need to make these components visible to students, parents, and teachers — and assessable by outside reviewers.

And we need to be very clear that these things aren't ancillary to a rigorous education, they're part of one.

Dr. King dreamed that our kids would one day be judged on the content of their characters, rather than the color of their skin. What recent research tells us is that character traits are something that educators can help children develop and hone.

In short, we have more power to make Dr. King’s dream come true than we might ever have imagined. And we owe it to our students to make sure our conversation stays focused on the best ways to do just that.

** There isn’t conclusive research that “grit” is teachable in a broad sense — and regardless it hasn’t been demonstrated as the most powerful tool to use in schools. What we know does work is coaching student mindsets toward learning and their academic community, and teaching them learning strategies, like goal-setting and study skills.*

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