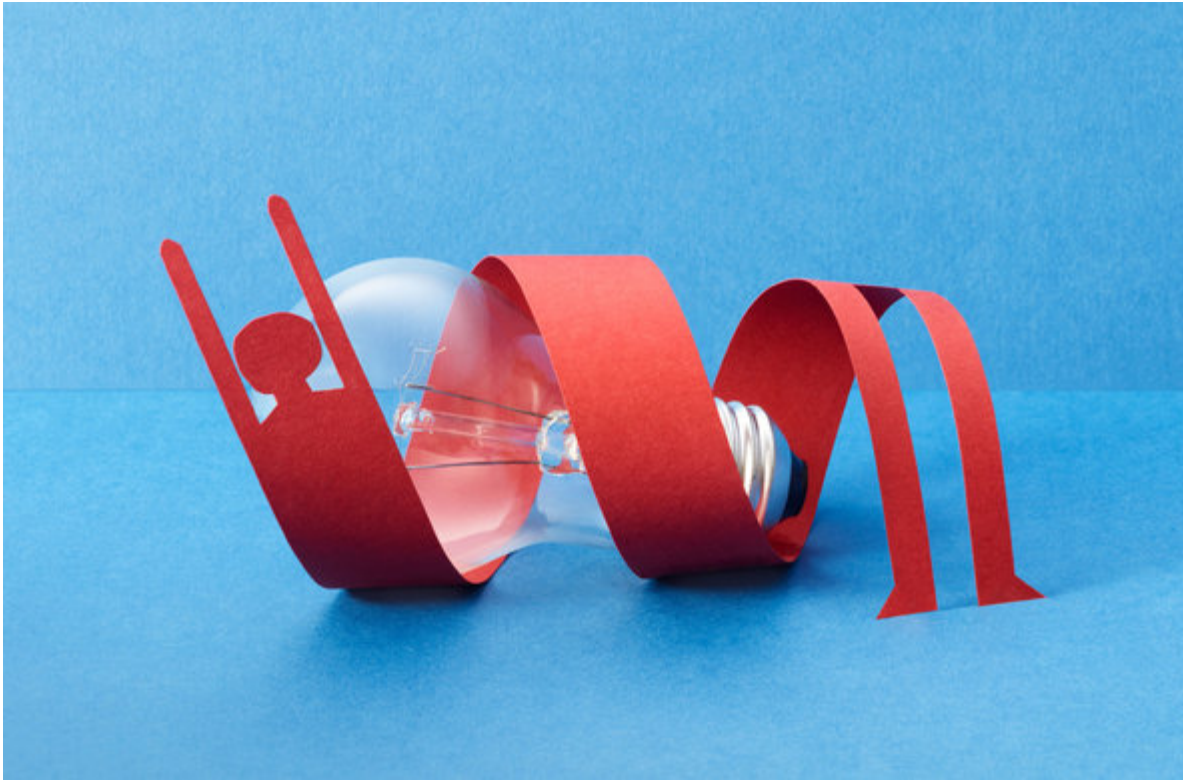


Should Schools Teach Personality?

 op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/should-schools-teach-personality/

By Anna North



Self-control, curiosity, “grit” — these qualities may seem more personal than academic, but at some schools, they’re now part of the regular curriculum. Some researchers say personality could be even more important than intelligence when it comes to students’ success in school. But critics worry that the increasing focus on qualities like grit will distract policy makers from problems with schools.

In a 2014 [paper](#), the Australian psychology professor Arthur E. Poropat cites research showing that both conscientiousness (which he defines as a tendency to be “diligent, dutiful and hardworking”) and openness (characterized by qualities like creativity and curiosity) are more highly correlated with student performance than intelligence is. And, he notes, ratings of students’ personalities by outside observers — teachers, for instance — are even more strongly linked with academic success than the way students rate themselves. The strength of the personality-performance link is good news, he writes, because “personality has been demonstrated to change over time to a far greater extent than intelligence.”

A number of researchers have been successful in improving students’ conscientiousness, Dr. Poropat said in an interview. One team, he said, found that when

elementary-school students get training in “effortful control,” a trait similar to conscientiousness, “it not only improves the students’ performance at that point in their education, but also has follow-on effects a number of years afterward.” Another [study](#) found that a 16-week problem-solving training program could increase retirees’ levels of openness.

“We probably need to start rethinking our emphasis on intelligence,” he said. “This isn’t to say that we should throw intelligence out,” he cautioned, “but we need to pull back on thinking that this is the only game in town.”

Some already have. “Grit” — which the psychology professor Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania and her co-authors define in a [2007 paper](#) as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” and which they see as overlapping in some ways with conscientiousness — has become part of the curriculum at a number of schools.

Mandy Benedix, who teaches a class on grit at Rogers Middle School in Pearland, Tex., said: “We know that these noncognitive traits can be taught. We also know that it is necessary for success. You look at anybody who has had long-term sustainable success, and every one of them exhibited at some point this grit, this tenacity to keep going.”

One result of the class, which includes lessons on people, like Malala Yousafzai, who have overcome significant challenges: Students “are now willing to do the hard thing instead of always running to what was easy.” Ms. Benedix also coordinates a districtwide grit initiative — since it began, she says, the number of high schoolers taking advanced-placement classes has increased significantly.

The [KIPP](#) network of charter schools emphasizes grit along with six other “character strengths,” including self-control and curiosity. Leyla Bravo-Willey, the assistant principal at KIPP Infinity Middle School in Harlem, said, “We talk a lot about them as being skills or strengths, not necessarily traits, because it’s not innate.”

“If a child happens to be very gritty but has trouble participating in class,” she added, “we still want them to develop that part of themselves.”

The focus on character, however, has encountered criticism. The education writer and speaker Alfie Kohn, for instance, argues that grit isn’t always helpful. In a [Washington Post essay](#) adapted from his new book, [“The Myth of the Spoiled Child: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom About Children and Parenting,”](#) he writes that dogged persistence isn’t the best approach to every situation: “Even if you don’t crash and burn by staying the course, you may not fare nearly as well as if you had stopped, reassessed and tried something else.”

And, he said in an interview, an emphasis on children’s personalities could take

attention away from problems with their schools. “Social psychologists for decades have identified a tendency to overestimate how important personality characteristics, motivation, individual values and the like tend to be relative to the importance of the structural characteristics of a situation,” he said. “We tend to think people just need to try harder, or have a better attitude,” but “this tends to miss the boat. What really matters is various aspects of the system itself.”

Truly improving education in America will require “asking about the environment in which kids are placed, what kids are being asked to learn, how they’re being taught, what voice they have, if any, in the experience,” he said. “Every time we focus on personality variables, we are distracted again from addressing the systemic questions that matter.”

And in an essay at The New Republic, Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, an educational studies professor at Carleton College, [contends](#) that as currently espoused by KIPP, “character-based education is untethered from any conception of morality.” And, he says in an interview, he questions the value of looking at character traits outside a larger moral framework: “What’s the importance of teaching grit if you’re not teaching it in the context of civic education, the public good, social responsibility?” Teaching it without such context “becomes kind of a looking-out-for-number-one-type approach to education.”

As an example of a better way, he points to a school he came across in his research whose students started a community garden during World War I (gardening is also part of the curriculum at [some schools](#) today). Planting, growing and distributing food taught many of the same traits that character-education programs hope to instill, he said, “but it’s all richly integrated into a task that has genuine purpose and that makes the students think beyond themselves.”

Ms. Bravo-Willey disputes the notion that character education at KIPP is hyperindividualistic. KIPP Infinity, she said, has students get together in groups to help one another with their academic goals, like getting to class on time or making the honor roll. “They work together to do that, because that sense of community is so critical.”

Though academic success is an important goal for KIPP, she said, it’s not the only thing: “We want to make kids that are great citizens for the world.”

And some say understanding personality can help teachers tailor instruction to fit students, or help students choose fields that match their preferences. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a professor of business psychology at University College London who has studied the relationship between personality and learning, is less interested in changing people’s personalities than in helping students find the right path for them. Rather than making everyone gritty in all circumstances, he said, “I think it will probably be more about helping people find what their interests are.”

“If you have no interest in classical music or no interest in starting your business,” he said, “I doubt that you will be very gritty or display a lot of passion and perseverance there.” But personality assessment could help people find areas where they might be more likely to persevere — it could “teach people what they’re naturally like, so they can make better choices.” And rather than changing their personalities completely, people might simply learn behaviors to help them better deal with their existing traits. For instance, he said, “if I know that I’m generally an introverted person and I don’t enjoy social events, I can teach myself four or five simple strategies to relate to other people.”

“I shouldn’t really aspire to be something completely different,” he said, “because that’s a very, very hard and counterproductive task.” And, he added, “We wouldn’t want to live in a world where everybody has the same personality.”

Ms. Benedix believes understanding students’ personalities could help her meet their needs. If she knows a child is introverted, for instance, she might not expect him or her to demonstrate knowledge by speaking up frequently in class. “Anytime you’re teaching any kid,” she said, “the more I know about their personality and how they learn best, the better I’m going to be able to reach them and deliver that.”

And Dr. Poropat said a knowledge of students’ personality traits “provides teachers with more guidance on what they should be doing in the classroom.” People with high levels of openness may learn differently from those in whom the trait is less prominent, he noted. “You can train the students who are low on openness to become more open and curious and so on, but also the teacher can adapt their way of learning to suit the students.”

“A good teacher makes a huge difference,” he said. “It’s not just what the student brings.”