TEACHING KIDS GRIT AND SELF-CONTROL

Philly Student (Photo by Vikki Sloviter, courtesy KIPP Philadelphia Schools)

The truth, as many American teachers know firsthand, is that low-income children can be harder to educate than children from more-comfortable backgrounds. Educators often struggle to motivate them, to calm them down, to connect with them. This doesn't mean they're impossible to teach, of course; plenty of kids who grow up in poverty are thriving in the classroom. But two decades of national attention have done little or nothing to close the achievement gap between poor students and their better-off peers.

In recent years, in response to this growing crisis, a new idea (or perhaps a very old one) has arisen in the education world: Character matters. Researchers concerned with academic-achievement gaps have begun to study, with increasing interest and enthusiasm, a set of personal qualities—often referred to as noncognitive skills, or character strengths—that include resilience, conscientiousness, optimism, self-control, and grit. These capacities generally aren't captured by our ubiquitous standardized tests, but they seem to make a big difference in the academic success of children, especially low-income children.

But here's the problem: For all our talk about noncognitive skills, nobody has yet found a reliable way to teach kids to be grittier or more resilient. And it has become clear, at the same time, that the educators who are best able to engender noncognitive abilities in their students often do so without really "teaching" these capacities the way one might teach math or reading—indeed, they often do so without ever saying a word about them in the classroom. This paradox has raised a pressing question for a new generation of researchers: Is the teaching paradigm the right one to use when it comes to helping young people develop noncognitive capacities?

The problem is that when disadvantaged children run into trouble in school, either academically or behaviorally, most schools respond by imposing more control on them, not less. This diminishes their fragile sense of autonomy. As these students fall behind their peers academically, they feel less and less competent. And if their relationships with their teachers are wary or even contentious, they are less likely to experience the kind of relatedness that Deci and Ryan, professors at the University of Rochester, describe as being so powerfully motivating for young people in the classroom. Once students reach that

point, no collection of material incentives or punishments is going to motivate them, at least not in a deep or sustained way.

All of which brings us back to the question of how to help children develop those mysterious noncognitive capacities. If we want students to act in ways that will maximize their future opportunities—-to persevere through challenges, to delay gratification, to control their impulses—-we need to consider what might motivate them to take those difficult steps. What Deci and Ryan's research suggests is that students will be more likely to display these positive academic habits when they are in an environment where they feel a sense of belonging, independence, and growth—or, to use Deci and Ryan's language, where they experience relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

From article by Paul Tough

http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/how-kids-really-succeed/480744/

Getty Images

Excerpted from the book "Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why" by Paul Tough.

Because noncognitive qualities like grit, curiosity, self-control, optimism, and conscientiousness are often described, with some accuracy, as skills, educators eager to develop these qualities in their students quite naturally tend to treat them like the skills that we already know how to teach: reading, calculating, analyzing, and so on. And as the value of noncognitive skills has become more widely acknowledged, demand has grown for a curriculum or a textbook or a teaching strategy to guide us in helping students develop these skills. If we can all agree on the most effective way to teach the Pythagorean theorem, can't we also agree on the best way to teach grit? In practice, though, it hasn't been so simple. Some schools have developed comprehensive approaches to teaching character strengths, and in classrooms across the country, teachers are talking to their students more than ever about qualities like grit and perseverance. But in my reporting for How Children Succeed, I noticed a strange paradox: Many of the educators I encountered who seemed best able to engender noncognitive abilities in their students never said a word about these skills in the classroom.

It was clear that certain pedagogical techniques that work well in math or history are ineffective when it comes to character strengths. No child ever learned curiosity by filling out curiosity worksheets; hearing lectures on perseverance doesn't seem to have much impact on the extent to which young people persevere.

This dawning understanding led me to some new questions: What if noncognitive capacities are categorically different than cognitive skills? What if they are not primarily the result of training and practice? And what if the process of developing them doesn't actually look anything like the process of learning stuff like reading and writing and math?

Rather than consider noncognitive capacities as skills to be taught, I came to conclude, it's more accurate and useful to look at them as products of a child's environment. There is certainly strong evidence that this is true in early childhood; we have in recent years learned a great deal about the effects that adverse environments have on children's early development. And there is growing evidence that even in middle and high school, children's noncognitive capacities are primarily a reflection of the environments in which they are embedded, including, centrally, their school environment.

That's important news for those of us seeking to shrink class-based achievement gaps and provide broader avenues of opportunity for children growing up in adversity. If we want to improve a child's grit or resilience or self-control, it turns out that the place to begin is not with the child himself. What we need to change first, it seems, is his environment.

http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/06/09/why-character-cant-be-taught-like-the-pythagorean-theorem/