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**The Great Grit Debate: The Impact and Implications of Character Education**

In the introduction of his book, *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough describes a shift in educational research in the past decade, outlining the revolutionary idea that qualities such as "persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence," termed noncognitive or character skills, matter more for child development than cognitive abilities (Tough xv). The resulting contemporary focus on character education, termed "the current buzz about self-regulation," by progressive critic Alfie Kohn ("Grit"), and "the current emphasis on self-control skills of conscientiousness, self-discipline, and perseverance," by researcher Terrie Moffit (Moffit et al. 2693), has spawned a variety of character-building programs, including the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) detailed in Tough's book. To some extent, the KIPP system of charter schools has become both the poster child and scapegoat for the new character education movement, sparking much debate on the impact of instilling noncognitive skills. Tough, KIPP founders David Levin and Michael Feinberg, and researchers such as Moffit, Walter Mischel, and Angela Duckworth believe strongly in the power of character traits, particularly self-control and grit, in determining academic and life success. These thinkers also agree that character qualities can and should be taught, a process piloted by Levin in KIPP schools. However, opponents such as Kohn and researchers at the University of Chicago remain skeptical of the value of grit, and oppose the strict methods used by schools like KIPP to teach character, denouncing them as paternalistic and racist. These different educators, researchers,

and thinkers all have a stake in the great grit debate, contributing to the conversation on the efficacy of character education and the best methods for its implementation.

As Kohn points out, though Tough opens with a list of beneficial character traits, "that's the last time the reader hears about curiosity or self-confidence…By contrast, there are lengthy entries for 'self-control'" ("Grit"). The effects of self-control, demonstrated by researchers such as Angela Duckworth, Walter Mischel, Terrie Moffit, and James Heckman, dominate much of the character debate. "The need to delay gratification, control impulses, and modulate emotional expression is the earliest and most ubiquitous demand that societies place on their children," write Moffit and her coauthors (Moffit et al. 2693). Tough devotes considerable attention to the power of self-discipline in predicting academic achievement, introducing Angela Duckworth, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania who, through her work in schools, came to believe in the power of self-regulation (Tough 61). In a study of 164 eighth-graders, Duckworth and her coauthor Martin Seligman found that self-discipline measured at the beginning of the academic year accounted for twice as much variance as IQ in final grades, high school selection, attendance, and the time of day students started their homework (Duckworth and Seligman 939). In their account of the study, Duckworth and Seligman reference previous research on the power of self-control in predicting academic success, including the famous marshmallow test conducted by Walter Mischel in the late 1960s. Mischel found that children able to wait fifteen minutes for a second marshmallow rather than eating a single marshmallow right away had S.A.T. scores an average of two hundred and ten points higher than children who only waited thirty seconds before eating the first marshmallow (Lehrer). Low delayers- children who could not wait- often struggled to pay attention, and experienced more behavioral problems and greater difficulty maintaining friendships than high delayers, suggesting that self-control in children greatly

impacts future success (Lehrer). A study published in 2011 echoes these results; Terrie Moffit et al. followed a cohort of 1,000 people from birth to the age of thirty-two, and found that childhood self-control predicts physical health, substance dependence, personal finances, and criminal offenses regardless of intelligence, social class, and family background (Moffit et al. 2693). Moffit, like Tough, cites the Perry Preschool experiment of the 1960s as further evidence on the power of self-control. Tough explains that researchers randomly divided the children of low-income, low-IQ parents into a control group, which they left alone, and a treatment group, which they enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. As Moffit et al. recount,  "Although failing to achieve [its] stated goal of lasting improvement in children's intelligence quotient (IQ) scores," the Perry Preschool experiment, "somehow produced byproduct reductions in teen pregnancy, school dropout, delinquency, and work absenteeism," in participating students (Moffit et al 2693). Analyzing these results, University of Chicago economist James Heckman determined that noncognitive factors, including self-control, accounted for up to two-thirds of the total benefits gained from participation in the program (Tough xx), an observation that sparked Moffit's research on self-regulation and thus her conclusion that "self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety," (Moffit et al 2693).

Despite the evidence that childhood self-control predicts life outcomes at least as well as socioeconomic status and intelligence (Duckworth and Gross 2), Duckworth found that teaching self-control techniques to fifth-graders did not boost their academic success (Tough 63). Furthermore, according to Duckworth, previous research by Francis Galton suggests that, "the ability to resist temptation and control impulses is a surprisingly poor predictor of the very highest achievements," and Leatta Hough believes that self-control characterizes dependable rather than achievement-oriented individuals (Duckworth et al. 1089).  Duckworth thus

concludes that self-control addresses only half of the mechanics of achievement, which involve

both motivation and volition (Tough 64). Self-control fuels volition, granting students the

willpower to resist temptation, but fails to provide the motivation for doing so. To address both

dimensions of academic performance, students need something greater than self-control: grit.

Duckworth defines grit as, "perseverance and passion for long term goals," the ability to not only

maintain the volition to resist temptation, but also keep distant motivations in sight (Duckworth,

et al. 1087). While, "domain-general measures of self-control are generally more predictive of

everyday measures of adaptive functioning (e.g. grades, physical health) than are domain-general

measures of grit," grit is more predictive of long-term success (Duckworth and Gross 3).

Students require self-control to accomplish short-term, lower-order goals rather than succumbing

to the temptation to opt for easier alternatives, but they need grit to pursue a dominant

superordinate goal and, if faced with setbacks, develop alternative lower-order goals on the path

to that objective (Duckworth and Gross 3-4). Thus, though a necessary element of grit, self-

control alone does not provide the drive to seek long-term superordinate goals. Further research

corroborates the impact of grit on achievement and the importance of motivation in addition to

volition. In 2006, Carmit Segal compared the scores of students not enlisted in the military to

those of military recruits on a tedious test known as the coding-speed test. She found that, though

the students outperformed the recruits on cognitive tests, the recruits had higher scores on the

coding-speed test because it affected their chances of being accepted into the armed forces as

opposed to having no impact on the students' futures, indicating the power of effort and

motivation on performance regardless of intelligence (Tough 68). Segal also found that the

students who performed well on the coding test had higher earnings in later life than those who

did not, because the labor market values "the kind of internal motivation required to try hard on a test even when there is no external reward for doing well:" in other words, grit (Tough 69).

Thus, research suggests that character traits, particularly self-control and even more specifically grit, impact academic achievement and future success. This recent idea has caused education reformers, keen on addressing a perceived crisis in the quality of modern education, to pose the question of whether and how schools can teach these traits. "Self-control and grit have attracted increased interest in recent years," writes Angela Duckworth, "in no small part because they seem more amenable to intervention than other determinants of success such as cognitive ability and socioeconomic status…We are optimistic that a better understanding of the psychological processed underlying self control and grit could, in fact, lead to high-impact, cost-effective interventions," (Duckworth and Gross 5). But is grit, or self-control, or even character for that matter, truly malleable? Paul Tough suggests that it is. He describes research by stress physiologists determining that early stress, such as the trauma experienced due to a childhood in poverty, impacts the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain critical in self-regulatory activities, meaning that children raised in stressful environments often find it hard to concentrate, follow directions, and rebound from disappointments (Tough 17). Because self-regulation and perseverance in the face of disappointment make up grit, the idea that environmental factors can negatively impact these abilities suggests grit's malleability. Even more promisingly for education reformers, research indicates that nurturing by parents and caregivers protects children from the negative neurological impacts of stress (Tough 28). A study of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axes- the biological systems regulating stress- of rats in the lab of Michael Meaney, a neuroscientist at McGill University, found that "the greater the frequency of maternal licking and grooming during infancy, the lower the HPA response to stress in

adulthood," in other words, the level of maternal care the rats received as pups impacted their ability to handle stress as adults (Liu et al. 1660).  Researchers participating in the experiment wrote that the effect of licking and grooming on HPA responses to stress "reflect a naturally occurring plasticity whereby factors such as maternal care are able to program rudimentary, biological responses to threatening stimuli," (Liu et al. 1661) To summarize, the idea that parental nurturing protects children from the negative effects of childhood stress on self-regulatory behaviors implies the plasticity of these behaviors: self-control is malleable, and can be bolstered by a nurturing environment. Mischel, orchestrator of the marshmallow test, concurs. He found that children taught to employ strategies such as envisioning the marshmallow as a cloud, or within a picture frame, managed to delay gratification for longer, and therefore believes that, "will power is just a matter of learning how to control your attention and thoughts," and can be increased (Lehrer).

Agreeing with the findings of Meaney and Mischel that, "self-control is under both genetic and environmental influences," Moffit turns her attention to the practical implications of that conclusion. "Given that self-control is malleable, it could be a prevention target," she writes, echoing Duckworth's call for high-impact interventions (Moffit et. al. 2693). But what form should these interventions take? Accepting the malleability of self-control and grit raises the question of how caretakers can best cultivate these traits to ensure their children's success. Tough explores the KIPP program as his primary example of character education, and David Whitman identifies KIPP as one of six "no excuses" schools "engaged in explicit character training aimed at creating a culture of kindness, decency, integrity and hard work," with the goal of closing the achievement gap between white and minority students (Whitman x). After realizing that the KIPP graduates who persisted in college were not necessarily academic

superstars, but rather students with skills like resilience and self-control, KIPP founder David

Levin discovered the research of character scholars Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson, who led

him to Angela Duckworth. Convinced of the achievement value of character, Levin worked

closely with Duckworth to formulate an evaluative tool that could measure seven essential

character traits pulled from Seligman and Peterson's findings: zest, grit, optimism, self-control,

gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity (Tough 74). In 2011, Levin used Duckworth's

questionnaire to implement the first-ever character report card, quantifying the noncognitive

strengths of KIPP students. In addition to use of the character report card, the KIPP website

proposes seven steps for carrying out character education, including modeling character traits,

discussing character in the classroom, exploring real and fictional examples of good character,

and praising desired character behavior in students ("Character Counts"). KIPP's newfound

focus on character also appears in the organization's practice of message saturation. Levin and

his cofounder Feinberg "use posters and slogans and signs and T-shirts to create a powerful

school culture," (Tough 95). That culture has become one of character, with posters reading "Got

Self Control?" and T-shirts branded with "Don't Eat the Marshmallow!" (Tough 95). "Once you

have one concrete language that everyone is using- teachers, parents, students- that they see it on

the walls, their teachers are using it every day in class, that makes it a lot more salient for them, I

think," explains Yazmin Chavira, a KIPP teacher interviewed in a promotional video that also

features teachers querying, "who wants to zestfully perform this?" and "who's being optimistic

today and know that they can get the answer?" ("Teaching about character in your classroom").

The video also recommends what Levin calls "intentional dual-purpose activities;" wherein

students examine how curricular material informs their understanding of the seven traits. Thus,

KIPP uses calculated character messaging and tracking to foster certain traits, particularly grit,

that, according to Duckworth and others, will carry its students further on the road to success

than pure intelligence ever could.

However, not all researchers agree that teaching self-control and grit improves education

and boosts academic performance. A 2012 report for the University of Chicago Consortium on

School Research cautions blind belief in the power of noncognitive factors. "Many of the big

claims about noncognitive factors have little clear evidence about their implications for

educational practice," assert the authors, explaining that the value of developing character can

only be tested if educators possess concrete strategies and have tools to reliably measure progress

(Farrington et al. 5). These tools exist in a trial phase at KIPP, but at this early stage, their

efficacy in comparison to other strategies cannot be determined. The authors go on to state that

"there is little evidence that working directly on changing students' grit or perseverance would

be an effective lever for improving their academic performance,"  (Farrington et al. 6). The

researchers claim that noncognitive factors only impact academic performance *through* academic

behaviors such as regularly attending class, arriving with the necessary materials, paying

attention, and completing homework (Farrington et al. 8). Thus, rather than focusing on boosting

students' perseverance, educators should make it easier to persevere by instilling positive

academic behaviors (Farrington et al. 7). The report points out that, "many of the studies of

unobservable noncognitive factors (such as academic perseverance) are actually

based on observable academic behaviors from which these unobservable factors are then

inferred," so success attributed to character traits could actually be due to improved academic

behaviors (Farrington et al. 16). Alfie Kohn, an outspoken opponent of the benefits of grit, shares

the researchers' skepticism. "Duckworth's recommendations emerge not from evidence but from

her personal belief that people should spend their time trying to improve at one thing rather than

exploring," writes Kohn, arguing that educators should value the well roundedness, happiness, and psychological health of their students over dedication to a single goal (Kohn "Grit"). Kohn also balks at the amorality of grit, sniping, "this would be a better world if people who were up to no good had *less* grit," (Kohn "Grit"). Kohn and the University of Chicago researchers therefore reject the beliefs of Duckworth, Levin and their supporters in terms of the value of self-control and grit.

In addition to criticizing the academic benefits of grit, many oppose the methods by which reformers strive to teach self-control and other character traits. Though David Whitman lauds no-excuses schools such as KIPP as "the single most effective way of closing the achievement gap," the methods he labels "the new paternalism" alarm progressive thinkers (Whitman 5). Whitman describes KIPP and other character education schools as "highly prescriptive institution[s] that [teach] students not just how to think but how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values," (Whitman 3). According to Whitman, no-excuses schools instruct their students exactly how to behave and penalize noncompliance, obliging students to talk, sit, and dress a certain way (Whitman 4). Kohn labels this kind of instruction "the pedagogy of poverty," borrowing the term from Martin Haberman, a researcher who observed that education in urban schools encourages compliance while education in suburban schools fosters critical thinking (Kohn "Poor Teaching"). According to Kohn, teachers instruct low-income children of color using worksheets and rote memorization with chanting and clapping (widely used at KIPP), assisted by "almost militaristic behavior control," (also reminiscent of KIPP's strict discipline). In a blatant jab at Levin's organization, Kohn compares the KIPP motto, "Work hard, be nice," to a quote by Jonathan Kozol claiming that "inner-city kids 'are trained for nonreflective acquiescence,'" (Kohn "Poor Teaching"). "Rather

than viewing the pedagogy of poverty as a disgrace," writes Kohn, "many of the charter schools championed by the new reformers have concentrated on perfecting and intensifying techniques to keep children 'on task,'" delivering a final blow to KIPP, character education, and the concept of fostering grit (Kohn "Poor Teaching").

In a post on Daily Kos, Paul L. Thomas echoes Kohn's views on the intellectual subjugation of low-income children, insisting that, "we must unmask the racist and classist policies and practices hiding beneath metrics debate surrounding...TFA and KIPP," (Thomas "No Excuses"). "'No excuses' environments," he continues, "are predominantly about placing affluent and privileged people in positions of authority to deliver authoritarian training to students *unlike them*; in other words, 'no excuses' ideology is about isolating, controlling, and ultimately 'fixing' other people's children," (Thomas "No Excuses"). Whitman, for his part, seemingly takes no issue with the neocolonial undertones of paternalistic education, though he recognizes its history of assimilationist Native American boarding schools and explains that, "successful paternalistic schools create a culture of achievement within the school that is at odds with the culture of adolescents' peers and high-poverty neighborhoods… Thus, by their very nature, the new paternalistic schools for teens tend to displace a piece of parents' traditional role in transmitting values," (Whitman 20). Whitman therefore acknowledges that character education schools impose "middle class" (read: white) values on low-income, minority children, while simultaneously stripping them of their own culture. His characterization of this culture as detrimental to success, apparent in his statements that, "poor black and Hispanic communities may place less value on academic achievement" and "there seems to be a correlation between a high drop out rate and a deep attachment to Black English," (Whitman 26-27), fuels the myth of the "culture of poverty," a thinly veiled justification for racist beliefs that poor blacks and

Hispanics lack work ethic and dedication to academic success. What's more, the "culture of poverty" construction blames students and families, rather than the racism and classism of American society, for their struggles.

Similarly, the character education movement's focus on the power of grit magnifies the racist undertones of methods employed in no-excuses schools. In his article, "Grit: A Skeptical Look at the Latest Educational Fad," Kohn introduces the concept of "fundamental attribution error," "[the] tendency to pay so much attention to character, personality, and individual responsibility that we overlook how profoundly the social environment affects what we do and who we are," (Kohn, "Grit"). Kohn contends that Tough's description of character strengths as the ultimate antipoverty tool simply lets government and people of privilege off the hook when it comes to tackling poverty. Whitman's statement that the message of no-excuses schools "runs counter to the defeatist view that underlying social inequalities have to be redressed before low-income minority students can do well," (Whitman 9) could be construed as a valid excuse to ignore underlying inequalities altogether. Arguably, Duckworth's assertion that self control and grit "seem more amenable to intervention" than socioeconomic status boils down to the idea that it is simply easier to forcefully assimilate low-income children than to address poverty on a systematic level. In a second article, Paul L. Thomas argues that the educational obsession with grit only fuels the myth of meritocracy and "promotes effort as a mask for privilege," (Thomas "Enough"). In short, arguing in favor of grit as the greatest determinant of success allows reformers to put the blame on the victims of an unfair system rather than on the system itself, and relieves society of any responsibility to strive for equity.

Though the great grit debate requires further research and better-tested methods, the case for character and its malleability is convincing. Duckworth and other researchers' findings are

not alarming in and of themselves, but the means by which these findings have been applied to educational reform are troubling. Even if, like Whitman, one were not opposed to assimilation or paternalism as methods of education, the fact remains that character education ignores the underlying inequalities behind the achievement gap and fuels the myth of a culture of poverty. Character education works to mold low-income children into students that will succeed in our flawed society, rather than deconstructing the society to better fit the needs of its most oppressed people. However, is it really the role of schools to alter society, or do schools fulfill their purpose if they equip students as best they can for whatever society currently exists? Perhaps no excuses schools such as KIPP merely do their best in a political climate in which the burden of breaking the cycle of poverty has mysteriously shifted to educational institutions. In the end, it is possible that KIPP has become a scapegoat for the classist paternalism of character education, but it is also possible that education as a whole has become a scapegoats for the failings of a broken society.

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key component in education practices carries profound implications for society. His teachings in this regard have led to the development of a range of formal, non-formal, and informal educational programmes, which are collectively referred to as Sathya Sai Education. The programmes have been described in detail in earlier chapters. Brazil. The objective was to find out the impact of the programme on pupils, teachers, and parents and also to assess the suitability of SSEHV as an educational input for schools in Africa. Dr. Manchishi observed the school's delivery of education over an extended period of time, and also conducted systematic interviews with pupils, teachers, parents, the Parent Teacher Association, and Education Ministry officials.