



Developing grit in physical education

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Introduction

Resilience is a buzz word across all walks of life. It has become a leading topic in schools searching for ways to best prepare students for adulthood and the complexities that a 21st century world brings with it. Due to COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown, developing resilience seems more important than ever. Many researchers have explored this area including Dweck's (2006) investigation of growth mindset. Dweck argues that pupils possessing a growth mindset believe that intelligence is flexible, have a positive attitude towards their learning and their ability to progress, and also possess a greater ability to manage challenges and learn from them. In a related area of research, Duckworth et al (2007) consider the trait of grit, the focus of this article, which they define as the ability to work 'strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress' (p.1087-1088). Duckworth's research seems to suggest that the presence of grit in pupils predicts academic success across a range of measures (grades, competitions, and awards) (Duckworth 2017).

As a teacher I have long admired those who work hard and place a greater emphasis on effort, and perhaps have more grit, than those relying solely on gift and talent.

In sport, there are countless examples of the very best athletes in the world who overcame adversity at some point in their careers and the common theme for those who are successful is usually ongoing and dedicated practice. One example is Michael Jordan (professional basketball player for the Chicago Bulls) who had an overwhelming desire to win. A recent documentary tells his story of being dropped from his high school team, and his subsequent inspirational efforts in spending hours practicing, and ultimately improving.

Why do we not all possess this ability? How are some individuals and pupils more gritty and able to persevere than others? This project sought to explore whether being gritty could help in being more successful in a sporting environment.

What is grit?

Duckworth et al (2007) define grit as 'perseverance and passion for long term goals' comprising these two elements of perseverance of effort and consistency of interest.

When these elements are present, Duckworth argues a pupil has greater levels of grit and ability to succeed. Therefore, developing strategies in school to enhance these areas of grit will enable young people to realise their potential and increase their achievement levels. Duckworth's grit questionnaire has also become popular in the world of work, and amongst some employers seeking to recruit the 'right' and 'gritty' sort of employee.

Through their research into growth mindset and grit, Hinton and Turnbull (2015) found that gritty students appeared to have developed learning strategies and dispositions helping them to work towards long-term goals, specifically growth mindset, metacognition and self-compassion. They note 'gritty students tend to believe that intelligence is malleable, have a metacognitive awareness of their learning process, and be kind to themselves in the face of set-backs' (p.10).

Developing grit in sport

As a Physical Education department, our priority should perhaps be to help pupils identify a sport or sports which they are passionate about, as following Duckworth's research 'consistency of interests' is an important element in the development of grit. Students are much more likely to stick at it when it becomes tough. But we must also consider how we support 'perseverance of effort'. MacDonald (n.d.) suggests such perseverance can be developed by working with students to: establish goals, enhance their understanding of the process needed to achieve them, and producing an action plan which builds in student/team accountability. And perhaps nurturing the self-compassion Hinton and Turnbull (2015) describe for occasions where



individual and team goals are not achieved, and the disappointment this may bring. These all appear to be important considerations for achieving student success in a difficult task over a long period of time.

The problem with grit

However, there appears to be some discussion over whether the concept of grit actually exists, and how it is measured. Tyumeneva et al (2019) contest whether 'consistency of interests' and 'perseverance of effort' do indeed form a single personality trait of 'grit'. Through their research, they found that only effort resulted in academic engagement, and argue therefore that the grit scale measures two independent constructs of effort and interests.

Additionally Didau (2017) highlights a meta-analysis conducted by Crede et al (2017) suggesting that grit is only moderately correlated with performance and retention but strongly correlated with the trait of conscientiousness. Didau questions whether "Given these problems, can teachers have any confidence that interventions or character education initiatives based on the idea of developing grit will influence student outcomes?"

Is grit the answer?

It appears hard to measure grit as a concept and this perhaps leads us to question whether grit is an indicator of academic success as presented by Duckworth. Farrington et al (2012) suggest it might not be possible to help pupils to develop grit as a character trait, but they can perhaps be helped to 'act gritty' which will impact outcomes in school. Drawing on the extensive research into academic mind-sets, Farrington et al suggest that if students are able to embrace the

following four key beliefs, with support from their teachers to instil them, there is evidence these will have an impact on their ability to persevere:

1. A belief that they belong in an academic/school community.
2. A belief that their ability and competence will grow with effort.
3. A belief that they can succeed.
4. A belief that work has value for them.

Farrington et al conclude, from their literature review, that if students hold these beliefs they are more likely to persevere through the challenges they encounter at school.

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