

GRIT: How to encourage passion and perseverance in young people

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Before I became a psychologist, I was a math teacher. Almost immediately, I discovered my responsibilities were greater than I'd anticipated. Yes, I wanted my students to master the mathematical concepts in the assigned curriculum. Yes, I wanted to manage the classroom in a way that maximized learning. But there was so much more that I as their teacher could help my students learn. I could help them develop their interests; I could show them how to counter boredom by, paradoxically, going deeper into a subject. I could help them see both their failures and successes for what they are: opportunities to learn more masquerading as ends in themselves. I could show them that getting feedback on what they already do well isn't half as rewarding as getting feedback on how they can do even better tomorrow.

Indeed, if I didn't consider the needs of "the whole child," I'd fail in even the narrowest conceptualization of what it means to be an effective teacher. For what math student has ever mastered the concepts of proportions, algebra, or calculus without first mastering their own motivation and behavior? In the words of Martin Luther King, Junior: "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education."

It's now fourteen years since I left the classroom to enter the field of psychology. What have I learned? More to the point: what are my practical recommendations for teachers? Here are three.

1. *Help your students geek out over something that sparks their curiosity.* It's a wonderful thing when I sit down on a plane or train and turn to my seatmate, asking, "Do you love what you do?" If, without hesitation, they say, "Yes! I do! I love what I do!" then I know they have an abiding interest that with more time and experience, grows deeper. More systematic research affirms that adults whose career choices align with their personal interests are happier and more successful. So if we care about what happens to our students

later in life, we'll encourage them to get really "into" something, whether it's what we're teaching (a year-long project?) or an endeavor outside the classroom (soccer? chess? a community service project)? It's around early adolescence that personal interests begin to sharpen, but it's never too early—or too late—to encourage our students to discover, develop, and deepen their interests.

2. *Show your students how to fail better.* One of my favorite quotes is from the playwright Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." Like so many things in life, learning from failure is easier said than done. It takes courage to fall on your face and get up again, knowing you'll probably fall again at some point. One thing you can do is model a resilient, optimistic, unashamed reaction to failure. For instance, when a research article I've labored over gets rejected, I send it around to all my students. I let them know how frustrated and disappointed I am. I share my pain and acknowledge the article's shortcomings. But I also show my students that no matter what, I get up again. I show them that the world doesn't come to an end when things don't work out, and I model for them how to learn from feedback, to try again, maybe fail again, but always to fail better.
3. *Help your students help others.* A post-doctoral fellow in my lab named Lauren Eskreis-Winkler came up with a brilliant idea for cultivating grit in young people. It's completely counterintuitive, and so far, Lauren's data suggest it's tremendously powerful. Put simply: instead of directing your students' attention to how to improve their own grit, ask them to help others. For instance, when students write letters to younger peers, advising them how to maintain confidence and motivation, the students themselves demonstrate greater academic effort and achievement. How does this intervention work? Maybe giving another person advice gives you perspective and understanding. Maybe helping another person affirms your identity as a capable

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student. Maybe helping is a way of feeling like “you matter.” To be honest, we don’t know why this brief intervention works. But by whatever means, putting students in the position of benefactor, rather than beneficiary, is an approach to character development that I’d love to see teachers explore.

In my view, every teacher teaches lessons about grit every day. How so? Our students hear what we say and watch what we do. What we think of them, they soon think of themselves. So let us share our passion and perseverance, and at every opportunity, help them discover and develop their own.