



2015

### Grit: A Short History of a Useful Concept

Ethan W. Ris

Stanford University, eris@stanford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ris, Ethan W. (2015) "Grit: A Short History of a Useful Concept," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol10/iss1/3>

This Continuing the Conversation is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

---

## Grit: A Short History of a Useful Concept

### Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to thank David Labaree and Philo Hutcheson for their commentary on versions of this paper.

## **Grit: A Short History of a Useful Concept**

**Ethan W. Ris**

**Stanford University Graduate School of Education**

*The character trait “grit” is a much-discussed and debated topic, both among education researchers and in public forums. Employing longitudinal discourse analysis, this paper examines the history of grit over more than a century, paying special attention to the ways in which adults have attempted to inculcate it in children. The author finds that current discussion of grit’s salience for the education of disadvantaged students ignores the rich historical context of a long-sought trait, which in fact has usually been the focus of anxiety from middle and upper-class parents and educators. Grit functions as a proxy for a type of character-building that privilege prevents. When poor children have appeared in this discourse, they are not the problem but rather the romanticized solution. A similar pattern is emerging today.*

If we needed convincing that “grit” had arrived in the pantheon of educational concepts, Angela Duckworth’s resounding recent success should have provided it. In 2013, the Penn psychologist so closely identified with this character trait received the two highest laurels of modern public intellectualism: a MacArthur Fellowship, often called a *genius grant*, and a TED Talk.

The current discourse on grit dates largely to 2007, with the publication of an article co-authored by Duckworth in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). The research team established a psychometric scale that measured grit, defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” using a self-report questionnaire. “Grittiness” turned out to have little correlation with IQ, but it was a strong predictor of high achievement, most notably in GPA and persistence at the college level. The takeaway was intoxicating. IQ, whether viewed as a strict measure of innate intelligence (i.e., Wechsler, 1939) or as an indicator of socioeconomic status (i.e., Bowles and Gintis, 1976), isn’t everything. The research shows that character matters. The academy, the media, and the curators at Macarthur and TED pounced.<sup>i</sup>

At first glance, grit’s sudden prominence in the national discourse seems to be tied in directly to ongoing questions about schools that serve low-income

students. This is, of course, a contentious debate, and the introduction of the new research has fueled it. To its champions, the concept of grit offers a solution to the intractable low performance in these schools: help the kids get grittier, and they can claw their way out of poverty (Tough, 2011; Tough, 2012; Rock Center, 2012; Lipman, 2013). To its skeptics, grit is at best an empty buzzword, at worst a Social Darwinist explanation for why poor communities remain poor – one that blames the victims of entrenched poverty, racism, or inferior schooling for character flaws that caused their own disadvantage (Shapiro, 2013; Thomas, 2013; Anderson, 2014; Isquith, 2014; Noguera & Kundu, 2014; Ravitch, 2014a; Snyder, 2014; Ravitch, 2015). The language of a *National Geographic* article (Del Giudice, 2014) on grit shows how easily one might argue for either side of the debate; Del Giudice situates Duckworth’s research amid “a shift away from blaming teachers, class size, lack of money, family conditions, and other ‘situational’ factors, which, while important, have increasingly over the past century let the student off the hook and turned underperformers into victims of circumstance rather than creators of opportunity.” In one reading, this line of inquiry leads to student empowerment; in another, it is simply abandonment.

Both sides have the story wrong. An examination of the history of grit (which certainly does not begin with Duckworth’s research) shows that this particular trait has never had much to do with the education of poor children at all. Instead, it is a useful concept that middle and upper-class adults can employ to justify their own children’s shortcomings, and perhaps to overcome them. Grit functions as a proxy for a type of character-building that privilege prevents. When poor children appear in this discourse, they are not the problem but rather the romanticized solution. Their status as such is inherently problematic; it does not simply legitimate hardship, it celebrates it.

This paper seeks to apply longitudinal discourse analysis to the Anglo-American conversation about grit. Examining the history of grit reveals more than the simple fact that this character trait has had a long life. The “usefulness” noted in this paper’s title refers to the way in which language and rhetoric are employed to “legitimize relations of organized power” (Habermas, 1967, in Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 10). In other words, the grit discourse allows privileged socioeconomic groups to preserve their position under the guise of creative pedagogy. This phenomenon does not require malevolence on the part of its enactors. In fact, it can coexist with perfectly benign intentions.

### **A century of discourse**

By way of definition, Duckworth, et al., (2007) write that “Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years

despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (pp. 1087-1088). The basic theme is one of persistence despite challenge, a definition largely unchanged over more than a century. Reginald Brabazon, the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Meath, explained in 1909 that “The writer understands by the word ‘grit’ that virile spirit which makes light of pain and physical discomfort, and rejoices in the consciousness of victory over adverse circumstances, and which regards the performance of duty, however difficult and distasteful, as one of the supreme virtues of all true men and women” (Meath, 1909, p. 1).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2015) classifies the word as “U.S. slang,” but in its early usage it often applied to effete British people who apparently did not have it. The earliest use of “grit” as a character trait is attributed to Nathaniel Hawthorne (1863), who wrote of a British poet: “His main deficiency was a lack of grit” (p. 179). Half a century later, Edward Lyttelton (1909), the headmaster of Eton College, wrote in the same volume as Brabazon that he was concerned that his nation’s young people suffered from a deficiency of grit, rendering them unqualified to replicate the military triumphs of their ancestors. This, he claimed, was due to a satanic impulse among elite parents to coddle their children: “We have been deceived by the arch Deceiver into showing love to our children by humouring them. ... If something is wrong with the summerhouse, let the first thought be whether it is possible for the heir to the property to put it right, unaided. ... The one fatal thing is to ring and tell the butler to do the job for the child” (Lyttelton, 1909, pp. 3-4).

As the United States entered the Gilded Age in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, its middle and upper classes also begin to worry about what modern scholars have termed “affluenza:” the disadvantages caused by childhood advantage (de Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001). Unlike the British suggestion to toughen up children by making them tidy up the summerhouse, Americans relied more on the grit-providing straits of poverty. The elite boarding schools established in New England during this time proudly advertised their Spartan quality of life, complete with cramped quarters and cold showers (Karabel, 2005: 28). More importantly, middle and upper class parents relied on the persuasive example of impoverished children, conveyed through popular literature. The most famous example of the poor but gritty child is Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Grit is invariably classified as a non-cognitive skill, learned not through scholastic pursuits but through facing adversity outside of traditional academic rituals. Huck epitomizes the trope: a child growing up in an abusive, single-parent home gains grit and self-actualization not through the “sivilized” instructions of the emasculating Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, but out on the river under the tutelage of the illiterate slave Jim (Wieck 2000).

Twain may win on literary merit, but in terms of sheer volume of published material on exemplars of grit, Horatio Alger, Jr., beats him handily. Alger's more than one hundred so-called rags-to-riches books followed a set formula: an impoverished boy, frequently abandoned or orphaned, endures a series of hardships and due to his own strong character attains a respectable middle-class position as a clerk or professional (Nackenoff, 1994). (Only a few of the protagonists actually achieve riches, usually through a hidden inheritance.) Alger uses the words "grit," "pluck," and "resolve" interchangeably, always reflecting a dogged refusal to succumb to obstacles on the path to occupational success.

Contrary to popular belief, Alger's hugely popular books were not published as dime novels available on the cheap to all comers. Instead, they cost between one dollar and \$1.50, or roughly \$20-\$30 in 2015 currency. These were not meant as encouragement for the types of urchins whose names gave the books their titles – *Ragged Dick* (Alger, 1868) and *Tattered Tom* (Alger, 1871) – but for the children of the middle and upper classes. In fact, in the years before his increasingly popular books made him a rich man, the Harvard-educated Alger worked as a private tutor for wealthy families in New York City. As research for his novels, he would travel downtown to observe the ruffians who he hoped could offer something to teach his privileged charges (Hoyt, 1974). Using egalitarian language, he explained that "[E]very boy's life is a campaign, more or less difficult, in which success depends upon integrity and a steadfast adherence to duty" (Alger, 1893, p. vii). The fact that wealthy boys suffered from a relative lack of adversity could at least be partially mitigated by reading about their impoverished, grit-infused counterparts.<sup>ii</sup>

It is important that Alger's striving young protagonists typically ended up in clerkships or other entry-level white collar jobs. In an economy rapidly shifting from a hereditary occupational structure to meritocracy (whether real or perceived), privileged sons could not expect to simply step into their fathers' shoes. Instead, they would have to contend with new entrants whose abundance of grit compensated for their lack of social and cultural capital. Learning from Alger's examples just might toughen them up enough to avoid downward mobility. The protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Forging Ahead," published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the inauspicious year of 1929, is a classic example. This young man, from a wealthy family in which the men "had not been resourceful for several generations" (p. 101), learns that his inheritance is lost, along with his plans to attend Yale in the fall. His first reaction is to revisit the Alger novels of his youth, before heading out to find manual labor and work his way back up the ladder (Fitzgerald, 1929).

Grit was not exclusively an urban phenomenon. The hero of Alger's *The Young Boatman of Pine Point* (1892), Harry "Grit" Morris, was not a city urchin

but a teenager in a single-parent home in rural Maine. “He was sure to make his way in the world, and maintain his rights against all aggression. It was the general recognition of this trait which had led to the nickname, ‘Grit,’ by which he was generally known” (p. 4). Like Huck, Grit came into his own on an untamed river, but the pluck and striving he displayed was just as generative as that of his city-dwelling peers on the Hudson. Alger effortlessly employed the conflation of urban and rural as a poverty-defined *other* in a way that still shapes educational discourse (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 48).

Rural America was not just a place of instructive poverty but also of rustic hard work. *Grit*, a national weekly newspaper published continuously from 1885 to 1993, focused on positive news from rural communities. More importantly, it opened up an important opportunity for middle-class youth to gain the trait that graced its masthead. More than any other publication, *Grit* relied on children and teenagers to sell and distribute its issues. By the 1920’s, its promoters boasted that “Over 12,000 agents are engaged in selling GRIT throughout all parts of the country. Many boys earn liberal profits every week, besides gaining valuable experience, helping to fit them for successful business careers in later life” (Meckley, 2006, p. 42). The newspaper was deliberately not promoted in major cities, meaning that its distributors were not urban paper-slingers struggling for survival (as depicted in Alger’s *Rough and Ready, or, Life Among the New York Newsboys* [1869]) but suburban and small-town kids whose rain-or-shine paper routes provided them with much-needed grit.

*Grit* was not published in the American heartland, but in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, a geographic symbol of the appropriation of the grit discourse by a privileged stratum. Williamsport was hardly an exemplar of the type of rustic simplicity that *Grit*’s pages celebrated. By the turn of the century, enriched by lumber and other extraction industries, it boasted of more millionaires per capita than any other place in the country (Meckley, 2006). Additionally, Williamsport’s status as the acme of middle-class childhood striving was not limited to its newspaper. In 1939 the small city became the headquarters of Little League baseball, and today it still hosts the annual Little League World Series, the nation’s preeminent sporting contest for children up to age twelve.<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, in the decades leading up to the Second World War, the American obsession with grit shifted from urban and rural poverty to the athletic field. Exactly why this happened is unclear, but the economic collapse of 1929 surely helped; with the wolf at the door, perhaps poor children weren’t so easy to romanticize anymore. But athletics already had a history as a perceived milieu for gaining character, as reflected in the Duke of Wellington’s purported observation that “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton” (Orwell, 1941). Brabazon, an Eton man himself, deplored the tendency of contemporary

Britons to participate as spectators, not as athletes: “There are large numbers of men who are far readier to criticise the ‘form’ of some notable footballer or cricketer than they are to submit themselves to even the mild severities of amateur training, or to take the rough and tumble of the game itself” (Brabazon, 1909, p. 7).

In the US, however, being an observer was part of the equation, at least in the realm of popular literature. When Horatio Alger’s books were reissued in second editions in the 1910s and 20s, publishers often slapped an athletic scene on the cover. When *The Young Boatman of Pine Point* was reprinted by M. A. Donohue & Co. as *Grit, the Young Boatman* (c. 1915), its cover depicted a thrilling football scene, despite the fact that no athletics of any type exist in the book. Alger imitators fully embraced the trope, especially Burt L. Standish, who churned out the adventures of two brothers, all-around sports stars at Yale, in books like *Frank Merriwell’s Struggle*, *Frank Merriwell’s Hard Luck*, *Dick Merriwell’s Persistence*, and *Dick Merriwell’s Grit* (Oriard, 1982, pp. 309-310).

The football field was the unquestioned locus of grit in the 1930s, and there was no better way for a young athlete to prove he had it than to die. Early football was a highly dangerous game, with dozens of college players dying on the field in the 1890s and 1900s (Watterson, 2002). After rules changes and the introduction of protective helmets, casualties plummeted. However, when Robert Henry Michelet, a Dartmouth football star, died of pneumonia off field in 1934, the occasion merited national mourning. In addition to a packed memorial service and a profile in *Time*, the Grit Publishing Company of Williamsport printed a full-length biography of the dead twenty-two year old, *A Challenge to Youth*, that extolled his perseverance and character (Chapman, 1943). And while Michelet has been largely forgotten by history, his counterpart at Notre Dame, George Gipp, has not. Ronald Reagan’s famous 1940 portrayal of the young man dying of strep throat is a paragon of instructive grit, telling his coach: “Some day when the team’s up against it, and the breaks are beatin’ the boys, ask ‘em to go in there with all they’ve got and win just one for the Gipper” (Bacon, 1940).

After World War II, Little League and paper routes continued to be a part of the character-building project for middle-class youth, and postwar prosperity allowed poor children to once more be the primary exemplars for grit. Alger, who had been largely out of print for two decades, experienced a nostalgic revival in the late 1940s, with the reissuance of his books and the establishment of annual Horatio Alger Awards in 1947, celebrating individuals who had risen from poverty to national prominence. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, the national discourse on grit quieted. A Google Ngram display of the incidence of the word in published text shows a dramatic decline after 1950, falling 50% by 1970 (the all-time peak came in 1912) (Google Books Ngram Viewer, 2015). Robert Putnam



(2000) reports that participation in the Boy and Girl Scouts, organizations primed to provide grit to middle-class children, began to plateau in 1957 and fell in real numbers from 1972 onwards. This was part of an overall decline in associationalism, but in the case of grit the national *zeitgeist* may have played a role as well. The United States' disastrous pursuits in Vietnam, for example, could be succinctly described as "working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (to borrow the definition of grit from Duckworth, et al., 2007, pp. 1087-1088). Additionally, and importantly for this paper's argument, in the 1960s and 1970s income inequality in the United States was historically low (Stone, Trisi, Sherman, & Chen, 2012). The relative lack of grit discourse in these decades could be theoretically linked to two conclusions: that the rising tide of prosperity lessened anxiety about downward mobility in privileged classes, or, more cynically, that the ebbing of extreme poverty meant that the grit narrative was no longer needed as a rationalization for systemic hardship. If either of these is the case, then grit's reemergence in the national discourse in recent years, simultaneous with widening economic inequality, is not a coincidence.

### **The discourse today**

In the midst of the temporary lull in the discourse on grit, the impoverished rural child briefly returned to the fore, in Charles Portis' novel *True Grit* (1968). Originally serialized in the eminently middle-class *Saturday Evening Post*, the story recounted the perseverance of a poor teenage girl seeking to avenge her father's death. Her success in this grisly mission was further celebrated in a popular 1969 John Wayne film of the same name (Hathaway, 1969). In 2010, *True Grit* was remade on film (Coen & Coen, 2010), a box-office hit perfectly timed to provide the title for much scholarship on grit. (Academic papers with "True Grit" in the title include Stix, 2011; Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2013; Pappas, Pierrakos, Pappas, & Paterson, 2013; Powell, 2013; Henderson, 2014.) But the title was not simply a convenient pop culture reference. The psychological scholarship on grit and the film itself are indeed part of the same discourse.

This is not obvious. At first glance, the latter-day importance of grit seems to be entirely about improving the prospects of students in disadvantaged communities. The public image of the scholar most identified with grit, Duckworth, reinforces that notion. In her TED Talk (Duckworth, 2013), the psychologist explains that her research originated in her work as a math teacher in low-income New York City public schools. She goes on to explain that the concept matters most "in school, especially for kids at risk for dropping out," despite the fact that she conducted her foundational research in populations that

do not meet anyone's notion of disadvantage or risk: Ivy League undergraduates, West Point cadets, and participants in the National Spelling Bee (Duckworth, et al., 2007).

Meanwhile, journalists have eagerly embraced the grit narrative and are quick to apply it to poor and minority children. Paul Tough, perhaps best known for introducing the Harlem Children's Zone to the readers of *The New York Times Magazine* (Tough, 2004) is at the forefront. His book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), which followed a *Times Magazine* cover story (2011) and spent 49 weeks on the *Times* paperback non-fiction best sellers list, dwells extensively on Duckworth's research and ties it repeatedly to low-income students. To temper the tedium of synthesized academic studies, Tough sprinkles his narrative with interviews with impoverished young people. Most are exemplars of Alger-style grit, having overcoming absentee parents, racism, and violence before succeeding academically.

Here, though, is the fundamental problem with the perception that the importance of grit has to do with bettering the chances of disadvantaged students. Children raised in poverty display ample amounts of grit every day, and they don't need more of it in school. As NBC anchor Brian Williams noted while interviewing students about grit at a Knowledge Is Power Program school: "The kids we met here at KIPP already get it" (Rock Center 2012). As Duckworth and other scholars insist, grit is not a fixed quality but one that can be developed. And what better milieu for developing grit than facing the hardships of poverty and surviving? Poor children, therefore, are not the ones who need to be taught grit. As we have seen earlier in this paper, they are the ones who have historically taught it to the rest of us.

The more probable subjects of today's grit instruction are not the students interviewed by Tough and Williams, but much wealthier ones. Both journalists note that Riverdale Country School, an elite private school in New York, has eagerly pursued a grit-focused curriculum. (KIPP's founder, David Levin, attended Riverdale and maintains close ties with its headmaster.) Additionally, the first curriculum guide for teaching grit, Thomas R. Hoerr's *Fostering Grit* (2013), was written by the longtime head of an elite private school in St. Louis. Although these types of schools usually have generous scholarship programs for low-income students, their interest in this particular character trait is clearly targeted at their middle and upper-class clientele. This population has many advantages, but the opportunity to develop grit has apparently not been one of them.

Independent schools are often prime candidates for adopting pedagogical concepts that quickly rise to prominence in the national discourse, such the theory of multiple intelligences. As documented by Jack Schneider (2014), this theory was a rare case of academic research on education that penetrated the classroom

door. Like grit, multiple intelligences was associated with a MacArthur Fellow and Ivy League psychologist, Howard Gardner (Gardner, 1983), was consistent with common educator philosophy, and was transportable from academics to practitioners due to its accessible language and conceptualization. Because of their tight coupling and less-restrictive funding streams, independent schools and autonomous charter schools like KIPP have the ability to quickly incorporate such research, and their parents and teachers are receptive to such efforts. Hoerr's New City School, for example, brands itself as a *Multiple Intelligences School*. In a similar vein, Carol Dweck's growth mindset theory (2006), though advertised as a panacea for "closing the achievement gap" (Mindset Works, 2015), has been embraced at elite schools. Dweck is a popular speaker at prestigious independent schools and in the past two years has given lectures at both Sidwell Friends School, which President Obama's children attend, and Punahou School, his alma mater.

Grit, however, is even better adapted to the realm of privileged young people than multiple intelligences or growth mindset, because it provides an answer to their unique problems. For all of their advantages, they are perceived to be at risk of a condition that is typically described as a deficiency: the lack of grit, tenacity, or "stick-to-itiveness" (another term that dates to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century). This observation helps their parents and educators explain why despite all of their advantages, they still may fail to outperform their peers in school, win admission to an Ivy League college, or secure a prestigious career. Most conveniently, a lack of grit explains these failures without claiming a lack of ability. Grit, we have long hoped, can be learned. Middle and upper-class youth just need to get a paper route, go on an Outward Bound trip, or read about a plucky counterpart from the inner city in order to fully reach their potential.

### **A fundamental misunderstanding**

So why has this discourse been so misconstrued in recent years? To begin with, the national conversation on education has become dominated by the widely-acknowledged disadvantage of poor students and students of color. Driven by both federal and philanthropic efforts, current education reform policy is directed almost entirely at these communities, unlike in other eras during which legislation and policy reports targeted schools that served all socioeconomic groups (i.e., the National Defense Education Act [1958], the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [1965], and the *A Nation at Risk* report [National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983]). It is understandable that many observers both inside and outside the academy would make a knee-jerk assumption in today's policy climate that an enticing pedagogical theory should apply primarily to low-income students.

Critics of contemporary school reform have also criticized grit theory primarily in the context of schooling for poor children. The education historian Diane Ravitch's blog has become a sounding board for this type of concern. Lauren Anderson's (2014) critique, highlighted by Ravitch (2014b), is typical: proponents of the concept of grit, like Duckworth, "reflect long legacies of victim-blaming, the tendency (especially among the privileged) to emphasize individualism and personal traits over material conditions and social structures, as the core determinants of academic 'success.'" In this reading, grit rhetoric is an updated version of the cultural deficit theory of the 1960's, which blamed an endemic *culture of poverty* for the reduced educational achievement of African-Americans and other minority groups (i.e., Lewis, 1966; Payne, 2005). Duckworth, for her part, helps feed this perception by dwelling on her research's salience for impoverished children (which may be understood as a prerequisite for successful grant proposals). Additionally, she exposes herself to accusations of Social Darwinism through unexplained academic tics like a tendency to cite Francis Galton, a noted eugenicist (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Duckworth, 2015). And journalists like Tough relentlessly keep the focus on low-income students in their search for simple interventions that are certain to close the achievement gap.

Both sides of the debate miss the fact that the grit discourse is driven primarily not by concerns about disadvantaged students but by the anxiety of middle and upper-class parents about the character of their own children. The critics, however, are right that poor children are the inevitable losers of this game. The first reason for this, as Mike Rose (2013) points out, is that an overemphasis on character education means that fewer resources will be spent on teaching disadvantaged students the skills and knowledge they need to actually succeed academically and professionally. Sisyphus had plenty of grit, but it didn't get him very far. Furthermore, as Rose (2014) writes elsewhere, there is an inherent failure of responsibility in the notion that the biggest problem poor children face is their inability to deal with the ravages of poverty: "[C]an you imagine the outcry if, let's say, an old toxic dump was discovered near Scarsdale or Beverly Hills and the National Institutes of Health undertook a program to teach kids strategies to lessen the effects of the toxins but didn't do anything to address the toxic dump itself? (Rose, 2014, p. 115)." Rose's point is not that social and emotional learning programs are a waste of time; many of them show significant positive impacts on both academic and non-academic indicators (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Rather, the problem is that describing these as panaceas can be a dangerous distraction from more pressing issues.

Secondly, real harm can come from romanticizing poverty as a character-building experience. If privileged classes see poor children as potential role models for their own offspring, they risk losing sight of the enormous harms

caused by a childhood without high quality housing, health care, nutrition, and education. The playing fields of Eton and impoverished rural and urban communities may both have their challenges, but they are very different places. Worst of all, in this discourse poverty becomes its own solution, eliminating the need for societal and governmental intervention.

Earlier, this paper drew a theoretical connection between the prominence of the grit discourse and widening income inequality. Both experienced spikes around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first fifteen years of the 21<sup>st</sup>. The argument that the US has entered a second Gilded Age is now familiar, argued most prominently by Thomas Piketty, who shows a return to a wealth gap and a form of “patrimonial capitalism” (Piketty, 2014, p. 173) not seen for a century, resulting in a massive flow of resources to the topmost socioeconomic stratum. Faced with the undeniable existence of a poverty-stricken underclass, well-meaning elites have two choices: mitigate it, or rationalize it. Attempts at mitigation, of course, can take the form of educational initiatives. In the case of grit, however, there is very little reason to believe that the teaching of this character trait is actually relevant to poor children. Therefore, rationalization may be at play.

Rationalization is not the same thing as justification. The grit discourse does not teach that poor children deserve their fate due to character flaws; it teaches that poverty itself is not so bad. In fact, hardship provides the very traits required to escape hardship. This logic is as seductive as it is circular. Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is construed as a virtuous enterprise whether practiced by Alger’s urchins or Silicon Valley’s entrepreneurs (*bootstrapping* is a common term in technology finance circles). And most importantly, it creates a purported path out of poverty that does not raise the spectre of significant sacrifice on the part of the privileged classes.

This conversation, of course, quickly takes on a dangerous character. If grit provides the pathway to success, and grit comes from persevering through hardship, then the way to help poor people is to make sure their lives remain difficult. Climbing over obstacles will make them stronger and more mobile. While it is hard to find arguments that explicitly follow this reasoning, antipoverty programs that emphasize labor in menial jobs (such as *work first* welfare policies) certainly flirt with it. So do *no excuses* schools that foist punitive behavioral codes on low-income students and often have shockingly high suspension and expulsion rates (Carr, 2014). At its furthest extension, this discourse claims that upward mobility can be harmful for those who start in poverty: consider the rhetoric about athletes who displayed virtuous grit on the courts and fields of their inner-city childhoods, only to sink into profligacy and sloth once they sign lucrative professional contracts. Perhaps, like *Citizen Kane*

yearning for his hardscrabble boyhood, they would have been better off if they had stayed poor and powerless.

Grit is an eminently useful concept, but not because it can help the prospects of disadvantaged students. Instead, it helps middle and upper-class adults explain and counteract the shortcomings of their own children, and it also helps them put off the sacrifices that could break down the American caste system.

---

## References

- Alger, Jr., H. (1868). *Ragged Dick*. New York, NY: A. K. Loring.
- Alger, Jr., H. (1869). *Rough and Ready, or, Life Among the New York Newsboys*. Philadelphia, PA: Porter & Coates.
- Alger, Jr., H. (1871). *Tattered Tom*. New York, NY: A. K. Loring.
- Alger, Jr., H. (1892). *The young boatman of Pine Point*. Philadelphia, PA: The Penn Publishing Co.
- Alger, Jr., H. (1893). *Paul Prescott's charge: A story for boys*. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co.
- Alger, Jr., H. (1915?). *Grit, the Young Boatman*. Chicago: M. A. Donohue & Co.
- Anderson, L. (2014, March 21). Lauren Anderson: Grit, Galton, and eugenics. *Education Week Teacher*. Retrieved from [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2014/03/lauren\\_anderson\\_grit.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2014/03/lauren_anderson_grit.html).
- Bacon, L. (Director) (1940). *Knute Rockne, All American* [motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brabazon, R. (1909). Have we the grit of our forefathers? *Essays on duty and discipline: A series of papers on the training of children in relation to social and national welfare*. London: Cassell & Co.
- Bush, G. W. (2001). President Bush – Speech. Little League website. <http://www.littleleague.org/Page56582.aspx>.

- Carr, S. (December 2014) How strict is too strict? The backlash against no-excuses discipline in high school. *The Atlantic*, 82-87.
- Chapman, D. F. (1943). *A challenge to youth: Biography of Robert Henry Michelet*. Williamsport, PA: Grit Publishing Co.
- Coen, E., & Coen, J. (Directors). (2010). *True grit*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.
- Del Giudice, M. (October 14, 2014). Grit trumps talent and IQ: A story every parent (and educator) should read. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141015-angela-duckworth-success-grit-psychology-self-control-science-nginnovators/>.
- De Graaf, J., Wann, D., & Naylor, T. H. (2001). *Affluenza: The all-consuming epidemic*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Duckworth, A. (2013). Angela Lee Duckworth: The key to success? Grit. [TED Talk] Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_the\\_key\\_to\\_success\\_grit/transcript](http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit/transcript).
- Duckworth, A. (2015, May 12). Research statement. Retrieved from <https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/duckworth/pages/research-statement>.
- Duckworth, A. L. & Eskreis-Winkler, L. (2013). True grit. *The Observer*, 26(4), 1-3.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92 (6), 1087-1101.
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432.
- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Elementary and Secondary Public Education Act (1965): Public Law 89-10: 89th Congress, H.R. 2362, April 11, 1965
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (1929, March 30). Forging Ahead. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 201, 12-13, 101, 105.

- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Google Books Ngram Viewer (2015). Search results for “grit,” obtained July 10, 2015. <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>.
- Hathaway, H. (Director). (1969). *True grit*. [Motion picture]. United States: Skydance Productions.
- Hawthorne, N. (1863). *Our old home: A series of English sketches*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.
- Henderson, S. W. (2014). True grit. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 53 (5), 589.
- Hoerr, T. R. (2013). *Fostering Grit: How do I prepare my students for the real world?* United States: ASCD Arias.
- Holland, N. N. (1959). Hobbling with Horatio, or the uses of literature. *The Hudson Review*, 12 (4), 549-557.
- Hoyt, E. P. (1974). *Horatio's boys: The life and works of Horatio Alger, Jr.* Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Co.
- Isquith, E. (2014). Education reformers' favorite canard: The truth about “grit” and poverty. *Salon*. Retrieved from [http://www.salon.com/2014/10/09/education\\_reformers\\_favorite\\_canard\\_the\\_truth\\_about\\_grit\\_and\\_poverty/](http://www.salon.com/2014/10/09/education_reformers_favorite_canard_the_truth_about_grit_and_poverty/).
- Karabel, J. (2005). *The chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Lewis, O. (1966). *La vida: a Puerto Rican family in the culture of poverty - San Juan and New York*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Lipman, J. (2013, Sept. 27). Why tough teachers get good results. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304213904579095303368899132/>.
- Lytleton, Edward (1909). Endure hardness. *Essays on duty and discipline: A series of papers on the training of children in relation to social and national welfare*. London: Cassell & Co.
- Meckley, T. S. (2006). *Williamsport*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.



- Mindset Works (2015). Website. Retrieved July 10, 2015.  
<http://www.mindsetworks.com/>.
- Nackenoff, C. (1994). *The fictional republic: Horatio Alger and American political discourse*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. A report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education*. Washington, D.C.: The Commission.
- National Defense Education Act of 1958: Public Law 85-864: 85th Congress, H.R. 13247, Sept. 2, 1958.
- NBC. (2012). Education Nation Summit 2012. Retrieved from  
<http://www.nbcnews.com/feature/education-nation/education-nation-2012-summit-n18491/>.
- Noguera, P.A. & Kundu, A. (2014, March 2). Why students need more than “grit.” *MSNBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/my-brothers-keeper-education/>.
- Oriard, M. (1982). *Dreaming of heroes: American sports fiction, 1868-1980*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Orwell, G. (1941). The lion and the unicorn: Socialism and the English genius.  
<http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/>
- Oxford English Dictionary Online (2015). "grit, n.1". December 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.stanford.edu/view/Entry/81639?rskey=XbCGnj&result=1>.
- Pappas, J., Pierrakos, O., Pappas, E., and Paterson, K. (2013). True grit: Toward a culture of psychological preparedness in engineering education. *Frontiers in Education Conference, 2013 IEEE*, 764-766.
- Payne, Ruby K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (1998). *Struggling for the soul: The politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Portis, C. (1968). *True grit*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Powell, K. (2013). Higher education: On the lookout for true grit. *Nature*, 504, 471-473.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Ravitch, D. (2014a, March 24). Peter Greene shows how to measure grit [Web log article]. Retrieved from <http://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/24/peter-greene-shows-how-to-measure-grit/>.
- Ravitch, D. (2014b, March 22). Lauren Anderson: Why the Focus on “Grit”? [Web log article]. Retrieved from <http://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/22/lauren-anderson-why-the-focus-on-grit/>.
- Ravitch, D. (2015, January 27). Jeff Snyder: What’s wrong with teaching “grit”? [Web log article]. Retrieved from <http://dianeravitch.net/2015/01/27/jeff-snyder-whats-wrong-with-teaching-grit/>.
- Robertson-Kraft, C., & Duckworth, A. L. (2013). True grit: Trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals predicts effectiveness and retention among novice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 116 (3), 1-27.
- Rock Center with Brian Williams (2012, Sept. 27). True grit: Is it important to fail? [Television broadcast]. New York, NY: NBC News. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/21134540/vp/49202614#49202614>.
- Rose, M. (2013). Being careful about character. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(2), 44-46.
- Rose, M. (2014). *Why school? Reclaiming education for all of us*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Schneider, J. (2014). *From the ivory tower to the schoolhouse: How scholarship becomes common knowledge in education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Shapiro, J. (2013, October 14). Grit, optimism and other buzzwords in the way of education. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanshapiro/2013/10/14/grit-optimism-and-other-buzzwords-in-the-way-of-education>.
- Snyder, J. A. (2014, May 6). Teaching kids ‘grit’ is all the rage. Here’s what’s wrong with it. *New Republic*. Retrieved from

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117615/problem-grit-kipp-and-character-based-education>.

- Stix, G. (2011). The neuroscience of true grit. *Scientific American* , 304, 28-33.
- Stone, C., Trisi, D., Sherman, A., & Chen, W. (2012). A guide to statistics on historical trends in income inequality. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbpp.org/files/11-28-11pov.pdf>.
- Thomas, P.L. (2013, November 10). The poverty trap: Slack, not grit, creates achievement. Retrieved from <http://atthechalkface.com/2013/11/10/the-poverty-trap-slack-not-grit-creates-achievement>.
- Tough, P. (2004, June 20). The Harlem project. *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/20/magazine/the-harlem-project.html>.
- Tough, P. (2011, September 14). What if the secret to success is failure? *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html>.
- Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- U. S. Department of Education. (2013). Promoting grit, tenacity, and perseverance: Critical factors for success in the 21st century. W. Seager, & K. Toppert (Eds.). Damascus, MD: Penny Hill Press.
- Watterson, J. S. (2002). *College football: History, spectacle, controversy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wechsler, D. (1939). *The measure of adult intelligence*. Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins, Co.
- White, R., Silk, M. K., and Andrews, D. L. (2008). The Little League World Series: Spectacle of youthful innocence or spectre of the New Right?, pp. 13-24, in M. D. Giardina, & M. K. Donnelly. *Youth culture and sport: Identity, power, and politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.
- Wieck, C. F. (2000). *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> As of June 2015, seven years after the initial publication, Duckworth, et al.'s original article (2007) and several follow-ups had garnered a minimum of 1,093 scholarly citations, as measured by Google Scholar. A LexisNexis search over the same time period showed 322 articles in print media that addressed this research. Many more online and televised media sources covered the concept, including NBC's 2012 star-studded *Education Nation* initiative and televised summit. The topic of grit has also crossed the line from research into classrooms at all levels of higher education. In 2015, courses on grit are being offered at both the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Relay Graduate School of Education, and *grit* is the theme of the 2015 California State University Symposium on University Teaching.

<sup>ii</sup> For more on Alger's constant use of grit as a trope, see Holland (1959), who claims that the author rejected Calvinist notions of poverty as a manifestation of sin and instead advocated a form of Arminianism rooted in striving: "Money, 'pluck,' 'grit,' pocket-watches, and other symbols of potency are outward manifestations of this inward grace (p. 557)".

<sup>iii</sup> For more on Little League as a middle-class bastion in the United States, see White, Silk, & Andrews (2008). Using Little League as a signifier of rustic hard work is a robust tradition; in 2001, President George W. Bush, the scion of a political dynasty, spoke at the Little League Hall of Excellence: "Years ago, when I was playing on those dusty Little League fields in West Texas, I never dreamt I'd be President of the United States. ... One of the things I did dream about though, was making it to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, for the Little League World Series" (Bush, 2001).