

## Should Teaching "Soft" Skills Be a Priority?

An interview with Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Random House)

As someone who analyzes data on student achievement in Latin America for a living, I have always been skeptical of calls for schools to teach so-called "non-cognitive" skills. Learning outcomes in the region are abysmally low. Two thirds of 15-year-olds in Argentina perform at the lowest levels of international assessments of math. Low-income students in Chile lag behind their wealthy peers by more than two grades. Even Brazil, the country that has made the most progress over the past decade, is projected to take at least 27 years to reach the average math performance of developed nations.

Why would a region that allows young people to graduate from high school without basic arithmetic and reading comprehension skills set out to do more? And why would we think that it could? Sure, it would be nice if, in going about their daily business, schools instilled skills like perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism, and self-control. But should they make it a priority? If resources are scarce, and if more time invested in something means less time invested in something else, asking schools to teach character may not only be hopeless, but also harmful.

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of sitting down with Paul Tough, an acclaimed education journalist who writes often for the *New York Times*, after he gave the keynote speech at the World Innovation Summit for Education in Doha, Qatar. Tough is not an education scholar, but that has worked in his favor. He possesses a unique gift that eludes many academics for anticipating pressing questions in the field, distilling the key lessons from rigorous research, and identifying promising initiatives. The initial chapters of his first book, *Whatever It Takes* (2008), offer perhaps the most compelling non-technical discussion of what we know about how to educate low-income minority students.

Tough's latest book, *How Children Succeed* (2012), makes an unapologetic case for teaching non-cognitive skills at school. It argues that these skills are not a substitute, but a complement to cognitive skills. Children, Tough argues, under-perform in school partly because they have a hard time doing seemingly simple things like staying focused while reading a long passage or not giving up when trying to solve a complicated equation. Cultivating self-control and perseverance, Tough argues, is not just "nice". It enables children to do well in subjects like math and reading.

As any other Latin American (worse yet, an Argentine), I hate being proven wrong. But after finishing Tough's book (which I did in just one sitting, thanks to his "*The New Yorker-meets-The Economist*" writing style), I was a happy convert. The volume introduced me to decades' worth of research in psychology and economics showing that character strengths at early ages predict later success, and perhaps most importantly, that simple interventions can go a long way in improving these skills.

In spite of Tough's successful proselytization, I had a few questions. First on my list was whether schools should be in the business of teaching non-cognitive skills at all, or whether this is best left to parents. Although they are often called "skills", things like self-control, grit, or self-esteem can also be thought of as (teachable) personality traits. Are schools overstepping their boundaries by seeking to shape students' character?

For Tough, this is one of those questions that we education researchers love to mull over, but that parents themselves find a non-issue. "Every parent is desperate for advice. As a parent myself, I can tell you that no one has it all figured out," says Tough. Indeed, he argues, even affluent parents stand to benefit from character education. In *How Children Succeed*, he tells the story of how Dominic Randolph, the headmaster of a prestigious private school in New York City, worries that by single-mindedly rewarding success, well-off parents may be inadvertently sheltering children from valuable frustrating experiences

that can teach them how to confront challenging situations later in life.

Even if teaching character at school is necessary, I wondered whether it was possible. Many of the initiatives Tough describes in his latest book take place in schools that have already figured out how to get all students to excel in academic subjects. Could public schools in Latin America do the same? Tough certainly thinks so: "For many teachers, teaching non-cognitive skills is intuitive. They know these skills are important, and they're inclined to want to teach them."

For Tough, teaching character is about unleashing the potential of teachers and parents to share with children why it is important to do things like resisting distractions or setting clear goals, and to give students feedback about how they can get better at these habits. In his book, Tough tells the story of Elizabeth Spiegel, a chess teacher in a school serving low-income minority students in Brooklyn. When her students lose a game, she sits down with them and replays every single move, calling them on each of their mistakes.

Tough admits this is not what happens in most classrooms. "Math teachers don't think of themselves in the same way, but that does not mean that they shouldn't." In math, like in chess, "students should be allowed to struggle with hard problems. And teachers should play more of a coaching role: telling students what they did wrong and how they can do it better," claims Tough.

Teaching character may be desirable, and it may even be possible inside the classroom, but is it up to each teacher, or is there something schools can do to help parents and teachers? In his book, Tough describes the "character report card" used at the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools in the United States. These report cards ask teachers to rate students on seven "strengths": zest, grit, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity. The report card is based on the research of two leading psychologists on character education, Martin Seligman and the late Chris Peterson, and was developed with Angela Duckworth, best known for her research on grit.

According to Tough, what is useful about these report cards is not that they identify the seven most essential non-cognitive skills. "One could make a reasonable case for excluding some skills and including others." To him, what is most helpful is that they "start a conversation between teachers, parents, and students" about these skills. He argues that because these reports assess students on multiple aspects (each strength is scored according to how frequently a number of observable behaviors occur), a child is often strong in some of these aspects and weak in others. "So, you can tell a child: 'You're great at optimism. Let's talk about how you can improve at self-control.' This makes kids *want* to have these conversations," says Tough with palpable enthusiasm.

Tough was far less sanguine about using the report card for accountability purposes. While he points out that "all of our incentives are on the cognitive side of education," he warns that "this should not be another thing for which we hold teachers accountable." Instead, Tough argues, "we should change the way we think about accountability." First, he suggests, we should change how we evaluate schools to focus more on students' skills rather than on their knowledge. Second, we should continue to monitor the long-term effects of socio-emotional skills and make decisions about school accountability based on those outcomes, which are the ones we ultimately care about.

By the end of my interview, I was ready to convert others, but I had one more question: what are we missing? Since Tough had anticipated the discussion on charter schools and socio-emotional skills, I thought it could not hurt to pick his brain on the next big trend. Tough did not disappoint. "Environments," he said, with the look of someone who had already given this question some serious thought. "In education, we have conversations about *skills*, but we actually know a great deal about how adverse environments affect children. We do not think enough about the environments where children are learning every day and how we can change these environments to help them learn more."

As always, Tough proves to be at the frontier of education. Research in neuroscience, clinical psychology, and economics has for decades documented the importance of "toxic stress" environments during childhood on long-term outcomes. This research is gaining momentum as new experimental evidence has emerged in recent years. Perhaps, I wondered, I am witnessing the beginning of Tough's next groundbreaking book.

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