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Resilience and Grit:

What They Are and Why They Matter for Youth Development Professionals

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Abstract

The challenges faced by youth can hinder them from reaching their full potential or help them grow and develop as they overcome their challenges. Grit and resilience provide young people with the skills, confidence, and perseverance to overcome challenges, pursue their goals and thrive. In this article, the authors examine the complex constructs that make up resilience and grit, draw connections to positive youth development practices, and propose a model of how these constructs can be enacted by youth development professionals in their work. The article offers specific educational practices that can support young people in developing the skills and characteristics of resilience and grit. Skills and characteristics which can aid youth in overcoming challenges and thriving now and into their future.

Keywords: resilience, grit, youth development, thriving, characteristics

Introduction

Youth development professionals strive to aid youth in reaching their full potential regardless of the settings in which youth live. Through positive youth development, professionals guide youth to develop knowledge, skills, and characteristics that will aid them in overcoming challenges so that they can find success and be contributing members of society. With this purpose in mind, the authors began a review of research on resilience and grit as it pertains to positive youth development.

The authors begin by looking at the complex constructs that make up resilience and grit, consider how they are similar and how they are different, then draw connections to positive youth development practices. As they analyze this information, they consider what educational practices could intentionally foster the development of these traits. Then they set forth strategies that youth development professionals can use to support youth in building resilience and grit.

How Do We Define Resilience and Grit?

An understanding of resilience and grit will support educators in their intentional efforts to help young people develop important skills and characteristics that equip them for success. As Arnold and Rennekamp (2021) succinctly state, positive youth development professionals focus on “building youth assets and providing supportive contexts” (p. 4) addressing “the multiple socio-developmental levels of the whole child” (p. 4).

However, resilience and grit are not so simply defined. The definitions of resilience and grit vary across cultures and even youth development organizations. In some circles, resiliency is perceived as one’s ability to overcome adverse or traumatic circumstances (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013); however, in others it is more synonymous with the ability to consistently push forward through challenges (Marone, 2021), which is similar to grit. Through more in-depth literature investigations into resilience, grit, and their overlap, the complexity of these terms becomes apparent; they are more like broad constructs combining skills, characteristics, and abilities. To define these constructs, a look at various definitions and relationships of these terms is required.

What Is Resiliency?

Resilience is a dynamic concept (Rutter, 2013) that encompasses one’s ability to overcome stress and adversities (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013) and withstand challenges that threaten stability (Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Some researchers, however, define it as the process of (Richardson, 2002), the capacity for (Catalano et al., 2004), or the outcome of (Masten et al., 1990) successful adaptation to challenges and threats. Regardless of whether resilience is considered an ability, a process, or an outcome, Jamieson (2018) notes that resiliency may be the key in aiding youth in overcoming traumatic events (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Various skills and characteristics have been determined to contribute to resilience, including optimism, self-efficacy and self-awareness, the ability to ask for help and accept support, problem solving skills, self-confidence, and the ability to utilize coping strategies (Ahlschlager, 2020; Bell, 2001; Cahill et al., 2014; Ginsburg, n.d.; and Hornor, 2017). Bell also attributes skills such as resource management, communication, leadership skills, and planning to resiliency, while Ahlschlager notes that self-care and mindfulness also play a role. Together these authors make the case that resilience develops along with the individual’s abilities to create connections and close attachments to people, establish personal purpose, and contribute to others.

What Is Grit?

Grit is the passion and perseverance that individuals can draw upon to sustain interest and effort toward long-term goals regardless of challenges (Duckworth, 2016). Characteristics demonstrated by gritty people

include interest, practice, purpose, and hope. Grit combines passion and perseverance providing learners with the competence to continue after complications (Duckworth et. al., 2007). Duckworth tagged gritty individuals as “paragons of perseverance” as they believe it is important to continue after failures and have a drive to continuously seek improvement.

Grit has also been characterized as a dynamic personality strength that allows people to remain enthusiastic and determined to achieve long-term objectives despite difficulties and afflictions they may experience (Lozano-Jiménez et al., 2021).

What Is the Relationship Between Resilience and Grit?

These terms, while different, are often used interchangeably. Miller (2020) relates grit and resilience with a metaphor: “grit is the engine that moves us towards our goal, while resiliency is the oil that keeps the engine moving” (p. 8). In order to see how these concepts are related, Table 1 compiles the characteristics of resilience and grit found within literature. It can be noted that the characteristics of grit can be more explicit and immediate—the engine moving us forward. The characteristics aligned with resilience, the oil that keeps the engine moving, grow through tenacity and investment over time. Table 1 illustrates how characteristics of grit and resilience align with one another.

Table 1. *Alignment of Characteristics Between Grit and Resilience*

Grit characteristics are explicit and immediate	Resilience develops from investment over time
Interest Hope	Self-efficacy Self-awareness Optimism
Practice	Self-confidence Ability to utilize coping strategies
Perseverance Drive to seek improvement	Ability to ask for help Accept support
Competence to continue	Problem-solving skills
Purpose	Resource management Communication Leadership skills Planning
Passion	Self-care Mindfulness

Why Develop Resilience and Grit?

Developing resilience within youth is essential for them to realize their personal potential and reach self-fulfillment (Koul et. al., 2021). Youth who are resilient are better able to face disappointments, learn from failure, cope with loss, and adapt to changes. This resilience is apparent as they exhibit determination and perseverance when tackling a problem and coping with emotional challenges (Price-Mitchell, 2015). Youth who cultivate character skills, including resilience and grit, are less likely to drop out of school and are more likely to be well-rounded, successful, and fulfilled adults (Shechtman et al., 2013).

Grit is also an important component of achieving success. It has a positive effect on an individual’s happiness, ability to be persistent, and ability to exhibit self-control. It alludes to mental strength in endeavoring toward achievements (Reed & Jeremiah, 2017). Grit supports success in the classroom. Various literature has noted that grit is associated with academic productivity and engagement (Hodge et al., 2018), academic motivation (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014), academic achievement (Pate et al., 2017),

perseverance (Lucas et al., 2015), and goal orientation (Muenks et al., 2017). Duckworth and Seligman (2005) have demonstrated that grit is a better predictor of success in college than the SAT or IQ tests.

In addition to impacting achievements, it is noted that traits such as grit influence psychological performance through the reduction of stress, depression, and tension (Mosanya, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018) and through the enhancement of positive feelings such as efficacy, self-regulation, pleasure, well-being, and optimism (Datu & Restubog, 2020; Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2018; and Salles et al., 2014). Grit is positively associated with satisfaction and sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2015), value and self-efficacy (Muenks et al., 2017), self-esteem (Weisskirch, 2018), pursuing engagement and pleasure in life (Von Culin et al., 2014), higher mental health (Sharkey et al., 2017), emotional stability during stressful or negative life events (Blalock et al., 2015), and a sense of meaning in life (Von Culin et al., 2014).

Recognizing that resilience and grit are important in youth success, it is then imperative for youth development professionals to understand that every child can learn how to be resilient if provided with the opportunity to develop the necessary skills.

How Do We Develop Grit and Resilience?

To cultivate resilience, youth development professionals must provide opportunities for young people to overcome challenges. In these situations, they foster youths' capacity to be resilient when challenged by developing flexibility and coping strategies. This equips youth with the skills to bounce back from difficult life experiences and achieve positive outcomes (Catalano et al., 2004). Though caring adults may do this intuitively, it is important for professionals to understand the theory behind this resilience so that they can be intentional in preparing young people to strive and to reach their full potential dealing with a rapidly changing and challenging world.

Bloom's 1985 talent development model has been related to grit characteristics (Sanguras, 2017) and can be a useful framework to help youth development professionals understand how they can support youth in developing grit. Bloom's 1985 study provided evidence that individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability without a process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training (Bloom, 1985). This model displays the long-term progression of developing successful people and can be used to better understand the role that influential adults can have on grit development. Table 2 aligns characteristics of grit (noted in Table 1) with Bloom's three stages of learning in the talent development model, and how professionals can help youth develop the characteristics of grit at each phase of the learning process.

Table 2. *Alignment of Grit Characteristics and Bloom's 1985 Model*

Grit Characteristic	Bloom's Phases of the Learning Process	How Professionals Guide Youth
Interest	Phase 1: Early years of a learning process	Professionals promote curiosity and allow youth to discover new ideas through play, exploration, and fun. Guiding youth to find their interests.
Passion and Practice	Phase 2: Middle years of a learning process	By encouraging youth to pursue their passions, professionals repeatedly introduce activities to improve youth practice, develop skills, and reach their goals.
Hope, Purpose, and Perseverance	Phase 3: Later years of a learning process	In order for youth to continue practice, identifying a purpose encourages persistence and provides focus, which will help youth persevere when challenges arise.

Table 2 illustrates how grit can develop over time with aid from external supports. At each phase of the learning process, the supports needed to continue growth and development are different. Similarly, resiliency evolves over time manifesting differently depending on an individual's upbringing and environment (Beyond Blue Ltd., 2017).

Developing resilience is a complex challenge that involves a combination of both macro- and micro-level interventions (Greenberg, 2006). Macro-level interventions occur at the community scale and support the creation of communities that foster safe, supportive, and healthy environments (Hornor, 2017). Meanwhile, micro-level interventions focus on individual interventions that enhance individual characteristics (Greenberg, 2006). The next section focuses on developing the characteristics of grit—interest; passion and practice; hope and purpose.

Developing Interest

Duckworth (2016) defines interest as having a childlike curiosity. As youth have the ability to explore a variety of topics and ideas, they can begin to identify what they truly like and where their interests lie. Developing interest aligns with the early years in Bloom's phases of a learning process. New interests are developed throughout the lifespan as youth interact with the outside world. New interests must be followed by subsequent interactions that can be fostered by youth development professionals who encourage practice and exploration. These interests may then develop into part of a youth's identity and grow into a passion.

Growing Passion and Practice

Passion can be defined as the strong desire or motivation and enthusiasm that drives one to a goal or achievement (Sigmundsson et al., 2020). To encourage youth to identify and develop a passion, youth development professionals promote curiosity. They expose youth to new ideas and allow the process of discovery to occur (Sanguras, 2017). Once a passion has been identified, it is important to support goal setting and deliberate practice that helps the passion develop (Sanguras, 2017). Deliberate practice is defined by Duckworth et al. (2011) as engaging in planned activities that improve some aspect of performance. They found that youth who intentionally choose difficult learning tasks and engaged in individual practice, such as studying new words, demonstrated a higher level of success. Deliberate practice can lead to mastery, which is also essential for building resiliency (Koul et al., 2021).

By focusing on the concept of "mastery," youth experience how their effort and practice results in progress. They are encouraged to reframe how they see failure—not as something to avoid but an essential stage in achieving mastery. Adults can help youth understand that each attempt, even a failed attempt, provides the opportunity to learn (Koul et al., 2021). Lyon (2014) encourages professionals to allow youth to struggle and make mistakes because it is during the struggle that important learning is taking place. When adults step in and prevent youth from experiencing challenges, setbacks, or failure, it can come at the cost of their growth (Tough, 2012). Helping youth confront their limitations and reach beyond their comfort zones cultivates resilience (Maltese et al., 2018) and grit (Sanguras, 2017).

Developing Hope and Purpose

Developing a sense of optimism and hope is important in fostering resilience and grit. When facing challenges, youth need hope that success is possible. Hope accompanies a feeling of power throughout each experience of interest, practice, and purpose (Duckworth, 2016). Professionals foster the development of resilience as they create experiences that allow young people to "achieve mastery amidst the struggle" (Sanguras, 2017, p. 48).

When a person is optimistic, they are more likely to find an explanation for something negative occurring, thus determining that it is changeable (Duckworth, 2010). If youth feel in control of their success and where they are headed, they are more likely to be optimistic. Optimistic people are more

likely to persevere than their pessimistic counterparts (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to Tough (2012), optimism is best taught to youth around fourth to sixth grade. These youth have not yet reached puberty but are late enough in childhood that they are capable of thinking about thinking and thus can comprehend that habits are hard to change, but not impossible.

Identifying their own purpose helps youth maintain their focus and persistence (Sanguras, 2017). According to Sanguras (2017), purpose is developed by several factors and is not always easily identified; however, as youth grow emotionally, they can begin to articulate their “why.” Cultivating a sense of hope and purpose prepares youth people to face challenges with grit and resilience.

What Is the Role of the Youth Development Professional?

Duckworth (2016) notes that in addition to being developed internally by cultivating interests, developing a habit of practice, connecting to purpose, and fostering hope, grit can also be fostered by others through positive relationships. Relationships are an important component of positive youth development and can help foster grit (Duckworth, 2016) and resiliency (Ahlschlager, 2020; Cahill et al., 2014; Ginsburg, n.d.; and Hornor, 2017).

Youth development professionals focus on building youth-adult partnerships and can use these relationships to develop grit and resilience. Bashant (2014) argues that regardless of the intervention or strategy that is implemented to develop grit, it really is the quality of the interactions that occur during the intervention that matter most. Positive relationships can reinforce that youth are worthy and able to overcome challenges. “When students believe they are worthy and capable of overcoming challenges, they become resilient” (Tocino-Smith, 2019, p. 1).

Positive relationships with peers can also support developing resilience and grit. Johnson and Johnson (2012) found that youth who work together in positive and encouraging ways persevere longer, work harder, and learn more in general than do youth who work alone or who compete against their peers. One way to foster positive peer relationships is to incorporate teamwork and collaboration into learning experiences (Johnson & Johnson, 2012).

In their work, youth development professionals provide meaningful experiences that increase young people’s knowledge and skills, and their mental health. This section provides strategies for developing grit and resilience in a safe and intentional manner by providing opportunities for youth to develop the skills and characteristics that have been discussed. Youth development professionals can design learning activities and challenges that provide opportunities to develop interest, explore and practice passions, and to build a sense of hope and purpose. These six strategies can guide professionals in how to develop learning experiences that foster resilience and grit. These examples include specific real-world activities commonly used across 4-H youth development programs as examples. The strategies can be used in almost any kind of youth development work.

Introduce Failure

Introducing the potential to fail into youth programming allows youth to use and develop their critical analysis and problem-solving skills. It also allows youth to see that sometimes the path they take toward learning is more important than the eventual outcome. As Maltese and colleagues (2018) state, “failure experiences for youth can lead to gains in learning and persistence” (p. 1). Opportunities to fail are also opportunities for success and for mastery. Experiences of failure and success together help youth see how their effort and practice results in progress. Engineering design challenges, such as building towers with inexpensive materials like newspaper or spaghetti and marshmallows, often do not result in success with the youths’ first attempts. Success comes almost always after multiple attempts, and usually multiple failures. Challenges to recreate a structure built by others using only written instructions, or when the two builders cannot see each other, provide youth with opportunities to grow outside their comfort zones and allow youth to progress and learn during the process.

Incorporate Teamwork

When professionals incorporate teamwork and collaboration into activities, they help youth develop the skills to work effectively with others (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Experiences working with others require youth to practice coping strategies, such as flexibility, and workplace skills, such as communication. Team-building games such as the classic “human knot” and “telephone” game are fun opportunities to develop teamwork and communication skills. Taking time to reflect on these experiences and explicitly identify the skills practiced is essential. Reflection helps youth understand how their fun experience connects to resilience and grit.

Learn by Doing

Learning by doing incorporates experiential learning and taking advantage of teachable moments. Professionals support learning by doing as they use unplanned opportunities to incorporate real-world connections to learning activities. This can be as simple as reacting positively to youth seeing a plane fly overhead and asking questions. When an educator realizes it might be better to make paper airplanes to answer these questions, rather than the originally planned activity of binary bracelets, they are fostering a new interest and a positive relationship. Another opportunity for learning by doing presents itself when youth complete a task, such as building a catapult, but realize their peers nearby have a better solution. Encouraging them to work together to solve the problem and share their prior and learned knowledge to figuring out how to extend the shooting distance develops characteristics of resilience such as problem-solving skills and the ability to ask for and accept help. Learning can be made more fun by allowing youth to have direct input into activities. Teachable moments occur throughout youth programming, often in the most subtle of ways. It is in these moments that youth can follow their interests, practice new skills, and develop their sense of purpose.

Model the Behavior

As they grow, youth are naturally curious and are constantly watching and listening to those around them, trying to assess, learn, and model what they see and hear. Thus, it's easy to argue that one of the best ways to develop resilience and grit is for youth development professionals to model the behaviors desired. Educators should encourage young people to be each other's cheerleaders as they do the same for them. Adults should not be afraid to tell youth that they do not know the answer to a question or that they are learning along with them. By modeling these behaviors, educators are showing them how to persevere, that it is okay for people to rely on and ask for help from their peers to help navigate obstacles, and that relying on passion and abilities can open endless opportunities.

Celebrate Accomplishments

Youth development professionals aim to create environments where youth discover and develop their skills, passion, and purpose. Celebrating youth accomplishments toward these goals and recognizing positive behavior provides opportunities to focus on the characteristics of resilience and grit. A supportive environment that strengthens self-efficacy and self-awareness is important in adolescent development. However, celebrating accomplishments should be done with caution so that recognition does not become the focus of program delivery (Law et al., 2012).

Develop Deep Relationships

As they develop deeper relationships with youth, supporting both their academic and non-academic interests, passion, and activities, youth development professionals support young people's growth and skill development (Noam & Bernstein, 2013). Building trusting relationships can improve overall

communication. Adults can encourage resilience and prepare youth to overcome challenges that might otherwise have been a roadblock to their success. Strong relationships build young people’s confidence and help see how their experiences have helped develop grit. Positive relationships help young people relate to adults who model resilience and grit and encourage them to appreciate their own strengths.

Combining Concepts into Practical Application

As this review shows, the concepts of grit and resilience are abstract concepts, even to experts in cognitive development. It is not easy to give precise definitions for these terms. However, parents, educators, and youth development professionals do not need a precise definition to actively cultivate the skills and characteristics of resilience and grit. Parents, educators, and youth development professionals need to understand the importance of resilience and grit. Then they need strategies they can use to help youth develop the characteristics of grit and resilience through experiences, positive relationships, and opportunities to build mastery.

It is important to understand that this is an ongoing cycle of development where skills and characteristics build upon each other over time. The conceptual model in Figure 1 was created by the authors to illustrate the growth of an individual’s skills and practices through positive youth development. Over time, the experiences on the outside of the spinning wheel help youth develop the skills and characteristics of grit and resilience that are on the inside of the wheel. These skills and characteristics are rarely taught directly. They develop over time through challenges, experiences, and reflection.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of How Grit and Resilience Help Youth Reach Their Full Potential*



Conclusion

Individual experiences range widely from one young person to the next. However, when their life experiences include opportunities for youth development professionals to foster the development of skills, characteristics, and abilities that foster resilience and grit, young people can be prepared to overcome the challenges and obstacles that are part of modern life.

Grit and resilience offer an individual the confidence and perseverance to pursue their goals and thrive. The characteristics of grit are resources that individuals pull upon immediately when facing challenging situations, and the characteristics of resilience are those resources that develop across a lifetime. People draw upon both resilience and grit to overcome difficulties. Each generation and era of humanity has presented unique challenges and difficulties. With the fast-paced change of technology, it is difficult to predict the challenges and difficulties that today's young people will face in the future. Throughout all of this though, youth development professionals are in a prime position to prepare the young people they work with to successfully navigate life as they build in positive relationships and create opportunities for mastery, the ability to connect work to purpose, the capacity to hope, and opportunities to build optimism.

Youth development professionals who intentionally encourage these characteristics through the programming they provide, help young people reflect on the development of these characteristics and model grit and resilience themselves will make a difference in the lives of young people. They will positively influence youth and encourage their growth of resiliency over time. So, when humanity moves forward and continues to experience hardships and challenges in the future, a more resilient population of youth will be equipped to deal with challenges and rebound more effectively than the generations before them.

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