

Balancing Grit with Grace

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Westminster School's motto is *Grit & Grace*—two words that balance each other alliteratively, but far more importantly, complement each other inspirationally. Reflections about grit focus mostly on individual improvement, whereas grace emphasizes the importance of making a difference for others and possibly leading a more fulfilling and gratifying life.

Grit: Reaching Within One's Self

Thanks in large part to the research and writing of Angela Duckworth, grit permeates discussions in academic and popular culture today as a way to promote student success. Proponents of grit argue that qualities of character emphasizing persistence and effort offer a better predictor of success in life than the “gift” of talent. Significantly, these qualities can be taught and with deliberate practice absorbed.

This emphasis on grit is empowering, since it offers the prospect of more control over the personal and professional narratives that shape lives. Cultivating grit can lead to self-improvement and, ultimately, more success. Nuanced discussions of grit, such as those presented persuasively by Duckworth, extend beyond self-improvement to include passion, hope and gratitude, among other attributes. Nevertheless, at its core, grit offers a positive pathway to personal development through hard work, thereby diminishing the relevance of talent and offering opportunities otherwise thought unattainable.

Instances when students extend themselves to reach new horizons are highly motivational to teachers. Teachers devote themselves to teaching because they care about youngsters and seek to make a difference in their lives. Discussions about grit encourage teachers to consider their vocation more holistically, to move beyond the confines of preconceived notions of a student's talent and to consider a more promising context for student learning. The best teachers reflect constantly upon how they might support their students and advance student learning. By encouraging gritty behavior in their students, teachers model how learning is not about uninterrupted successes following upon each other. Rather, they convey that some of the most important lessons occur at moments of failure. The resilience encompassed in grit offers a broader pathway forward.

Grace: Reaching Out to Others

Good teaching can be a fundamentally selfless endeavor. In addition to continually expanding knowledge of their field, teachers seek to improve their teaching for the benefit of their students. Considered as such, good teachers are filled with plenty of grace along with grit. The extraordinarily powerful motivation they gain from making a difference for others—from gazing outward, instead of inward, from being selfless, not self-absorbed—reveals their commitment to an ethos of grace.

When considering the significance of grace, this aphorism resonates: “Grace isn’t a little prayer you say before receiving a meal. It’s a way to live.” A successful, meaningful life cannot only be about grit. Grace is about awareness of others. It is about thinking beyond self, to what can be done to support others. Individuals display grace when they adhere to an ethic of personal integrity, when they respect other people, including those who seem different, and when they insist on playing fairly and exhibiting sportsmanship. Grace also encompasses the small daily courtesies extended to others by greeting them in a friendly manner, holding the door open, taking hats off when inside, and being polite and respectful. These common courtesies not only honor another person’s dignity, they make someone else’s day a bit better. Grace underscores the importance of being kind, courteous, respectful and selfless.

Just as important as teaching students about grit is teaching them about grace. In this context, schools are not simply about teaching academic lessons; they balance individual lessons with lessons about community. Students learn that in the company of others, they can accomplish far more than alone. In this way, they not only develop an appreciation of differing perspectives and circumstances but empathy. Grace is essential to any successful community, organization, institution or school. Without grace we are on our own.

Throughout the school day, whether in classrooms, in studios, onstage, on teams or in living spaces, students should learn to share, to listen, to appreciate, to cooperate and to compromise. These lessons can be especially poignant at boarding schools, where students can be from a wider range of circumstances and places than day schools, which may only draw students from a particular locale. Depending on a school’s inclination, grace also offers the possibility for spiritual reflection. Civic engagement and partnership programs offer additional venues for students to extend their perspectives and to learn these lessons.

Schools should create opportunities for students to practice the lessons learned through grace. Considering the challenges facing our world today, these lessons seem especially relevant. Simply put, our world would be a better place, a more stable place, a more prosperous place, and a more accepting place, if more people embraced the qualities associated with grace.

Grace Enhances Grit

Most important, grace enhances grit by invoking the passions that motivate achievement. Motivation for solitary self-improvement may be purposeful and productive, but without the passion invoked by involving others, it offers a limited horizon for accomplishment. It is in the company and service of others that we unlock passions necessary to fulfill our true potential. The joy derived from making a difference results in more meaningful and more gratifying accomplishments. Grace inspires us to overcome the challenges presented by the hard work of grit.

By balancing grit and grace, students are able to expand their opportunities for successful and fulfilling lives. Together, *Grit & Grace* offer a motto for a life well lived.

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