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## Pocket Watch – Developing True Grit

### Introduction

Can you teach it? Should you teach it? Should it be part of the school curriculum? The 'it' in question is character, or grit, or resilience or all three and more, and it's been a big talking point this week. Michael Gove believes his school reforms would help develop it; Tristram Hunt argues that it should be a taught part of the curriculum while an all Party Parliamentary Group is behind a **Report** published this week on future policy. It's not a new issue of course but seems to have resurfaced as debate continues about whether the current curriculum reforms tilt learning too far away from what are often regarded as essential personal skills and politicians battle it out for the soul of education. So what is true grit and where's it best developed?

### What is meant by grit/resilience in an education setting?

It's generally easier to recognise than define and most attempts at codification tend to reflect what comes under the heading of 'soft skills.' Click on preferred soft or personal skills on recruitment websites and you generally get a list that comprises the following: effective communication; problem solving; team player; flexibility; creative thinking; confidence; and being able to accept feedback and act on it.

These tally pretty closely with the seven acknowledged employability skills that the CBI has been promoting for some time although theirs include Business and Customer Awareness and Application of IT and of Numeracy along with self-management, team working and communications.

Similar lists can be found in most employer surveys and are pretty much staple diet in vocational programmes these days but the MPs' Report this week, published with the think tank Centre Forum and the independent Character Counts centre, focuses more on the "*personal resilience and emotive wellbeing*" side of personal development. Their research suggests four key '*character capabilities*' namely: application; self-direction; self-control; and empathy, with a strong nod towards a range of other characteristics such as self-efficacy and the ability to defer gratification, generally reflected in the terms 'mental toughness' and 'grit.'

An interesting aspect of this is the development of wellbeing, the subject of recent Reports from both Young Minds and Barnardos and increasingly recognised in schools as an important contributor to learning success and component of personal or character development.

### Where should these 'skills' and character be developed?

This is where things get trickier with fierce debates about nature v nurture, schools v family.

Michael Gove has long argued that the best schools already develop such skills and in his latest speech last week pointed to the success of independent schools in particular in doing this and pledging to help other schools imbibe from the same cup: "*I will work with school leaders to put the steps in place to provide for these character-building activities.*" Such activities included "*orchestras and choirs, school plays, cadets, debating competitions*" all of which he argued help develop character.

In a keynote speech this week, Shadow Schools Secretary Tristram Hunt also tackled the issue of character, distancing himself from the Michael Gove approach and arguing strongly that it was something that could be taught in schools. "*What is clear is that this is about more than bolting-on some more music lessons or sports clubs to the school day. No this is about learning from the rigorous academic discipline that is character education and implementing a holistic approach that goes beyond extra-curricular activities and into the classroom.*" In his view, character education should be included in initial teacher training and embedded across the school curriculum. The work being done by for instance the Jubilee Centre at the University of

Birmingham on developing character building in the school curriculum, he argued, makes such an assertion feasible.

In fairness as the MPs' Report notes, many schools see the development of personal skills and characteristics as part of their "*core business*" and have done so for some time in both the wider school culture and in subjects such as PSHE. Under the revised National Curriculum, Personal Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) remains a non-statutory subject but schools must make provision for it. The PSHE Association has developed a new Programme of Study built around three features: Health and Wellbeing, Relationships, and Living in the Wider World which includes some of the features being discussed here but the broader issue perhaps is that this is not just a subject let alone a whole school issue, it is a societal one.

The MPs' Report calls for a "*national conversation*" about the matter set in the context of social mobility. Education has a key role in this and the Report lists 18 recommendations to enhance it ranging from an Early Years Premium to a School Leavers Certificate that can reflect wider achievement and skills to support for a National Volunteering Award Scheme.

The Report is only just out and the Government has yet to respond to it but with work under way to develop even a Global Youth Wellbeing Index, it's no wonder politicians are beginning to recognise what's at stake here.



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