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High levels of perseverance and self-control linked to better life outcomes

While discussion of educational outcomes usually focuses on academic (or cognitive) attainment, an increasing amount of attention is being paid to noncognitive skills such as independence, self-control and perseverance. Ildefonso Mendez of the University of Murcia in Spain writes that noncognitive factors are highly correlated with education, employment and health outcomes. In fact, he says, noncognitive skills are, in some cases, “even more relevant predictors of observed individual differences in life-time outcomes than innate intellectual ability” (Mendez, 2014, p. 1).

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of parental influence on the development of noncognitive skills, however Mendez recently expanded this research to examine whether noncognitive abilities learned in the family home impact on academic outcomes. By examining the 2003-2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data for seven countries, including Australia, and cross-referencing this with information about students’ cultural backgrounds gathered from World Values surveys, Mendez discovered that students whose ancestries emphasise thrift, perseverance, responsibility, independence and imagination perform better in PISA’s language, mathematics and science tests than students whose ancestries emphasise other traits, such as obedience and unselfishness (p. 3).

It is concerning, therefore, that researchers from both the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Australian National University (ANU) found that the 2012 PISA data, which included eleven new questions assessing the noncognitive abilities of control (or self-efficacy) and perseverance, showed that girls in Australia and New Zealand report significantly lower levels of perseverance than boys (De Bortoli & Macaskill, 2014, p. 63; Biddle & Ball, 2014). The ACER analysis also demonstrated a small positive association between the perseverance and problem-solving indexes, with higher levels of perseverance positively correlated with higher levels of problem-solving performance (De Bortoli & Macaskill, 2014, p. 64).

ANU researchers Nicholas Biddle and Sarah Ball analysed the 2012 PISA data for Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States, finding that girls in nearly all of these countries, including Australia and New Zealand, reported “significantly and substantially” lower levels of perseverance than boys. The lone exception in their analysis was the United States where there was no significant difference between the perceived perseverance of girls and boys.

Biddle and Ball’s analysis of the aggregated data for boys and girls suggests that, overall, Australian and New Zealand students report feeling significantly lower levels of control over their lives than students in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, and significantly lower perseverance than students in the United States, Canada and Ireland. The researchers conclude that this is “cause for concern” given that students will be competing in a global labour market against students from countries with higher levels of perseverance and self-efficacy.

Research summary for principals

Conclusion

Researchers with the Brookings Institute in the United States have recently examined the importance of noncognitive abilities, specifically looking at two character strengths: drive and prudence. Drive was defined as the ability to stick to a task (encompassing the character strengths of perseverance, industriousness and resilience) and prudence was defined as the ability to defer gratification in order to reach long-term goals (encompassing the character strengths of self-control, self-discipline and the ability to look to the future). The researchers concluded that:

Character matters. Children who learn and can exhibit character strengths attain more years of education, earn more, and likely outperform other individuals in other areas of life ... Similarly, people who are optimistic and believe their actions will have influence are more likely to get ahead. Those who see themselves in a positive light — in other words have high self-esteem — are likely to demonstrate greater personal agency and have higher expectations (Reeves, Venator, & Howard, 2014, pp. 30-31).

With the outstanding results achieved by girls' schools across a broad spectrum — encompassing leadership, community service, extracurricular participation and academic outcomes — our students are well-prepared to enter the wider world with confidence and optimism. Girls' schools provide the ideal environment, free from gender stereotyping, for girls to engage with enthusiastic teachers who support them to achieve their goals and develop the self-belief, resilience, perseverance and self-control that will stand them in good stead as they exit our doors.

References

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