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Terms of Endurance

Resilience, Grit, and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Education

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Abstract

This paper critiques the role of resilience and grit in neoliberal education. Both concepts have become popular within research, policy, practice, and public discourse about education. Proponents claim that the concepts affirm and support the ability of marginalized youth to succeed in schools and society. However, resilience and grit minimize the impact of structural inequality and social domination on oppressed youth in schools, obscuring the necessity of collective struggle in order to achieve educational liberation. Resilience and grit function as what the author calls the “terms of endurance” in neoliberal education because they individualize and depoliticize educational problems and practice. Against the affirmation of durative language in the cultural politics of education, the author calls for critical educators to insist instead on a transformative approach.



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In *An Essay on Liberation*, Herbert Marcuse (1969) wrote that “the experimentation with the limits of endurance and destruction are tokens of the mastery of necessity in the interest of exploitation” (p. 45). Exploring how scientific and technological progress expanded the limits of material possibility in the interest of wedding individual fulfillment to unfettered consumption, Marcuse revealed how advanced capitalism casts a positive glow on its encroachment upon the individual and collective psyche. In his view, that which appears as affirmative under capitalism often serves to entrench exploitation. Endurance and destruction are made to appear as requisite to progress, when in fact they are integral to deepening oppression. Building upon that premise, this article examines how the increasingly fashionable concepts of resilience and grit, despite affirmative characterization by advocates, instead serve to normalize social inequality and educational insecurity. Operating as part of the conceptual apparatus of neoliberal education, these terms cast schooling primarily as a matter of endurance, contributing further to a cultural politics of individualism, cynicism, and docility. The popularity of resilience and grit confronts critical educators with the insidious and patronizing valorization of students’ efforts to succeed, ignoring the fact that, for many youth in the volatile terrain of neoliberal schooling, the struggle is often one of survival. Similarly, the notion of grit fetishizes individual acts of persistence that do not pose a significant threat to the social order. These concepts do however pose a distinct threat to critical education. Against the proliferation of these concepts, this article argues that critical educators must counter these terms of endurance with an alternative grammar of transformation.

Critical Education and the Affirmative Language of Neoliberalism

In the neoliberal era, corporate school reformers have underwritten their educational project with a forged promissory note. Following four decades of colossal restructuring, which have wrought extensive damage upon public schooling, the market idyll remains at the forefront of educational policy and public discourse. Despite the corporate school reform movement failing on its own terms, predatory policies continue to assail students, teachers, and communities, meanwhile the conjoined creed of competition and choice persist with startling fortitude, suppressing critical dialogue concerning the democratic and egalitarian purposes of education (Saltman, 2012).

Driven by a brutal austerity politics, the neoliberal movement for corporate school reform has spurred massive disinvestment in public education, particularly in urban schools where poor and working class youth of color are contained in pre-carceral conditions. Despite persistent claims that market reforms constitute an innovative approach to ensuring educational equity, students and communities who are not deemed worthy of investment are regularly abandoned in the ruins of public education (Means, 2013). This assault has not gone unchallenged, however. Students, teachers, and communities have engaged in widespread and creative resistance to the imposition of educational insecurity (Slater, 2020). Furthermore, critical scholars have indicted the infiltration of neoliberal ideas into the educational realm, demonstrating the myriad ways that neoliberal reforms—purportedly meritocratic *and* equitable, facilitating individual and family choice as a mechanism to redress educational disparities—serve the agendas of racial capitalism and white supremacy (e.g. Brown & De Lissovoy, 2011; Lipman, 2015; Pierce, 2015).

Despite the extensive criticism and organized opposition to corporate school reform, neoliberal ideology persists in the educational realm (De Lissovoy, 2015). There are numerous and complex reasons for this fact. This paper focuses on matters of concepts as representative of formative ideologies that influence and guide educational practices, policies, and pedagogical relations, and how the use of affirmative language in the conceptual apparatus of neoliberal

education threatens to obstruct critical thought and collective struggle in schooling. Education tends to be an idealistic field of research and practice. Theories of educational practice have historically drawn on notions of individual enlightenment and social progress, and even when confronted with real barriers to the realization of those ideals, educators tend toward expanding the array of positive concepts with which to guide their activity. However, as critical theorists of education have argued doggedly, there are significant reasons not to view education in such idealistic terms, and the impulse to rely on affirmative concepts and positive thinking more often yields educational repression than enlightenment or emancipation (Farr, 2013).

The preponderance of positive approaches to educational theory and practice is not solely the product of educator optimism. Proponents of neoliberalism regularly appropriate ideas from the social sciences and package them as viable solutions to social problems. Presently, two concepts circulating favorably in educational discourse are resilience and grit. All the rage in public policy and corporate cant, these concepts are presented as remedies for inequality, which is itself cast within neoliberal perspectives as the result of individual or institutional failure, rather than as the product of structural contradictions within social systems. Generally omitted from the formula, however, is any component of social critique or blueprints for systemic change. As has always been the case with the neoliberal tradition, the presumed locus of social change is the individual (as well as the family). The system itself is never truly up for debate. Resilience and grit are distressingly consonant with a neoliberal view of social life in which economic prosperity is a product of merit, mere survival is an individual responsibility, and human flourishing is the immaculate progeny of the market. That the latter point has not yet been realized is, in the neoliberal view, a result of an insufficiently free market, which can only be reached at the vanishing point of neoliberal ideology. Its persistent delay is a product of deferral by delusion. Perhaps most pernicious in this arrangement are the evasive techniques of blame deployed by the architects and ideologues of neoliberal political and economic systems and cultural apparatuses, through which they project their own failure onto those most harmed by the current arrangements.

Caught up in the vortex of this perverse logic are the targets of neoliberal depredation in public schools. Indeed, social mobility—cast as attainable through individual achievement—is a millstone that has been hung around the necks of poor and working-class students—especially students of color—in public schools. In their foundational text *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) critiqued mid-twentieth century educational reforms that “proposed an end run on economic strife by offering all children an equal opportunity to make it,” arguing that the goal of ameliorating inequality through educational achievement rather than egalitarian social programs relied on a meritocratic theory of change (p. 4). By relying on individual achievement as the key to achieving its goal, the liberal reform platform evaded the necessity of structural economy analysis and radical political struggle to produce egalitarian social change. The general role of education in the social reproduction of capitalism has not changed much in the neoliberal era, though its impact on subjectification and contribution to inequality has intensified. As Alexander Means (2013) demonstrates, the exploitation of social insecurity and repressive management of educational life remain central to neoliberal schooling. Indeed, the program of neoliberal restructuring contributes to the intensification of inequality and the contradictions of capitalism as working class protections are eviscerated, and even the brutal exploitation of the Fordist era is replaced by the precarious misery of the gig economy. It is in this harsh economic landscape, exacerbated for many by racist state violence, compounded for all by existential threat of planetary environmental crisis, that resilience and grit—the affirmative language of neoliberal education—must be revealed in all their conceptual duplicity.

The commitment to social analysis and radical transformation held by critical theorists in education necessitates a critique that is dialectically attuned to the mechanics of domination and the constituent power to resist that resides in those facing oppression. In his earliest contributions to critical approaches in educational theory, Henry Giroux (1981) revealed the affirmative kernel of political possibility obscured by the fog of domination blanketing the reproduction theory of Bowles and Gintis, writing that “reproduction is a complex phenomenon that not only serves the interest of domination but also contains the seeds of conflict and transformation” (p. 109). In his subsequent book, *Theory and Resistance in Education*, Giroux (1983) developed the critique of reproduction theory further, arguing for a critical formulation of resistance that would “shift the analysis of oppositional behavior from the theoretical terrains of functionalism and mainstream educational psychology to those of political analysis” (p. 107). As I will explain further in the next section, the manner in which the concepts of resilience and grit circulate in educational discourse and are implemented in policy and practice are based on many of the same errors Bowles and Gintis, as well as Giroux, critiqued in their work, even despite their theoretical differences. In the assumption that affirmative concepts are representative of positive efforts to overcome undesirable conditions, those who rely on the neoliberal terms of endurance to frame their educational endeavors, or who impose the concepts on the activity of students, remove their language from social processes, an error that mystifies the conditions producing particular forms of social life, thus obstructing meaningful efforts to overcome existing social problems (see Adorno, 1964/2003; Marcuse, 1968/2009).

The affirmative language of resilience and grit are representative of a broader neoliberal cultural politics that rationalizes the widespread insecurities faced by the majority who inhabit a precarious capitalist economy and fractured social realm. In this grim context, critical educators face a crucial challenge: understanding the ideological foundations and political consequences of the prominence of resilience and grit in educational policy, practice, and public discourse, and articulating an alternative language for educational struggles. Though they are presented as affirmative concepts that can aid oppressed youth in overcoming individual deficits and systemic barriers, I argue in the following section that both resilience and grit are better understood as depoliticizing affiliates of the neoliberal production of social insecurity. Their promulgation in the educational realm contributes to reactionary defense of the established order. These concepts are as toxic as they are tempting, and as such, demand more thorough interrogation.

The Burden of Resilience and the Grit Fetish in Education

In *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, Brad Evans and Julian Reid (2014) ask a powerful question: “How did we come to think that individuals and societies must accept catastrophe as the start point for comporting themselves toward the future?” (pp. xii-xiii). The answer, they suggest, lies in a shift in political rationality away from the liberal state’s concern for social welfare toward the dispassionate abdication of state responsibility that characterizes neoliberalism. And while liberal states have often proven unable or unwilling to ensure the well-being of their citizenry, the bulk of the social protections left intact under neoliberalism are becoming ever more thin and ill-equipped to address the insecurity many face daily. In this increasingly unstable social landscape, insecurity becomes the order of the day, a contradiction shrouded in affirmative discourses. And it is within the neoliberal context that the notion of resilience has emerged in a variety of academic, policy, and institutional perspectives, proposed as an organizing goal for responses to risk and uncertainty. Though resilience heralds “insecurity as the natural order of things” (Evans & Reid, 2014, p. xii), its use in the neoliberal era seeks to

transmit a spirit of endurance in the face of adversity. Resilience can signal individual fortitude or institutional flexibility. Stepping into the gap left by the liberal state's inadequate protections, resilience capitalizes on the absence of a substantive explanation for the widespread absence of economic security and fractured solidarity wrought by neoliberalism (see Gilbert, 2014).

Nevertheless, the neoliberal vision of resilience is a cruel comfort. If an individual fails to exhibit resilience, their responsibility and self-sufficiency are brought into question, threatening the subject's perceived legitimacy and full inclusion within the social order. Any social suffering a subject experiences in the face of their failure to be resilient can be attributed to their own failure of character and determination, the accountability for which rests on the individual rather than the state or society. As Evans & Reid (2014) explain:

To be resilient, the subject must disavow any belief in the possibility to secure itself and accept instead an understanding of life as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which are said to be outside its control... [T]he resilient subject must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world. The resilient subject is not a political subject who on its own terms conceives of changing the world, its structure and conditions and possibility. The resilient subject is required to accept the dangerousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world and accept the necessity of the injunction to change itself in correspondence with threats now presupposed as endemic and unavoidable. (pp. 41-42)

From this perspective, resilience promotes acceptance of the existing social order, limiting the locus of transformation to the psychic efforts of individuals to survive in a harsh social terrain. Resilience promotes broader forms of individual acquiescence and collective complacency that contribute to the neoliberal reproduction of an unequal social order in which some are resigned to an anguishing cycle of being knocked down, and recovering, only to be hit with yet another jarring blow (see Slater, 2015). Resilience only serves to rationalize the injustice of the social reproduction of precarity and insecurity.

Resilience is also troubling because of its appeal to many who have otherwise maintained a modicum of concern for economic equality and social welfare. For example, former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, Judith Rodin (2014), suggests that resilience should be viewed as generating a social benefit, rather than a cost. "Ideally, as you become more adept at managing disruption and skilled at resilience building," she writes, "you are able to create and take advantage of new opportunities in good times and bad. That is the resilience dividend" (p. 3). It is not difficult to imagine how many might find this conviction appealing. However, in a society that is characterized by stark immiseration and organized globally by a mode of production and social relations that are based on exploitation and hierarchy, liberation struggles require critical forms of suspicion, for the terms of endurance are deeply ideological, and thus, persuasive.

Although some scholars claim that "progressive thinkers are proposing new critically informed paths forward for resilience" (Biermann, Hillmer-Pegram, Knapp, & Hum, 2016, p. 60), critical educators in particular should exercise caution in rushing to embrace the concept as progressive. There are some questions to consider before jumping on the resilience bandwagon. What theories of endurance does resilience invoke? Is there any way of affirming resilience that does not also reinforce the concept's tendency to normalize crisis and render inequality an innate condition of social life? Even if scholars and policymakers "address power, justice and equity"

when invoking resilience (Biermann et al., 2016, p. 61), what is the impact of resilience on the broader conceptual horizon of critical theory and radical politics, particularly in education? I prefer to approach resilience with a critical suspicion. The concept is indelibly tainted by a cynical worldview; its advocates too willing to dismiss collective struggles to transform society. Despite widely touted claims of its practical necessity, resilience, “in both theory and practice meshes seamlessly with broader processes of neoliberalization, supports particular types of civil society-state relationships, envisions particular kinds of at-risk subjects, and privileges specific types of solutions” to social problems (Tierney, 2015, p. 1329). When transposed onto the educational realm, the problems associated with resilience stand out even more clearly.

The resilience doctrine finds a familial educational expression in the fetishization of grit. While grit has a long conceptual life, including in education (see Gonzalez-Stokas, 2015; Ris 2015), and predating the popularity of resilience, its recent popularity within educational debates has been influenced significantly by two books in particular: Paul Tough’s *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2013) and Angela Duckworth’s *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016). Each author extols the purportedly positive effect of grit on character formation and its capacity to reduce inequality through the accumulation of individual efforts to overcome adversity and achieve success according to social norms and values that are ratified by neoliberal rationality. In this framing, grit has little to do with transforming the social order. Rather, it emphasizes individualism and achievement, merely equipping the gritty to survive neoliberalism.

In response to its swift ascension to conceptual popularity, grit has also garnered skeptics and critics. Joshua Kim (2016) asks if grit thinking can exacerbate inequality. Admitting that he is a grit enthusiast, Kim argues that at the same time resilience appears to be a valuable concept for promoting effort-based learning theories over stratified hierarchies of intelligence, it seems plausible that “grit thinking has emerged as yet another advantage for our most privileged of communities” (n.p.). Kim generously assumes that many of the key figures in grit thinking, including Duckworth (who was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2013 for her work on the concept) in particular, are “passionate about improving opportunities for the children of low-income families,” and would most likely “fight for more equal and robust school funding, as well as greater access to affordable high quality postsecondary education” (n.p.). This may well be the case. Yet startlingly absent from Duckworth’s running commentary on grit, he laments, is an attunement to the structural forces that order neoliberal societies, constraining possibilities and opportunities for many to develop or display the type of grit in which Duckworth places hope. “What is left unspoken and unarticulated,” Kim concludes, is “the context in which success occurs” (n.p.). This oversight, I argue below, is the most flagrant violation in the grit literature.

The decontextualization and abstraction of resilience and grit from material conditions—whether due to dismissal or neglect—amounts to the eclipse of critical analysis in the literature advocating these concepts. According to Kim (2016), Duckworth and other grit thinkers have much to offer, and could bolster the potential impact of their research on issues of equality and justice, but only if they:

include structural opportunity factors in their description of the drivers of positive individual outcomes . . . This is a request that every sociologist makes of every psychologist. The request to recognize that individual outcomes are mediated by both individual factors and structural constraints. (n.p.)

Kim's treatment of Duckworth and the broader pro-grit cohort is a charitable reading. However, his magnanimity is overly clement. At the very least, it overlooks the extent to which grit thinking and the resilience doctrine pose serious threats to critical education in the face of neoliberalism. Along these lines, Kenneth Saltman (2016) argues that the rise of the resilience and grit demands reinvention of critical theories of social reproduction in education. Grit, for Saltman, is not an affirmative concept in any meaningful sense of the term, but is instead categorically repressive. Relying on the logic of austerity, the exhortation to display grit elicits behaviors from students that contribute to the reproduction and exacerbation of inequality. In the following sections, I explore several facets of the grit fetish from the perspective of critical educational thought.

Repressive Affirmation and Adaptive Agency

Grit has garnered interest in educational circles because it is cast as an affirmative concept. On the surface, grit appears to challenge deficit stereotypes that have haunted cognitive psychology, providing instead a model that is premised on cultivating non-cognitive capacities and forms of motivation that are ostensibly equipped to facilitate the translation of effort into success and achievement. Yet there are concerning aspects of the cultural politics of the grit fetish. Herbert Marcuse (2009) described the threat of "affirmative culture," which is characterized by

is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself 'from within,' without any transformation of the state of fact. (p. 70)

The grit fetish sustains elements of the affirmative culture Marcuse denounced by reformulating problems that are rooted in structural contradictions as individual challenges that can be resolved through positive emotion and solitary effort. As with the tendencies of bourgeois culture in Marcuse's critique, the grit fetish can be understood as an ideological construct that "affirms and conceals the new conditions of social life" (p. 71). Instead of providing a positive vehicle for individual emancipation, the affirmation promoted by both Tough and Duckworth is a repressive force that denies the importance of subverting the forces that confine many youth to lives of desperate struggle and cast a depoliticizing pall of normality over enforced insecurity.

The affirmative character of the grit fetish is clearly present in *How Children Succeed*, in which Tough rejects the "cognitive hypothesis" in favor of what he calls "noncognitive skills" such as persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence. Rejecting demeaning models that presume a tight link between cognitive capacity and success in favor of an ostensibly affirmative project aimed at cultivating noncognitive capacities has the potential, according to Tough, "to change how we raise our children, how we run our schools, and how we construct our social safety net" (p. xvi). Tough's position is imbued with a liberal concern for the well-being of individuals, and thus, of society. However, he does not ultimately abandon deficit views regarding individuals and communities who bear the unequal burden of being gritty.

In *Grit*, Duckworth's affirmationism has an even more explicitly individualistic focus. Though her basic argument is that passion and perseverance (the two central components of grit in her framework) are key to success and achievement, social inequality operates solely as a background concept that is subordinated to the focus on the achievement of individuals in whatever endeavors they value. Not unlike Tough's argument that the focus on cognitive capacity obscures the importance of noncognitive skills, Duckworth claims that the cultural emphasis on talent

disregards the crucial role that grit (understood as effort and perseverance) plays in educational achievement. An important aspect in her positive formulation is fostering “interest.” However, she is oddly out of tune with the structuring force that inequality exerts on the ability of many youth to develop and pursue their passions. She writes, “I don’t think most young people need encouragement to follow their passion. Most *would* do exactly that—in a heartbeat—if only they had a passion in the first place” (p. 99). Not only does Duckworth subtly reiterate the tired trope of apathetic youth, she overlooks the obstacles to pursuing meaningful passions that many young people face in neoliberal society. By confining passion, interest, and motivation to the psychological realm, and further sequestering them within the realm of positive psychology, which favors reductive theories of individual agency over the determinations of social structure, Duckworth insulates the grit debate from critical analysis of social context.

Tough also buys into the popular cultural trope that the entrepreneurial pairing of risk and failure is productive and even necessary to the development of gritty character. “[T]he best way for a young person to build character,” he suggests,

is for him to attempt something when there is a real and serious possibility for failure. In a high-risk endeavor, whether it’s in business or athletics or the arts, you are more likely to experience colossal defeat than in a low-risk one—but you’re also more likely to achieve real and original success. (p. 85)

Such decontextualized platitudes appear sensible when framed within the norms of relatively stable middle-class American life, where the stakes of risk are profit, recognition, and acclaim, and sometimes the opportunity to ascend to the upper echelon of the socioeconomic elite. This perspective, however, obscures the consequences of high-risk endeavors for those at the social margins, whose failure is often met not with praise for effort, but instead by moralizing blame for their own conditions of destitution, incarceration, subjection to state violence, and even death.

Overturing longstanding assumptions about learning and achievement, each author capitalizes on the growing desire among liberals to abandon deficit models. However, in doing so, they subordinate political economy analysis of structural inequality, and sociological perspectives on the dynamics of social change, to a reductive psychological model of individual character that is unfit to challenge neoliberal austerity. The tendency toward this affirmative cultural politics cedes the terrain of social struggle to the logics of the established order, promoting resignation that can only rationalize the inequality and insecurity produced by neoliberalism.

Reinvigorating the Achievement Ideology

Linking an image of character grounded in positive psychological definitions of effort, and obscuring the structural impact of social context on individual efforts to develop a resilient character, the grit fetish fortifies the achievement ideology in education. Articulated most prominently in Jay MacLeod’s (1987/1995) ethnography *Ain’t No Makin’ It*, the achievement ideology is a “reigning social perspective that sees American society as open and fair and full of opportunity. In this view, success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability” (p. 3). The achievement ideology expounds a meritocratic view of society that is a central object of critique within critical theories of social reproduction, which explains both the mechanics of intergenerational wealth transmission and the maintenance of social hierarchies through domination. The grit fetish is consistent with the achievement ideology in its basic commitment to the notion that successful schools and high levels of educational attainment

are key to reducing inequality, rather than through the implementation of social policies that aim to end poverty and to ensure democratic politics and egalitarian relations of production. However, the grit fetish also exerts a somewhat new inflection on the achievement ideology. Not only do those adhering to the grit fetish underestimate the impact of inequality, they also normalize stratification by tacitly accepting heightened conditions of social insecurity in vulnerable communities. Within this framework, the concept of achievement is weighted with an even heavier burden, further distancing neoliberalism from its dispossessive social effects, burdening those most harmed by inequality and insecurity with the task of ameliorating social problems through their own individual effort. Grit and resilience are cast as keys to curtailing inequality and alleviating the material and psychic insecurity it produces—a true violation (De Lissoy, 2012).

With the achievement ideology stabilized in spite of the proliferation of precariousness and the expansive array of research demonstrating the structural sources of inequality and necessity of systemic solutions, grit appears to offer a more accessible palliative for social problems precisely because it does not entail transformation of the social order. From this perspective, rather than clumsy and cumbersome technocratic efforts to overcome poverty, advocates of resilience and grit claim that education should aim to develop and enhance the quality of individual character. In Tough's formulation, the development of a gritty character:

can function as a substitute for the social safety net that students at Riverdale enjoy – the support from their families and schools and culture that protects them from the consequences of occasional detours and mistakes and bad decisions. If you don't have that kind of safety net – and children in low-income families almost by definition do not – you need to compensate in another way. To succeed, you need more grit, more social intelligence, more self-control than wealthier kids. (p. 103)

No longer mired in the deficit thinking of the cognitive hypothesis or the fixation on talent, educators can turn to the affirmative register and enable youth in schools to transcend their social position through curiosity and sheer effort. Despite its recognition of the existence of inequality, such a perspective has the effect of normalizing intense social disparities of wealth, status, and basic welfare, while at the same time tacitly advancing the argument that those most negatively impacted by such disparities must be accommodated to the established social order, rather than making a case for the system's fundamental transformation (Giroux, 1983). There is a cynical realism at play in this orientation toward inequality that takes the unjust and degrading social order at face value, and though Tough is clearly opposed in principle to the perpetuation of inequality, his arguments task those on the losing end of domination with the burden of its undoing. In a startling display of the detachment afforded by privilege, Tough suggests that when students from the underclass achieve, when they are successful, "it's hard not to think that they will set out into adulthood with some real advantages" over their privileged counterparts. "Not financial advantages," of course, for that would require a radical social transformation, which Tough ignores, "but character advantages" (p. 104). Tough may be right, but faced with a brutal economic system in which those deemed surplus to the requirements of capitalism are routinely jettisoned from the social order (Sassen, 2014), the advantage of character as defined by the grit fetish is an insulting pittance and provides no basis for an educational politics.

Key to Duckworth's conceptualization of grit is a theory of the psychological mechanics of achievement. "[W]hen you consider individuals in identical circumstances," she writes,

what each achieves depends on just two things, talent and effort. Talent—how fast we improve in skill—absolutely matters. But effort factors into the calculations *twice*, not once. Effort builds skill. At the very same time, effort makes skill *productive*” (p. 42).

Of course, in capitalist schools, students rarely operate under the same material conditions. Thus, even though Duckworth’s argument emphasizes the importance of effort (which she implies is equally accessible) over talent (a concept generally viewed as innate but unevenly distributed throughout populations), her formulation falls far short of an egalitarian argument. In a society in which educational achievement is measured instrumentally through standardized tests, allocating social opportunities, and thus economic security, Duckworth’s theory of achievement adds little to discussions of how to regulate schooling’s role in precarious social reproduction. Instead, her arguments about achievement callously valorize commitment, work ethic, productivity, and other characteristics of neoliberal individualism that fill the categories of success and fulfillment. In some instances, these examples are relatively benign. But if we think of them as the basis for an educational argument, their implications are sinister.

Acquiescence as Resistance

The emphasis placed on personal character and individual effort within the grit fetish reduces the relationship between education and the social order to a private affair. In this way, the grit fetish is susceptible to forms of political relativism that reinforce the established order, rather than facilitate collective resistance. Despite this contradiction, advocates of grit feign an oppositional sensibility firmly rooted in neoliberal reason, which valorizes entrepreneurial individualism. Youth who have historically been denied critical education are exhorted to persevere in spite of the odds. In the most superficial terms there are trace elements of political possibility in such an orientation, however the grit fetish does not come equipped to link the basic concept of grit to a larger critical analysis of structural oppression and commitment to liberation. Henry Giroux (1983) describes the imperative of incorporating radical criteria into theories of resistance and oppositional politics in education. He is worth quoting at length:

[C]entral to analyzing any act of resistance would be a concern with uncovering the degree to which it speaks to a form of refusal that highlights, either implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against the social nexus of domination and submission. In other words, resistance must have a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interest of self-emancipation and social emancipation. To the degree that oppositional behavior suppresses social contradictions while simultaneously merging with, rather than challenging, the logic of ideological domination, it falls not under the category of resistance but under its opposite, i.e., accommodation and conformism. (p. 109)

Eliding substantive discussion of the connection between individual effort and social structure, the grit fetish bypasses urgent questions of social imagination and collective politics, isolating marginalized individuals in their own corners of neoliberalism’s social wilderness. Though grit might appear as one way to conceptualize oppositional activity, it is premised on an uncritical view of social relations, and ultimately funnels resistance back into the circuits of domination.

Consider Duckworth's enervating discussion of "grit paragons," a term she uses to describe those she views as exemplars of the characteristics, habits, and practices of grit. Her use of the term paragon is especially informative regarding the connection between the grit fetish and the social realm. Grit paragons are not only *exemplars* of her conceptual construct, but they are also viewed as illustrations of *excellence*. Particularly vexing is not only how Duckworth's theory of grit is individualistic, but the consistency with which her examples of grit paragons are normatively successful and who generally work in industries and sectors that pose no threat to neoliberalism, capitalism, or imperialism. Her book is filled with stories heralding the grit of professional athletes, members of the U.S. military and massive global corporations, and others in the economic and cultural elite. Conspicuously absent, however, are dissidents and activists, as well as countless "unsuccessful" members of society whose lives are littered with obstacles to achievement, but who "persist" nonetheless. In this regard, Duckworth's formulation of grit illustrates the tethering of grit to socially acceptable notions of achievement and success. Though Duckworth emphasizes effort over talent, the immense effort of struggles against the established social order are starkly absent from her framework. Despite her arguments that interest, purpose, and hope are key facets of grit, we are left with a conceptual framework and proposed course of action that only leads individuals to mirror the activities, attributes, and characteristics of those who pursue endeavors that pose no significant political threat to the social order.

This rhetoric of adaptation merely casts an affirmative veil over what are at their core arguments for a politics of mere survival. But "[a]daptation in the face of the catastrophic is not the same as political transformation. The former accepts its conditions of insecurity and vulnerability. Adaptation conflates resistance with resilience such that politics becomes a sheer matter of survivability" (Evans and Reid, 2014, p. 119). Despite their presentation as tools for personal growth, resilience and grit are more likely to reproduce the status quo by normalizing insecurity and muting demands for social change. As Danny MacKinnon and Kate Driscoll Derickson (2012) explain, "resilience is inherently conservative insofar as it privileges the restoration of existing systemic relations rather than their transformation" (p. 263). The ability to adapt to imposed conditions is not a problem in and of itself. The problem, however, is that "[r]esilience building in a neoliberal framework may shift the emphasis from positive adaptation despite adversity to positive adaptation *to* adversity" (Bottrell, 2009, p. 334). From this angle, resilience can be understood to rationalize conditions of inequality and to eclipse the imperative of social transformation.

Critical Education in the Transformative Tense

When understood critically as normative concepts that set the terms of endurance in neoliberal schooling, resilience and grit appear less as affirmative tools for building the capacities of youth to survive and thrive in an increasingly precarious society, and more as a pernicious cultural politics that entrenches the status quo. Rather than cultivating transformative agency in students, resilience and grit support neoliberal forms of accountability and responsabilization, entrenching individualism and naturalizing precarity as an inherent condition, rather than one that is produced by a destructive political economy and then institutionally enforced in schools.

Against the terms of endurance in neoliberal education, critical education is articulated in a transformative, rather than durative, language. According to Bob Lingard and Greg Thompson (2017), there are substantial reasons for education scholars to dedicate sustained attention to the category of time when thinking about educational problems. They argue that:

time is both multiple and dynamic, and the construction of a sense of time frames our understandings and actions, our institutions and their organisation, our engagement with technologies, our explanation of the past and our present sense of purpose, and our individual and imagination for the future. (p. 1)

As I have argued in this article, resilience and grit are more than mere character traits. Their implementation in educational discourse has the effect of instituting a political temporality of endurance that undermines the imperative of transformation associated with critical education. As the temporal vocabulary of neoliberalism, resilience and grit set the terms of endurance. Together, they deliver an injunction to endure the suffering that characterizes social life for all but a few in the neoliberal era. These terms combine to articulate a cultural politics that valorizes endurance, yet ultimately surrenders to a cynical realism in which insecurity is perceived as permanent and mere survival is cast as a victory of character rather than an indication of the poverty of social vision (see Love, 2019). Rather than capitulate to the terms of endurance, critical educators must recommit to the longstanding efforts of critical educators to imagine and enact education in the transformative tense.

Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) cautions against the common tendency to incautiously valorize endurance because it is a concept that harbors a propensity to normalize abandonment and the uneven distribution of life and death, stunting efforts to imagine alternative social projects. Endurance, she explains, “encloses itself around the durative – the temporality of continuance, a denotation of continuous action without any reference to its beginning or end and outside the dialectic of presence and absence” (p. 32). This conceptual enclosure presents several problems.

First, affirmative invocations of endurance veil the concept’s opposite: exhaustion. Historically and socially decontextualized, the concept of endurance slots smoothly into the cultural politics of neoliberalism, a framework which valorizes intrepid individualism and self-congratulatory entrepreneurialism, while at the same time painting a cynical portrait of society in which there are no guarantees and the various existential ties that bind us together are always already severed by the razor sharp will to survive that purportedly characterizes human nature. Second, neoliberal depictions of endurance obscure legacies of social suffering and collective survival. In the formulations of endurance advanced by proponents of resilience and grit, the historical foundations of suffering and targeted exposure are blurred at best, and muted at worst, with a critical apprehension of the conditions that supposedly demand endurance as a response subordinated to motivational idealism ripped from the fabric of a more meaningful materialist history. As Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) puts it, the future “ought to be the product of a collective imagination shaped and reshaped by the very process of turning rubble and memory into the seeds of a new society” (pp. 196-197). And third, the exhortation of endurance, in its educational formulation, ignores the dialectic of domination and resistance under capitalism in favor of a dehistoricized individualism that fixes achievement and success within the purview of the status quo. Here, individual struggles to succeed in educational settings are divorced from larger social contexts of struggle. This is troubling, for it is within political struggle that the most potent resources for liberation are to be found, not in atomized individuals led to believe that building collective power is impossible (see for example Dean, 2016; Fisher, 2009; Gilbert, 2014).

Rather than a meaningful tools with which to survive neoliberalism, resilience and grit form an apparatus of capture inimical to radical struggles to transform society. They fit smoothly into the depoliticizing discourse of neoliberalism, which seeks to subdue outrage at oppression and to neutralize the development of critical consciousness and the organization of collective struggle.

If resilience and grit prove to be permanently embedded in the conceptual vocabulary of education, it will be at the expense of an indispensable transformative language.

Against this threat, what is needed is not merely a set of counter-concepts, but instead to challenge neoliberalism's language of endurance with critical education's transformative view. Such an endeavor would reject the mirage of adaptation and striving to achieve goals already ratified by the social order, in favor of a political horizon toward which critical education can orient. It would also require theorizing critical education as a studious praxis aimed at identifying and challenging the forces that thwart solidarity. Critical education does not operate within the durative temporality of resilience and grit, but rather creates the time of educational liberation, "in which students can act and intervene, as authentic subjects, in this historical situation" of neoliberalism (De Lissovoy, 2008, p. 9).

Conclusion

The terms of endurance that have emerged within the neoliberal context pose a serious threat to the prospect of critical education. They insinuate a depoliticizing language into educational thought and discourse, promoting individual solutions to social problems and normalizing the view that education should adapt students to the present order, rather than transform it. As I have argued in this article, the appeal of these concepts rests on an uncritical tendency in educational circles to embrace affirmative language, rather than the language of critique. So to critique the use of resilience and grit in educational theory and practice is not to abandon the struggle for better education for all, but especially for those marginalized and violated by the neoliberal system. To critique the terms of endurance in education is to make a move toward rejecting neoliberal ideology, particularly its enforcement of individualized notions of achievement and accountability. Critical education promotes reflective autonomy and aims to cultivate collective capacities that are necessary to mount organized resistance to artificially imposed conditions of social insecurity. An abiding task of the critical tradition in education has been to develop an alternative language and pedagogical approaches through which to challenge all forms of domination. The problem with education today is not that students are unaccountable or learning at rates that hinder their ability to integrate into the social and economic order. The problem is the social order itself, organized as it is by capital and colonial logics, which have intensified under the punitive neoliberal regime. The task of critical education is not to prepare students to endure present conditions, but rather to transform them in order to secure a livable, which is necessarily to say an egalitarian, future.

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