Tough On Kids

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American schools -- and American society -- are leaving millions of children behind. More than 23 percent of kids in the United States live in households where the disposable income is less than half the national median income. Often subject to physical and emotional neglect and various forms of family dysfunction, they are at grave risk of experiencing chronic disease, substance abuse, learning and behavioral problems throughout their lives.

About a quarter of students who enter high school in the United States do not graduate four years later. And, even though the value of a BA has skyrocketed, our nation has fallen from first to 12th in the percentage of 25 to 35 year-olds who get degrees from four-year colleges.

Disadvantaged children are falling behind, some experts insist, because they lack verbal and mathematical stimulation at home and at school. Missing from this "cognitive hypothesis," which is directed at the kind of intelligence that is measured in I.Q. tests, according to Paul Tough, a contributor to the New York Times Magazine and the radio program This American Life, is an emphasis on the character traits -- deferred gratification, grit, optimism, flexibility, curiosity, conscientiousness, resourcefulness, and resilience -- that are essential to success. Although rooted in brain chemistry, he argues, they can be introduced, imprinted, and internalized through interventions that begin at birth and continue through college.

Although it is by no means new, Tough's support for character education is valuable and timely, given the claims of "cognitive determinists" like Charles Murray that because intelligence is fixed early in life, schools should sort people, giving those with the highest I.Q.s opportunities to reach their potential and training the rest for low-skill jobs. And who cannot sympathize with Tough's call for a coordinated support system for disadvantaged kids that would include a pediatric wellness center, parenting interventions like Attachment and Behavioral Catch-up, programs like Tools of the Mind and Turnaround for Children, and schools like OneGoal?

In our judgment, however, Tough is too eager to embrace and endorse evidence that supports his thesis. He asserts that infants who develop "secure attachments" with their mothers during the first year are far better able than their peers to become competent throughout their lives, without mentioning counter-claims that social class is a far better predictor of depression, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with job and marriage. He lavishes praise on the "immersive," character-based KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) charter schools for providing a "reliable, replicable model for inner-city success," but does not address KIPP's capacity (which is unavailable to public schools) to attract the best students in poor neighborhoods and mandate longer hours or note the sizable attrition rate that accounts in part for the superior performance of KIPP students in higher grades.

And Tough's assertion of a consensus among education reformers on the central importance of teacher quality fails to take into account the difficulties of identifying and measuring excellence. Judged by student test scores (which reflect student ability and motivation, characteristic of the class and conditions in the school), Diane Ravitch, the distinguished historian policy analyst former assistant secretary of education, has noted, some teachers are deemed effective one year, but not the next. The notion that schools can recruit and retain a corps consisting exclusively of superstar teachers, Ravitch adds, is a fantasy, "akin to saying that baseball teams should consist only of players who hit over .300 and pitchers who win at least twenty games every season."

Tough, bless him, is an optimist. Although he acknowledges, albeit fleetingly, that "the development of an individual's character depends on all sorts of mysterious interactions among culture and family and genes and free will and fate," he expresses confidence bordering on certainty that, under the right conditions, under-performing individuals can transform themselves into successful students and professionals. When James Black, Jr., a 12-year-old African-American from Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, possessed of a keen enough intelligence to make him a stellar chess player, does not do well on the specialized high school admissions test (designed for applicants to selective high schools, including Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech), despite six months of tutoring, after school and on weekends, by his teacher, Tough is undaunted. If he had started studying in the third grade instead of the seventh grade, worked in every subject with a teacher as talented as Elizabeth Spiegel, Tough has "no doubt" he would have conquered the exam the same way he conquered the junior high nationals in chess.

We're not sure. Although we agree that the destinies of young people are malleable, we worry as well about the difficulty of achieving the right balance in school between character education and academic preparation -- and about assuming that we really do know how to overcome adverse childhood experiences and instill the non-cognitive skills that are essential for success.