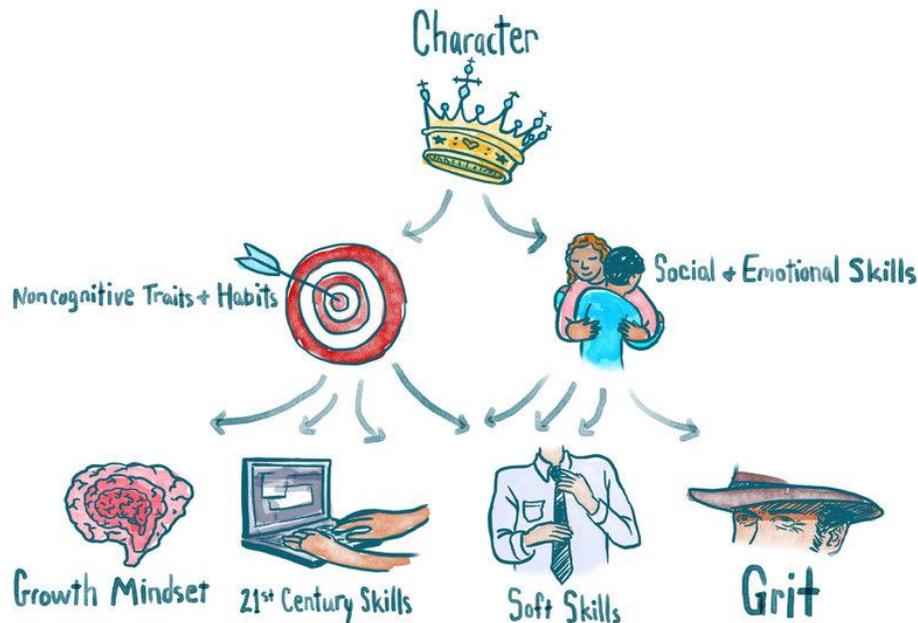


Nonacademic Skills Are Key To Success. But What Should We Call Them?

By: Anya Kamenetz



More and more people in education agree on the importance of learning stuff other than academics. But no one agrees on what to call that “stuff”.

There are at least seven major overlapping terms in play. New ones are being coined all the time. This bagginess bugs me, as a member of the education media. It bugs researchers and policymakers too.

“Basically we’re trying to explain student success educationally or in the labor market with skills not directly measured by standardized tests,” says Martin West, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “The problem is, you go to meetings and everyone spends the first two hours complaining and arguing about semantics.”

West studies what he calls “non-cognitive skills.” Although he’s not completely happy with that term.

The problem isn’t just semantic, argues Laura Bornfreund, deputy director of the education policy program at the New America Foundation. She wrote a paper on what she called “Skills for Success,” since she didn’t like any of these other terms. “There’s a lot of different terms floating around but also a lack of agreement on what really is most important to students.”

As Noah Webster, the great American lexicographer and educator, put it back in 1788, “The *virtues* of men are more consequence to society than their abilities; and for this reason, the *heart* should be cultivated with more assiduity than the *head*.”

Yet he didn’t come up with a good name, either.

So, in Webster’s tradition, here’s a short glossary of terms that are being used for that cultivation of the heart. Vote for your favorite in the comments – or propose a new one.



21st Century Skills

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning, a research and advocacy group, these include the “4Cs of critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity,” as well as “life and career skills” and “information, media and technology skills.”

The problem, says West, is that “if anything, all the evidence would suggest that in the closing decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, cognitive skills became more important than ever.” So this term, although it’s often heard of in business and technology circles, doesn’t necessarily signal the shift in focus that some researchers want.



Character

Character education has a long history in the U.S., with a major vogue in the 1930s and a revival in the 1980s and 1990s. Beginning a few years ago, the KIPP charter schools in New York City started to emphasize a curriculum of seven “character strengths”: grit, zest, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence and curiosity.

“We’re not religious, we’re not talking about ethics, we’re not going to give any kind of doctrine about what is right from wrong,” says Lelya Bravo-Willey of KIPP Infinity in Harlem. “But there are some fundamental things that make people really great citizens, which usually include being kind.”

West argues that the use of “character” is inappropriate in research and policymaking because of its moral and religious connotations.

He notes that many of the qualities on the KIPP list – grit and self-control, for example – are designed to prepare students for success. “That’s in tension with a traditional understanding of

character, which often implies something being good in and of itself – which often includes some notion of self sacrifice,” says West.

That distinction doesn't bother Bravo-Willey. She says that the school is responding to parents' own wishes that their children be happy and good as well as successful.



Grit is a pioneer virtue with a long American history – think of the classic western *True Grit*. When Angela Duckworth was working on her dissertation in the mid-2000s, she chose the term to encapsulate the measures of self-control, persistence and conscientiousness that she was finding to be powerful determinants of success. It quickly caught on – maybe too quickly, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist says.

“I'm grateful for the attention, but that gratitude and amazement was quickly replaced by anxiety about people thinking that we had figured things out already.” She's worried that grit is being overemphasized: in a recent paper, she argues that grit measures aren't ready to be incorporated into high stakes accountability systems. “I'm also concerned that people interpret my position to be that grit's the only thing that matters.”

Larry Nucci at UC Berkeley, who has studied moral development and character education for 40 years, has stronger words for grit. “I think it's flavor of the month. It's not very substantive, it's not very deep.”



Carol Dweck, the Stanford University psychologist, chose the term mindset in 2007 for the title of her bestselling book.

“**Growth mindset**” is the belief that positive traits, including intelligence, can be developed with practice. “Fixed mindset” refers to the idea that intelligence and other talents are set at birth.

“In my research papers I had some very, very clunky scientific-sounding term for the fixed and the growth mindset,” she says. “When I went to write the book I thought, these will not do at all.”

Mindset has caught on tremendously in both the business and education worlds. But Dweck’s concern is that it’s being used willy-nilly to justify any old institution that people might have about positive thinking in the classroom.

“When people start thinking, ‘I’ll make the kids feel good and they’ll learn,’ that’s how something like the self-esteem movement gains traction,” – a 1980s trend that led to lots of trophies but little improvement in achievement.



Noncognitive Traits + Habits

This term is most strongly associated with the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. He analyzed large data sets to show that attributes such as self-discipline and persistence – not just academic achievement – affected education, labor market and life outcomes.

This term is “ugly, broad, nonspecific,” argues Carol Dweck – and she’s a fan. “I’m the only person who likes the term,” she says. “And I’ll tell you why: It is a very diverse group of factors and the reason it’s been hard to come up with a name is that they don’t necessarily belong together.”

Martin West at Harvard uses this term himself, but he says he’s always careful to acknowledge that it can be “misleading”.

“Every skill or trait is cognitive in the sense that it involves and reflects the processing of information of some kind in our brains,” he says. And West adds that traditional academic skills more often than not are complements, not substitutes, for the attitudes and personality traits captured by the term “non-cognitive skills.”



Social + Emotional Skills

Nobody I spoke with hates this term.

“Increasingly teachers who are on the front line say that it’s very important to teach kids to be more socially and emotionally competent,” says Roger P. Weissberg, chief knowledge officer of the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which promotes the concept and the term nationwide. “Teachers feel, and growing research supports, that it helps them academically, it improves school climate, it improves discipline, and it’s going to help them to be college and career – and life – ready.

The Only problem is that the “skills” part may not be seen as encompassing things that are more like attitudes or beliefs, like growth mindset. And the “social and emotional” part, again, may be seen as excluding skills that are really cognitive in nature.

This is tough, right?



Soft Skills

Employers commonly use “**soft skills**” to include anything from being able to write a letter, to showing up on time and having a firm handshake. Most of the researchers I spoke with felt this phrase downplays the importance of these skills. “Soft skills, along with 21st century skills, strike me as exceptionally vague,” says West. “I don’t know that there’s anything soft about them.”

So the struggle persists. Maybe one day there will be a pithy acronym or portmanteau to wrap all these skills up with a bow. SES? SEL? N-COG? Gri-Grow-Sess? Let us know what you think.