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It's Not About Grit: Trauma, Equity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching (Book Review)

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Secondary teachers across the United States are often expected to help students develop academic resilience, or “grit,” in order to overcome setbacks in their learning—but is “grit” just another buzzword? As Steven Goodman argues in *It's Not About Grit: Trauma, Equity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching* (2018), students traumatized by daily injustices do not really benefit from this concept; instead, teachers and schools need to adjust their pedagogy and fight for systemic policy changes to truly address the needs of students who already display grit just to make it through the day amidst sometimes overwhelming systemic injustices. By focusing on systems, Goodman reminds educators that a term like “grit” highlights student deficits, when the true problem lies with oppressive societal forces and macro-level trauma that may impact their students’ daily lives. Goodman encourages educators to approach their students with compassion and to empower them through lessons, inquiries, and extracurricular activities that make space for their stories, highlight inequities, and develop student capacity for advocacy, which allows students to then find purpose and hope. He believes that to truly transform the lives of students and communities, teaching must be rooted in social justice. More broadly, though, he contends that placing the onus for change on students themselves excuses the systems that have produced the educational injustices that cause such grievous consequences for students. In other words, it should not be up to the kids to change for society; it is up to society to change for the kids.

The book’s introduction explains Goodman’s purpose in writing this book and provides an overview of Goodman’s organization, Educational Video Company (EVC), which focuses mostly on social justice education through students’ creation of documentary-style journalism. Each subsequent chapter spotlights a specific system (health and housing, police and juvenile justice, immigration, gender and identity, and foster care



and child welfare) that negatively influences student success. Throughout, Goodman centers the personal narratives of high school students to illustrate the strength of resiliency and grit students often already possess. The written narratives also connect to documentaries made by the EVC students about these issues, all of which can be accessed online. Interspersed with the stories, statistics show the breadth of injustices and obstacles faced by students today, from racial injustice to lack of housing to fear of deportation, as well as the connection to poor academic outcomes.

With each chapter, Goodman includes suggestions for how educators can engage their students' own stories to help them draw connections between themselves and others, to help them understand the history and causes of issues they face, and to cultivate empathy among students with varied life experiences. Suggestions include students' writing journal entries, performing spoken word, and creating comic books, along with researching problems and solutions, writing letters to politicians, and analyzing news reports. The book's conclusion outlines a participatory action research project to help students who have experienced trauma make meaning of their experiences and stand in their inherent power, embodying the change they wish to see. Lastly, the book includes a viewing guide for EVC's student documentaries and accompanying activities.

One critique of the book is that it neglects to meaningfully address how additional expectations placed on teachers might affect them; as research shows, burnout and stress contribute to high numbers of teachers leaving the profession—more so during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley, 2021). The impact of society's ills should not be placed on youth and their futures, but placing it squarely on the shoulders of teachers still excuses the systems that perpetuate inequities. Just as students cannot just "grit" their way out of substance abuse or homelessness and show up to class each day, teachers cannot instantly fix these circumstances for their students, no matter how much care and support they provide, or how trauma-informed their lessons might be, especially in situations in which there is little support from the public or administration; a lack of training, resources, and support staff; or overwhelming responsibilities in overcrowded classrooms. Goodman advocates for the "wholistic notion of community schools" (p. 5), which would lessen the burden on educators, but that is a long-term fix; what about right now, a time when nearly a quarter of teachers are considering leaving their jobs (Zamarro et al., 2021)? Teachers can, however, do more than they might imagine, and Goodman encourages them to look for opportunities to make change and empower their students. Goodman suggests they host a Gay Straight Alliance meeting in their classrooms, advocate for new tardy policies that meet the needs of unhoused students, or even organize for or against laws that directly affect students. Teachers cannot simply be let off the hook for addressing trauma and inequity, which is absolutely imperative, but they are not superheroes. Systemwide policy changes are needed, too.

Regardless, Goodman presents a powerful reminder that educators must consider that their students may have experienced, or be experiencing, trauma, and acknowledge and address the associated behaviors, emotions, and physical challenges. All teachers can shift their mindsets and provide safe spaces for their students. Goodman also provides a reminder that certain topics can be triggering for students and suggests group "ground rules" (pp. 146–147) for discussion of sensitive issues. Teachers who cannot find the time for major projects can make some of the smaller adjustments he suggests, such as choosing texts with characters who represent their students, assigning writing and

discussion topics that allow exploration of inequities, and creating affirming classroom displays, such as a wall of writers who identify as LGBTQ. As Goodman writes, “Giving spaces for marginalized and silenced voices in the school helps move students from a place of fear and victimization to empowerment” (p. 107).

Goodman’s book empowers teachers, as well, arming them with ideas, information, and student narratives. He offers teachers a new understanding of grit, one that recognizes and respects students’ realities. As teachers make space for those realities, they may understand their students more and help students make meaning of their trauma—and even, as Goodman suggests, move them to activism.

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