

Success Is Not Just About Smarts



Technology has been promoted as the great equalizer in education. Initiatives like One Laptop Per Child and Massive Online Open Courses were supposed to democratize learning, but when the \$400 laptops given to poor children around the world broke, and failure rates of some MOOCs were as high as 75 percent, reality set in.

Though many believe that computers can shrink the education gap, research shows that giving students from poor families online access is more likely to widen the divide, Susan Pinker reported in The Times. Jacob Vigdor and Helen Ladd, economists at Duke University in North Carolina, tracked a million disadvantaged middle-school students for five years after they were given networked computers and found “a persistent decline in reading and math scores,” they wrote.

The scores of boys and African-Americans dropped drastically because many used their machines to play games, surf social media and download entertainment.

The same thing happened in the One Laptop project, with children spending less time on their homework than before, researchers found. New findings suggest that educators should focus more on low teacher-student ratios, early intervention and character traits. Chicago has introduced an intensive program where black and Latino boys work two on one with a tutor, and participants have ended up as much as two years ahead of students who haven’t gotten help, David Kirp wrote in The

Times.

This math success also has put them on track to graduate, helped them engage in school and made them less likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Many programs address the time between birth and age 3, but the teen years may be just as important. Laurence Steinberg, a psychologist at Temple University in Philadelphia, points out in his new book that neuroscientists have realized that adolescence, like early childhood, is a “period of tremendous ‘neuroplasticity,’ ” during which the brain changes through experience.

The Times’s Nicholas Kristof wrote that early help for disadvantaged children not only reduces inequality but also can save public money. He quoted James Heckman, a University of Chicago professor and Nobel Prize-winning economist, who says the cheapest way to reduce crime is to invest in early childhood programs.

Mr. Heckman has calculated that to get the same reduction in crime by adding police officers would cost five times as much. “Early education” includes counseling at-risk pregnant women not to drink, smoke or take drugs, and then after birth, helping them breastfeed and read to the child. These help, Mr. Kristof wrote, “apparently because the first few years are the window when the brain is forming and when basic skills like self-control and grit are developed.”

At some schools, grit, self-control and curiosity are now part of the curriculum. Scientists say personality could be more important than intelligence when it comes to success in school. Arthur E. Poropat, an Australian psychology professor, cites data showing that a tendency to be “diligent, dutiful and hardworking,” and qualities like creativity and curiosity, are more predictive of student performance than intelligence.

This is good news, Dr. Poropat wrote in a paper last year, because “personality has been demonstrated to change over time to a far greater extent than intelligence.” “We probably need to start rethinking our emphasis on intelligence,” he told The Times.

Mandy Benedict, who teaches a class on grit at Rogers Middle School in Pearland, Texas, told The Times: “We know that these noncognitive traits can be taught. We also know that it is necessary for success. You look at anybody who has had long-term sustainable success, and every one of them exhibited at some point this grit, this tenacity to keep going.”