



## **Should *grit* be our educational goal?**

### **The relationship between *grit* and the mental well-being of youth in North-Eastern Poland**

**Abstract:** The article presents the relationship between the grit factor and the mental well-being of young people recruited from high school students in Podlaskie Voivodeship (n = 275). The study was conducted using the Short Grit Scale (SGS) by A.L. Duckworth, the Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS) by C. Ryff and the Cantril's Ladder of Life Scale. The obtained results indicate significant positive relationships of grit with the current assessment of the quality of life and mental well-being in each of the six dimensions measured with C. Ryff's PWBS tool (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance). Since grit is a construct showing positive relationships with well-being and quality of life and a modifiable one – it can be shaped at an early stage of development – it should be considered as an important element when drawing future educational plans.

**Keywords:** grit, mental well-being, education, youth, borderline

## **Introduction**

Everyone's ultimate goal is happiness and satisfaction with life. This is pursued through education and activity in the professional and private spheres. It is essential to be aware that education is a means to happiness and well-being. When planning educational activities, particular emphasis should therefore be placed on those aspects that increase children and young people's chances of happiness in their present and future lives. If one describes the main aims of education in this way, one should look particularly closely at all those factors that can support children and young people's sense of happiness and psychological well-being.

In recent years, several studies have emerged indicating the associations of grit and perseverance of effort with psychological well-being. Grit is a construct consisting of two aspects: *perseverance of effort* (PE) and *consistency of interest* (CI). This construct was introduced and popularised in the field of educational research by A.L. Duckworth (Duckworth et al., 2007). The grit factor, defined as persistence and passion in achieving long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016), is a significant predictor of many aspects of psychological well-being, such as satisfaction with life, a sense of harmony, lower risk of depression or less frequent feelings of anxiety (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016; Datu et al., 2018; Musumari et al., 2018; Disabato, Goodman and Kashdan, 2019). Exploring further reports confirming significant associations of grit with psychological well-being among people from different cultures, our goal was to see if the studies of learners from North-Eastern Poland would establish similar relationships. This region is an interesting place for research exploration due to its location at the confluence of borders, the high cultural, social, and religious diversity of its inhabitants, the quite widespread presence of national and ethnic minorities, and the historical influences of different cultures on the current identity of the region.

### **Psychological well-being and functioning in the school environment**

The primary developmental task of the school-age child, as conceptualised by Robert Havighurst (1972), is an adaptation to a new environment and the development of basic skills, i.e. reading, writing, learning, establishing peer relationships, shaping independence and attitudes towards institutions and social groups (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996). School, at least potentially, also has the task of preparing a person for a profession through education adapted to developmental regularities. Entering this social space, which is new for the child, should be stimulating but is also connected with a crisis due to the individual, personal nature of adaptation processes. Researchers into adaptation processes emphasize the importance of factors such as the requirements set by school (Nurmi, 2012), the child's developmental level in terms of skills necessary for education, the level of social and emotional development, and the level of motivation to learn and self-confidence (Filipiak, 2005; Kielar-Turska, 2011; Franicka and Liberska, 2015).

Despite numerous attempts to operationalize the category, the concept of psychological well-being is not clear-cut, either in its definition or in the

factors that construct it. The two main philosophical currents specifying the essence of well-being, i.e. the hedonistic and eudaimonic, differ in showing the basis of its formation. The hedonistic view emphasises that the source of a positive mental state, manifested by a high level of satisfaction with life, is the predominance of positive feelings over negative ones and the occurrence of a so-called generalized sense of happiness (Kossakowska and Zadworna, 2019). The eudaimonic understanding of psychological well-being locates the source of high quality of life in the sense of agency, autonomy, development, self-fulfilment and involvement (Ilska and Kołodziej-Zaleska, 2018).

The sense of well-being felt by the child in the school environment is conditioned, on the one hand, by reinforcements from teachers regarding academic progress and, on the other hand, by the sense of acceptance coming from the peer group (Liberska, 2014). A feedback loop can be observed here, according to which a sense of well-being stimulates the development of the child's activity towards satisfactory functioning as a student and member of the peer group, directly resulting in positive self-esteem. This corresponds to the Eriksonian dilemma of the developmental period at the early school stage, i.e. diligence *vs* feelings of inferiority, which, in the case of success, leads to the child's gaining competence and a boost to self-esteem. School should be a place where the young person discovers and consolidates their own potential and derives satisfaction from their activity (Sadowska, 2021). The educational reality, however, can be very different. A frequent dilemma for students is whether they should unreflectively accept the framework of 'normality' into which the educational system forces them or whether they should develop in harmony with themselves, which increases their chances of achieving psychological well-being. This is a contradiction of sorts since a high level of psychological well-being is essential for functioning well in the school environment and therefore conducive to achieving the 'good student' status so desirable from the point of view of the educational system.

## **Grit and psychological well-being**

Research reports confirming the associations of grit with various indicators of well-being and mental health have appeared in the world literature for several years. Jiang and his team (2020) conducted a large-scale study on a group of almost three thousand Chinese students in adolescence, showing a positive association of grit with life satisfaction and positive affect and a negative one with negative affect. Datu (Datu et al., 2018) in a study of Filipino high

school students, found a positive correlation between grit with the presence of a sense of life and a negative correlation with indicators of depression. In a series of studies conducted in subsequent years by Datu and colleagues (Datu et al., 2021), it was shown that: among Japanese students, one aspect of grit – perseverance of effort – was positively correlated with socio-psychological well-being, termed psychological *flourishing*; perseverance of effort was positively correlated with life satisfaction in a group of Filipino and Polish students; and among Filipino workers in various sectors, perseverance of effort and adaptability to situations were significant predictors of psychological flourishing. Weisskirch (2019), while studying American learners, found an association of two aspects of grit – perseverance of effort and consistency of interest – with levels of self-esteem and happiness (positive correlation) and their negative correlation with symptoms of depression. Similar results were found in a group of Swedish students, where grit correlated positively with psychological well-being, a sense of harmony in life and life satisfaction (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016). Research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic also points to grit as a potential protective factor in difficult and stressful situations for young people, through its importance in counteracting apathy or maintaining physical activity and consequently reducing levels of depression (Kolemba, 2021; Totoso de Zepetnek et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

## The study

Previous research on the grit factor indicates that it is significantly related to psychological well-being. This study aimed to empirically verify the associations of grit with adolescent well-being in eudaimonic terms, in a situation where factors that are a potential threat to adolescents' positive psycho-physical well-being are exacerbated, because some researchers consider psychological well-being as a vital indicator of adaptability to various critical events (Ryff, 2014, 2017). This was the situation during the period of remote education and social isolation enforced by the epidemic situation during the first wave of Covid-19. Statistical analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 26 package.

## Procedure and participants

The survey covered 275 secondary school students from Bielsk Podlaski and Białystok (163 women and 112 men). The survey implementation coincided

with the first wave of restrictions caused by the Covid-19 virus in 2020. The students ranged in age from 16 to 19.

The survey was implemented electronically using the google forms tool. A link to the survey with instructions was provided to students via the platforms used in remote education: Librus and MS Teams.

## Measures

The study used the Ryff *Psychological Well-Being Scales* – Polish adaptation (Karaś and Ciecuch, 2017), the Cantril's Ladder of Life Scale and the Duckworth Short Grit Scale (SGS) – Polish adaptation Wyszynska et al. (2017).

**The Psychological Wellbeing Scales (PWBS)** measures six dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life and personal growth. The version used in the study contains 18 items to which the respondent responds on a six-point scale where 1 means 'strongly disagree' and 6 means 'strongly agree'.

**The Short Grit Scale (SGS)**, in its Polish adaptation (Wyszynska et al., 2017), is used to measure the grit factor and consists of eight statements to which the respondent responds on a five-point scale, where 1 means 'doesn't apply to me at all' and 5 means 'fully applies to me'. The short grit scale allows for the calculation of an overall grit value, as well as the importance of the two factors comprising this construct: perseverance of effort (PE) and consistency of interest (CI). In the Polish adaptation, the two-dimensional structure of grit was confirmed, as well as the scale's satisfactory reliability and external validity.

**Cantril's Ladder of Life Scale** is a simple tool for assessing the quality of life (Levin and Currie, 2014). The respondent considers their life at present and marks a response on a scale from 0 – 10, where 10 represents the best life possible, and 0 represents the worst life the respondent can imagine. Responses of 6 or more are assumed to indicate satisfaction with life, while ratings of less than 6 are attributed to those who are dissatisfied with their lives.

## Results

The results confirm the positive association of grit with the current assessment of quality of life and psychological well-being in each of its six dimensions measured by C. Ryff's PWBS tool. Ryff (self-acceptance, autonomy,

environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life and personal growth). Table 1 presents the results with two aspects of grit: consistency of interest and perseverance of effort.

Table 1. Grit and psychological well-being (N=275)

	Psychological well-being	Autonomy	Environmental mastery	Personal growth	Positive relations with others	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance	Satisfaction with current life
Grit	<b>.40**</b>	<b>.23**</b>	<b>.36**</b>	<b>.20**</b>	<b>.20**</b>	<b>.13*</b>	<b>.38**</b>	<b>.23**</b>
Grit – consistency of interest	<b>.31**</b>	.11	<b>.28**</b>	<b>.12*</b>	<b>.22**</b>	.11	<b>.32**</b>	<b>.12*</b>
Grit – perseverance of effort	<b>.34**</b>	<b>.27**</b>	<b>.31**</b>	<b>.21**</b>	.10	.11	<b>.30**</b>	<b>.26**</b>

\*\* Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (two-sided). \*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (two-sided)

In the group of surveyed students, general psychological well-being as defined by C. Ryff showed a positive correlation with both total grit ( $r = 0.40$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and both aspects of grit ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < 0.01$  for consistency of interest and  $r = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.01$  for perseverance of effort). Each of the six dimensions of well-being showed positive relationships with grit (autonomy ( $r = 0.23$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.36$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), purpose in life ( $r = 0.13$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) self-acceptance ( $r = 0.38$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and level of satisfaction with one's current life ( $r = 0.23$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Consistency of interests correlated significantly with: environmental mastery ( $r = 0.28$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r = 0.12$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and with satisfaction with one's current life ( $r = 0.12$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The aspect of perseverance of effort showed a significant correlation with: autonomy ( $r = 0.27$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.30$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and with the level of satisfaction with one's current life ( $r = 0.26$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 2 shows the relationship between grit and both aspects of grit with individual dimensions of psychological well-being by gender.

Table 2 Grit and psychological well-being in a group of women (N=163) and men (N=112)

		Psychological well-being	Autonomy	Environmental mastery	Personal growth	Positive relations with others	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance	Satisfaction with current life
Grit	Females	<b>.37**</b>	.22**	<b>.35**</b>	.13	.19*	.15	<b>.33**</b>	.20**
	Males	<b>.45**</b>	.24*	<b>.37**</b>	<b>.33**</b>	.24*	.15	<b>.45**</b>	.25**
Grit – consistency of interest	Females	.29**	.07	.32**	.10	.20**	.06	<b>.32**</b>	.17*
	Males	<b>.34**</b>	.17	.21*	.17	.25**	.20*	<b>.31**</b>	.06
Grit – perseverance of effort	Females	<b>.32**</b>	<b>.32**</b>	.24**	.10	.09	.20*	.21**	.16*
	Males	<b>.37**</b>	.20*	<b>.38**</b>	.35**	.12	.03	<b>.40**</b>	<b>.35**</b>

\*\* Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (two-sided). \*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (two-sided)

Positive associations between the level of total grit and overall psychological well-being were found in both the groups of women ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and men ( $r = 0.45$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, the associations of well-being with the consistency of interest ( $r = 0.29$ ;  $p < 0.01$  – for women and  $r = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.01$  – for men), and perseverance of effort ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$  – for women and  $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.01$  – or men). Significant associations were also found between grit and: autonomy ( $r = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) self-acceptance ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and satisfaction with one’s current life ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) in the female group and autonomy ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.45$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and level of satisfaction with one’s current life ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) in the male group. In the area of consistency of interest, significant relationships were found with: environmental mastery ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) self-acceptance ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and level of satisfaction with one’s current life ( $r = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) in the women’s group and environmental mastery ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), positive relations with others ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), purpose in life ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) in the men’s group. The aspect of perseverance of effort was significantly correlated with: autonomy ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), purpose in life ( $r = 0.20$ ;

$p < 0.05$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and satisfaction with one's current life ( $r = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) in the women's group and autonomy ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), environmental mastery ( $r = 0.38$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.40$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and level of satisfaction with one's current life ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) in the men's group.

## Discussion

The research results, obtained from a group of students recruited from secondary schools in the Podlaskie Voivodeship, clearly confirm the strong relations of grit with many aspects of well-being. Both grit and its facets – consistency of interest and perseverance of effort – correlate positively with psychological well-being and evaluation of current life. Of the six aspects of well-being measured by the PWBS scale by C. Ryff, grit is most strongly related to mastery over one's environment and self-acceptance. These results are fully supported by how high levels of grit translate into coping with life's challenges, effectiveness in achieving long-term goals and the ability to overcome difficulties. Individuals characterised by high levels of grit, due to not giving up in the face of challenges and setbacks and the ability to sustain a commitment to the action taken, experience more situations that can be characterized in terms of success. Environmental mastery is recognised by Ryff (1989) as a key to an individual's development of a sense of competence and agency and coping with challenges posed by the environment, and self-acceptance – an aspect linked to optimal functioning – with a realistic but also positive attitude towards oneself. More frequent experience of situations that can be interpreted in terms of success or coping with a task should have (and as the data indicate, does have) a direct impact on the sense of competence and positive self-perception. Regarding gender differences, it is noteworthy that for one aspect of well-being, personal growth, the relation with grit – in practice, the relation with the perseverance of effort (PE) – was found to be significant only in the male group. As the aspect of personal growth is related to the feeling that the challenges undertaken lead to an increase in competence and improvement of one's skills, this result may have been influenced by the respondents' reported relatively high commitment to physical activity and the pursuit of training goals, particularly concerning young men. In addition, higher levels of grit are associated among both young women and men with general well-being, autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and evaluation of the quality of one's current life.



## Conclusions

The title of the article poses the question whether *grit* should be an educational goal. If we include among the purposes of education the support of each student on the path to happiness, development and maintaining a high level of psychological well-being, then undoubtedly, the *grit* construct is worth attention. High levels of *grit*, as the research shows, can act as a protective factor against depression and emotional disorders (Weisskirch, 2019; Liu et al., 2022). The associations of *grit* with psychological well-being, level of self-esteem or sense of harmony and satisfaction with life, are indisputable and are confirmed by reports from studies conducted around the world and among different cultures (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016; Jiang et al., 2020; Datu et al., 2021). Notably, the *grit* factor is a malleable construct (Duckworth, 2016), and this means that we can shape it from the early stages of education and effectively develop it in students so that it becomes a resource to support them in their educational, private and, in the future, professional spaces. Knowing these facts, the *grit* factor is undoubtedly worth effort at every stage of education.

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