

Self-Discipline May Beat Smarts as Key to Success

By Jay Mathews

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Zoe Bellars and Brad McGann, eighth-graders at Swanson Middle School in Arlington, do their homework faithfully and practice their musical instruments regularly. In a recent delayed gratification experiment, they declined to accept a dollar bill when told they could wait a week and get two dollars.

Those traits might be expected of good students, certainly no big deal. But a study by University of Pennsylvania researchers suggests that self-discipline and self-denial could be a key to saving U.S. schools.

According to a recent article by Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E.P. Seligman in the journal *Psychological Science*, self-discipline is a better predictor of academic success than even IQ.

"Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes," the researchers said. "We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline. . . . **We believe that many of America's children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement.**"

But how, educators, parents and other social scientists want to know, do you measure self-discipline? Duckworth, a former teacher studying for a doctorate in psychology, and Seligman, a psychology professor famous for books such as "Learned Optimism," used an assortment of yardsticks, including questions for the students (including how likely they are to have trouble breaking bad habits, on a 1-to-5 scale), ratings by their teachers and parents and the \$1-now-or-\$2-later test, which the researchers call the Delay Choice Task.

The results: **"Highly self-disciplined adolescents outperformed their more impulsive peers on every academic-performance variable, including report card grades, standardized achievement test scores, admission to a competitive high school and attendance.** Self-discipline measured in the fall predicted more variance in each of these outcomes than did IQ, and unlike IQ, self-discipline predicted gains in academic performance over the school year."

The study looked at one group of 140 eighth-graders and another group of 164 eighth-graders in a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse magnet school in a Northeast city. The names of the city, the school and the students were not revealed, so this reporter attempted a very small and unscientific version of the Delay Choice Task at Swanson.

Of the 10 eighth-graders approached during their lunch period, eight chose to forgo \$1 right away in exchange for \$2 in a week. The mothers of Zoe and Brad, who both declined the \$1 offer, said they were not surprised by their children's decisions and thought the correlation of self-discipline with academic success made sense.

"I remember when Zoe was in the second grade, they had to do this poster of what they would do with \$1 million," recalled her mother, Arlene Vigoda-Bellars, a former journalist. Her daughter said she would use it to go to Harvard. In preparation for that college competition, **Zoe is taking intensified algebra and second-year Spanish, has a voice scholarship at a music school and plays first flute in Swanson's symphonic band.**

Bertra McGann, a technical writer married to a Foreign Service officer, said that when Brad was 4, the family lived in Kenya and he was put in a class with older students. "He would come home from school and hand me the flashcards and work on his sight reading -- an extraordinary amount of self-discipline for a 4-year-old," she said. Now 13, **Brad plays clarinet and basketball and earned his black belt in tae kwon do** by practicing two hours a day, six days a week for two years.

Some experts expressed doubt about the Delay Choice Task. "I'd assume it was some kind of scam, take the buck and run," said Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, a nonprofit group that is critical of over-reliance on testing in U.S. schools. Zoe refused to take the \$2 at the end of the experiment. "I think it is rude to take money from strangers," she said.

Zoe always does her homework the minute she gets home from school at 2:30 p.m. Her friends, however, are not so diligent. During a telephone interview, Zoe noted that several of her friends' "away messages" -- put up on their online instant-messaging systems to explain why they aren't responding -- said they were doing their homework. "It's Sunday night," she said. "I finished mine Friday."

Some educators said schools can teach self-discipline. Rafe Esquith, an award-winning Los Angeles teacher, often tells his low-income fifth-graders about a study that showed that hungry 4-year-olds willing to wait for two marshmallows were more successful years later than those who gobbled up one marshmallow immediately.

Ryan Hill, director of the TEAM Academy Charter School in Newark, N.J., said students at his school, a Knowledge Is Power Program middle school in a low-income neighborhood, are required to stay at school until their homework is done if TV interfered with study the night before. "Over time, they learn to just do their homework before watching TV, delaying gratification, which becomes a habit of self-discipline," Hill said.

Educational psychologist Gerald W. Bracey noted the power of self-discipline in sports, citing tennis star Chris Everett, who triumphed over more talented players because she practiced more.

Martha McCarthy, an education professor at Indiana University, said such habits could be taught in early grades, with methods such as "giving students time to visit with their friends if they have been attentive during a lesson."

Will there be a Self-Discipline Test, the SDT, to replace the SAT? Most experts don't think so. Clever but lazy college applicants could "pretty easily figure out what the right answers would be to appear self-disciplined," said University of Virginia psychology professor Daniel T. Willingham.

Bruce Poch, vice president and dean of admissions at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., said self-discipline was good but not necessarily the only key to success. Albert Einstein, Poch said, "wasn't the most self-disciplined kid, at least according to his math grades through school."

That hasn't stopped Duckworth, who has two small daughters, from using her findings at home. Her eldest daughter, Amanda, 4, gets only one piece of saved Halloween candy each night after dinner. Asked why, Amanda says slowly and carefully, "It is de-LAY of gra-ti-fi-ca-tion."