



RESEARCH REPORT 2026

Why grit matters in education

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Summary

Education is about learning, but also about instilling the confidence and ambition amongst students to do the most with their talents. As shown in this study, schools that focus on an orderly climate and high expectations can create calmer and more focused study environments for the students. These environments allow students to evolve in grit, which strengthens their ability to deal with future challenges in life.

This aspect of education needs to be strengthened in Sweden. An OECD special report published in 2026 shows that Swedish schools have some strengths but suffer from some of the worst disciplinary climates amongst the countries included in this global study. According to the World Value Survey, the share of Swedish youth who believe that hard work is an important quality to have in life is considerably lower than in other advanced economies; there is a widespread lack of grit.

High levels of trust have historically characterised Nordic societies, and has been called Nordic gold since trust encourages cooperation, investment, and entrepreneurship. The belief that strangers in general can be trusted is however lower in Swedish youth compared to middle-aged and older individuals on average. In part the reduction in trust can be linked to the benefit morale of Swedish youth falling dramatically. With this background, this study gives a comprehensive background on why grit is so important for success in education and other work environments, and why schools that focus on orderly environments and high expectations prepare their students for success in life. Semi-structured anonymous interviews with teachers from Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) give insights into how the schools work with implementing a structured and positive work environment.

Minimising classroom distraction is a key part of the IES model. When students can focus on their studies properly, this also gives them the ability to progress with planned and focused work, creating an atmosphere where grit can be fostered. This is in line with research about the working memory of the brain, as distractions make it difficult to process information in the school environment, leading to stress and lower ability to progress with studies. High expectations are another key element. When teachers are transparent about their expectations for the students, and clear on what the students need to achieve to progress further, this allows for trust and for the formation of mentor relationships. Organised sports during breaks introduce leadership structure, boost health, and lead to reduced tensions between students, with less bullying as result. Overall focus is on promoting positive self-reinforcing routines, with grit in studies, sports, and respectful social interactions – with the aim of preparing students for future challenges in life.

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Norms matter in life, and in education

Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) was founded by Mrs. Barbara Bergström in 1993, based on the vision of a school that prepares its students for the challenges of adulthood. Mrs. Bergström worked towards building a school with focus on command of the English language, a safe and orderly school environment, and high academic expectations and aspirations.

Since then, IES has expanded to include 30,000 students in forty-six schools spread across Sweden.¹ The schools are dedicated to supporting their students, of various backgrounds, to become responsible and productive citizens. The education is based on the vision that students not only need to acquire academic knowledge, but also the confidence and ambition to do the most with their talents.² As shown in this study, this focus of fostering positive attitudes towards studies and work is in line with evidence-based research on the conditions of successful school models. Sweden in particular, with a lack of discipline in classrooms, and lack of grit amongst youth, has a need for orderly school environments that foster grit in studies and encourage physical activity with others.

SCHOOLS WITH FOCUS ON GRIT FOSTER GOOD OUTCOMES

A clear example of how schools foster life chances comes from the work of US economist Thomas Sowell. He noted that the first African American woman to graduate from college, the first man with the same origin to graduate from Harvard, as well as the first African Americans to become professors at a major university, generals, and judges respectively, all had something in common. They had been students at M Street School, or Dunbar High School, as it was renamed in 1916. Despite typically coming from less well-off homes, the students at the school performed very well. The school set high standards for its students' knowledge and standards – and thanks to this, the students were able to achieve great success in life despite the discrimination of the time.

Thomas Sowell identified several other schools that were unusually successful in educating ethnic minority youth during the 20th century. Some were private schools, while others were public. The common factor was that, like the M Street School, they focused on discipline and hard work.³ This recipe has also been shown ▶

1 Internationella Engelska Skolan (2026).
2 Internationella Engelska Skolan (2024).
3 Sowell (2002).

to work in other research. Studies from the USA and Chile that examine school chains characterised by structure and teacher-lead pedagogy show that these models promote better results in knowledge-based tests, especially among students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and from ethnic minorities.⁴ Schools that have high expectations from their students in essence allow the students to prosper more in life, since these higher expectations better prepare the students for the challenges of future life.

GRIT AND OTHER NORMS MATTER IN LIFE

In order to understand why structure, discipline, and focus on results matter, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of how norms including grit shape our lives. Norms are much like rules relevant in society, including in working environments such as schools. Social norms are generally shared rules and expectations of human behaviour. Unlike laws and regulations, norms are often implicit. For example, if you get on a bus and take a seat reserved for the disabled, while yourself not being disabled, you are breaking a rule. There is a sign that informs passengers that certain seats are reserved for the disabled; the rule is therefore formal. On the other hand, if you take a regular seat on the bus and then stand up and offer your seat to an elderly passenger, you are following a social norm and are perceived as polite by those around you. The latter is a voluntary choice and there is no sign that explains how the norm works or should be followed. Norms are also about following formal rules. Anyone who rides the bus without paying for themselves, takes seats reserved for the disabled while not having this need, or disturbs other passengers, is violating both social norms and formal rules. Norms are implicit rules and expectations of behaviour, which are sometimes, but not always, backed up by formal rules.⁵

The key point is that norms matter a lot in life. A school environment where students and teachers follow the norm of respecting each other, not distracting, and focusing with positive energy on the work at hand, leads to good opportunities to learn. It also prepares the individual for future challenges in life, with routines that contribute to success. Orderly school environments that foster grit are highly relevant in Sweden. The Swedish government recently asked the international organisation the OECD, which carries out the PISA tests on school performance around the world, to assess the Swedish school system. The results that were published in 2026 show that Swedish schools have some strengths, but suffer from some of the worst disciplinary climates amongst the countries included in this global study.⁶

Additionally, the belief in hard work as an important quality throughout life is considerably weaker amongst youth in Sweden, as compared to other countries in Europe, and other developed nations such as the USA, Japan, South Korea and Canada. Fostering a school atmosphere focused on respect and grit is relevant throughout

4 Angrist et al. (2013), Dynarski et al. (2018), Henríquez et al. (2012).
5 Sanandaji & Heller Sahlgren (2022).
6 OECD (2026).

“Orderly school environments that foster grit are highly relevant in Sweden where schools have a lack of structure and youth have less emphasis on hard work as an important quality in life as compared to youth in other developed countries”

the world, and particularly so in Sweden where schools have a lack of structure and youth have less emphasis on hard work as an important quality in life as compared to youth in other developed countries.

FOSTERING GRIT IS RELEVANT FOR STUDIES, SPORTS, AND SOCIAL LIFE

It is human nature to plan to do something, but instead do something else. With strong norms, however, the individual can better control actions. A student who has strong norms about diligence is likely to sit down and study well in advance of a test – and therefore increase the chances of getting a good grade. A student who has weaker norms is likely to start studying only a few days before the test. The first strategy gives the individual better results, which illustrates how norms affect study outcomes.⁷ A 2001 study by sociologist Karl-Dieter Opp found that norms are created if they enable a group of people to achieve important goals.⁸ Richard Posner and Eric Rasmusen show in another study, from 1999, that the emergence of norms is associated with punishment. In somewhat simplified terms, norms are created based on the general interest of society and those who violate them are punished. The punishment can be formal, but also informal in the form of the person being exposed to shame, for example.⁹

We form our norms in relation to others around us. Fostering grit and respectful behaviour in school leads to better chances to succeed in studies, and life. Grit is relevant in order to succeed in sports, in education, and can also be applied to building social relationships with others – it is about working continuously and hard to achieve one’s goals. School environment matters for grit, since when there is limited disturbance, our brains can better focus, enabling the focus that is needed for the individual to thrive with work. Distractions make it difficult to learn, and therefore difficult to foster the habits of grit. By fostering norms of hard work and respect towards others, schools can better prepare students for the future challenges of life.

7 Wade, Tavis & Garry (2013).
8 Opp (2001).
9 Posner & Rasmusen (1999).

Evidence based approach to a productive learning environment

Research on how the brain functions has shown that a healthy diet, sufficient sleep, and physical exercise are all critical for optimal cognitive function and memory consolidation.¹⁰

A key characteristic of good learning environments relates to focus and working memory. Working memory is the mental workspace that our brains use in the short-term for holding and manipulating small amounts of information. Working memory is crucial in solving problems, reasoning and learning. As individuals, we often try to keep too much information at the same time in the working memory. As a result, the working memory exceeds its capacity, and we fail at our task.¹¹ This happens in many daily situations, including in the school environment. Having focus during a lesson, allows the working memory to process the information, so that it becomes possible to store key facts in long-term memory.

However, if a student is distracted by a cell phone, or by other students acting out, there will be too much stimulus for the working memory to keep up. The more disorderly the school environment is, the more difficult it will be for students to focus their working memory on the task at hand. Trying to learn while not being able to focus might leave the student exhausted, since too much stimulus pushes the working memory to capacity, while making it more difficult to remember key facts. Students working with a task, failing to complete it, and keep working until they succeed is part of learning. When students are distracted, it becomes difficult to overcome challenges and go from early failure to success. This hinders learning in general, and in particular inhibits learning to push through until one overcomes challenges.

SWEDISH SCHOOLS SUFFER FROM LACK OF DISCIPLINE

The international PISA studies, carried out by the OECD, give insight into how well school systems work across the world. The PISA studies show that Swedish schools suffer in the disciplinary climate index. The OECD has, by request of the Swedish government, published a special analysis of the Swedish school system. The study shows that students in Swedish schools report delayed lesson starts, frequent disruptions, and difficulties maintaining focus. School leaders in Sweden also report ▶

¹⁰ Blakemore & Frith (2005).

¹¹ Klingberg (2013).

substantial problems with disorder. Sweden has, according to this study, significant problems with a lack of orderly class environments.¹²

Empirical evidence points to a positive disciplinary climate being conducive to learning and personal growth of students.¹³ According to the OECD a well-functioning school climate is characterised by structured and respectful interaction between teachers and students, minimal disorder and noise, few disruptions to learning, and lessons which begin with students promptly engaging in their tasks.¹⁴ Such a learning environment allows the working memory to focus on the task at hand, allowing students to better succeed in their education.

THE SPREADING OF DISORDER

A disorderly school environment not only limits the ability of the working memory to focus properly on the task at hand, but can also alter behaviour of the individual. If others around you are acting disrespectfully, you are also likely to act in the same way – the same is true for acting respectfully. According to experimental research on human behaviour, when individuals are in locations covered with litter and graffiti, they are themselves more likely to add to the litter, trespass or even steal. This is according to the broken windows theory, which suggests that people spread the negative behaviour that they see signs of around themselves. If you are in a school environment with dirty toilets, litter lying around, and students engaging in bullying each other, you are not only likely to be distracted, but also more likely to engage in some of these negative activities yourself. The finding is that when people violate a certain social norm or rule, they are more likely to violate other norms or rules.¹⁵

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12 OECD (2026).
13 OECD (2020), Thapa et al. (2013), Wang & Degol (2015).
14 OECD (2026, 2020).
15 Keizer, Lindenberg & Steg (2008).

CALM AND ORDERLY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS MAKE IT EASIER FOR THE BRAIN TO LEARN

Within a calm and orderly school environment, teachers and students can use lesson time to the fullest for effective learning. Rules and routines become an integral and internalised part of everyday life at school. Values follow from the practical norms for behaviour, as well as the reverse. These behaviours form habits, which will serve students well in adult and professional life. Activities such as sports are also an integral part of the solution, since physical activity encourages health which promotes better ability to carry out academic studies, and since organised sports encourage positive bonds to be formed amongst students and thus less bullying. Not being bullied in school is a key determinant of being able to focus on studies and sports.

In summary, the condition of good school systems according to the evidence based research of the global PISA project is structure, respectful interactions, minimal disorder, few disruptions to learning, and lessons which begin with students promptly engaging in their tasks. The Swedish school model has a significant lack of discipline, and too many distractions in the typical classroom. The next chapter explains in-depth why grit is important in education. It is followed by a chapter about the lack of grit in Swedish schools, and another about how youth in Sweden focus less on hard work as an important characteristic through life as when compared with other developed countries.

Importance of grit in education

In addition to social background and intelligence, there is another factor that plays a role in children's learning: grit. Grit is about perseverance, passion, and resilience in pursuing long-term goals. It refers to the property of continuing to work until one reaches the goal, overcoming obstacles and setbacks.

Several researchers, including psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth, have studied the importance of grit for students' educational outcomes.¹⁶ Torkel Klingberg, professor of cognitive neuroscience, has also contributed to our understanding of the importance of grit for student achievement, showing that motivation is key for learning.¹⁷ Research finds strong support for interventions aimed at strengthening students' grit leading to improved educational outcomes.¹⁸

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BENEFITS OF GRIT ARE WELL DOCUMENTED

Lauren Eskreis-Winkler and co-authors have found that grit matters for predicting retention in school, workplace, military, and marriage. Students who succeed in staying in school, and adults who succeed in retaining their work, military career, and marriage, are distinguished by perseverance, or in other words grit.¹⁹ Interestingly, this is not a new insight. As early as the second half of the 19th century, psychologist Francis Galton found that uniquely successful individuals were characterised by a capacity for hard work and perseverance.²⁰ Given the importance of ▶

¹⁶ Duckworth et al. (2007).

¹⁷ Klingberg (2016).

¹⁸ Alan et al. (2019).

¹⁹ Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014).

²⁰ Galton F. (1892).

these qualities, Aaron Hochanadel and Dora Finamore conclude that schools should focus more on strengthening grit and a growth mindset among students.²¹ Although perseverance is closely linked to success, it is not linked to intelligence.²² In other words: students who have lower aptitude can partly compensate for this by becoming more persistent. Focusing on perseverance therefore enables not only a better education but also more equal outcomes.

Researchers have also studied the relationship of perseverance to other character traits.²³ For example, John Meriac, John Slifka, and Lauren LaBat have analyzed the relationship between work ethic and perseverance.²⁴ They find a connection between these character traits, and that both are linked to conscientiousness. Alexander Vazsony and co-authors also conclude that perseverance is closely related to self-control. Persistence emerges as an important and unique character trait, with great significance for the individual's ability to achieve their goals.²⁵ In another study, researchers found that perseverance correlates positively with academic performance among students studying remotely using digital aids.²⁶

ORDERLY PHYSICAL SPACES FOSTER ORDERLY BEHAVIOUR

The physical environment is also important for norms. Few people have failed to observe that marginalised communities and neighbourhoods tend to have public environments that are dirty, unkempt, and characterised by lack of safety. What at first glance may seem like a symptom is often also an explanation: the individual's propensity to keep things clean is usually greater in cleaner environments. An environment that signals that others are dirty encourages the individual to be dirty themselves, while clean environments encourage the individual to keep things clean themselves. If a school is cleaned regularly, students can be similarly stimulated to minimise littering.

Anthony Braga at Harvard University and his colleague Brenda Bond have conducted an interesting experiment on how clean environments can lift marginalised areas. The researchers selected 34 marginalised neighbourhoods in the city of Lowell in the US state of Massachusetts. In half of the areas, the authorities worked to pick up trash from the sidewalks, fix broken streetlights, act against litterers and introduce extra security personnel. In the other neighbourhoods, no special efforts were made. The researchers found that the simple measures of keeping things clean, improving the environment and having extra security led to major changes. The number of reported crimes decreased by a fifth in the neighbourhoods that were kept clean. The reason does not seem to be that crimes moved to other neighbourhoods, but rather that cleaner environments and increased security simply reduced

21 Hochanadel and Finamore (2015).

22 Duckworth et al. (2007).

23 Research review by Datu, Yuen & Chang (2017).

24 Meriac, Slifka & LaBat (2015).

25 Vazsonyi et al. (2019).

26 Aparicio, Bacao & Oliveira (2017).

people's propensity to break the law. Perhaps most remarkably, the researchers found that clean environments had a greater effect on crime than increased police efforts usually have.²⁷

DISORDERLY ENVIRONMENTS ENCOURAGE DESTRUCTIVE ACTIVITY

The results are in line with the broken window theory. Say someone breaks a window in a house. If the window is not repaired, the house is likely to be subject to more vandalism. The risk of burglary may also increase. The reason is that the broken window signals that no one cares about the house. Maybe the property is even abandoned? However, if the window is repaired, it signals that someone is looking after the property. Vandalism and attempted burglaries therefore decrease.²⁸

The theory is that clean and well-maintained environments encourage us to follow social norms and become more inclined to help our fellow humans. The theory has been carefully tested in a well-received article in the leading scientific journal Science. In the study, researchers Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg and Linda Steg first chose an alley outside a shopping centre where many people park their bicycles. The researchers hung flyers from a fictional sports store on bicycles. The flyers had been placed so that the cyclists had to remove them in order to continue cycling. The researchers then studied whether the cyclists chose to throw the flyers on the street or in a trash can. It turned out that littering doubled if the wall behind the bicycles was covered in graffiti.²⁹

In another experiment, the same researchers placed an envelope, which passersby could see contained money, half-pressed into a mailbox. The researchers then studied how many of the passersby walked past the mailbox and how many chose to take the money. In one situation, both the mailbox and the surroundings were clean. In the second situation, the mailbox was scribbled on. In the third situation, the mailbox was clean, while the surroundings were dirty. The percentage who stole the money was twice as high in the latter two situations.³⁰

It is therefore no coincidence that schools with poor physical environments tend not to perform particularly well. The same applies to residential areas characterised by graffiti, gang crime and fighting; these areas are chaotic both physically and socially. Ensuring that environments are clean and well-maintained affects people's actions – this applies in school environments, other work places, neighbourhoods, and cities.

27 Braga and Bond (2008).

28 Wilson and Kelling (1982).

29 Keizer, Lindenberg and Steg (2008).

30 Ibid. In the clean environment, 13 percent of passersby stole the money. The percentage increased to 27 and 25 percent in the second and third situations, respectively.

Sweden lacks in grit in education

The PISA test that is widely referred to internationally by academics and decision makers in the public sector, examines school performance of 15-year-old students around the world.

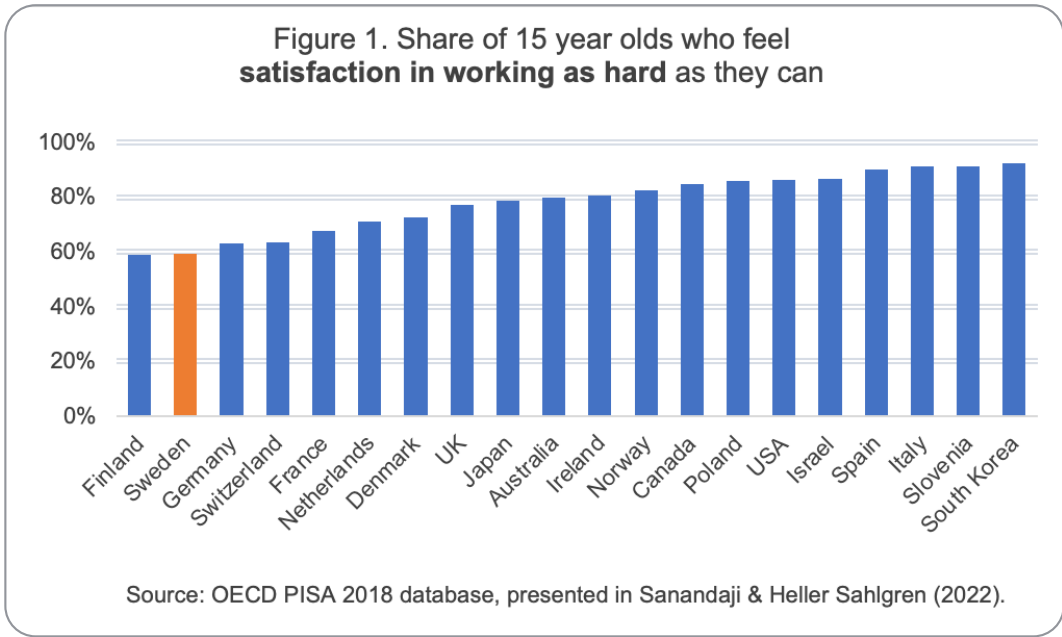
In the 2019 edition of this test, a special question relating to grit in school was included. The study found that in Sweden fewer than six out of ten students responded yes to the question asking if they felt satisfaction in working as hard as they can in school. This leads to Sweden having the lowest level of grit measured amongst students, alongside Finland where the same share gave this response.

LOWEST SHARE OF STUDENTS IN SWEDEN AND FINLAND FEEL SATISFACTION IN WORKING HARD IN SCHOOL

The share of students who feel satisfaction in working hard in school is a metric of grit. Grit relates to an understanding of hard work being its own rewards. This metric of grit is, as shown in figure 1, somewhat stronger in countries such as Germany (63 percent), France (68), and Denmark (72 percent) than in Sweden. Other countries such as the UK (77 percent), Japan (79), and Norway (83) have much more grit. International competitors to Sweden such as Canada (85 percent of 15-year-olds feel satisfaction in working as hard as they can in school), the USA (86 percent), and Spain (90) have considerably more grit in schools. ▶

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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW IN 2026 : SWEDEN SUFFERS FROM LACK OF DISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS

The Swedish government asked the OECD to help by examining what can be improved in the country's school system. The review that was published in 2026 is clear on what works and what needs improving in Swedish schools. What works is that the Swedish education system is "founded on strong values of equity, inclusion and local autonomy" and "benefits from a high level of public trust, professional engagement, and well-developed digital infrastructure". What does not work is the lack of structure and discipline. The OECD review explains: "Swedish students report strong teacher support and positive relationships with teachers, but also frequent distractions, disruptions and difficulties concentrating".³¹

SUBSTANTIAL BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS IN SWEDISH SCHOOLS

The review by the OECD utilises the results of the latest global 2022 PISA tests, and further analysis. Based on knowledge of Sweden and educational systems around the world, the study explains what needs improving in Swedish schools.

31 OECD (2026, p. 9).

The necessary change is about creating a study environment with focus on order rather than the current disorder in typical Swedish classrooms that creates stress for teachers as well as students. The study explains: "School leaders also report substantial behavioural problems, including truancy and disorder. Perceptions of safety vary across groups. Girls, socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with an immigrant background tend to feel less safe at school than their peers, even though disadvantaged students report slightly fewer specific safety risks than advantaged students."³²

This helps us better understand the example given in the introduction to this study, by Thomas Sowell, on how schools that allow for children from minority backgrounds and lower income families to thrive in future life, tend to have strong focus on discipline, expectations, and orderly environments. These conditions benefit all students, and in particular those who do not receive as much stimulus, and role model inspiration, from parents who themselves have an academic background. The chaotic typical Swedish school environment reduces opportunities to focus, learn, and build up grit for all, particularly for those whose parents have lower levels of education.

The OECD review notes that: "Sweden performs below the OECD average on the disciplinary climate index. Students report frequent disruptions, delayed lesson starts, and difficulties maintaining focus. Around one in three students states that they cannot work well in most or all lessons, and more than half report not listening to what the teacher says, though interpretation of the latter requires caution due to translation differences in the Swedish PISA questionnaire."³³

To summarise, Swedish schools have many good qualities, but suffer from lack of discipline, and lack of grit. These are related, since when students cannot fully focus on the tasks at hand, due to lack of discipline in the classroom, their working memory becomes stressed, and they cannot properly learn. Building up hard working routines is difficult when the work is constantly being performed during stress. The stressful environment of typical Swedish classrooms crowds out learning, and makes learning less pleasurable.

Grit is about finding pleasure in hard work, in the classroom and in the future workplace, and relies on the ability to focus. As explored in the next chapter Sweden not only has a lack of grit in the school environment, but also in general. A smaller share of youth in Sweden identify hard work as a good quality to have in life, when compared with youth in other countries.

32 OECD (2026, p. 10).
33 OECD (2026, p. 10).

Working and trust norms of youth in Sweden

The world value survey is a global research project, which measures values in different societies over time. It is possible to measure grit through one of the questions in this survey. The question is about what qualities are important for children to have throughout life.

Respondents who identify hard work as an important quality for children to have through life, believe in grit as being important. Grit is about believing that hard work is not just a necessity in life, but that a hard-working character is an important quality in life. Youth in Sweden, as it turns out, has less belief in hard work being an important quality in life, than youth than in other developed countries.

YOUNG SWEDES HAVE LOW BELIEF IN HARD WORK AS AN IMPORTANT QUALITY IN LIFE

In the mid-2000s just over 12 percent of youth (up to 29 years old) in Sweden identified hard work as an important quality in life, this level rose to just under 16 percent in the early 2020s. It is not that youth in Sweden have low levels of grit compared to middle-aged and older individuals, but rather that Sweden has low grit in society overall – middle aged and older Swedes also identify hard work, to a limited degree, as an important quality to have in life. While the level has risen somewhat, it is still far from the rest of the world.

A considerably lower share of the Swedish youth believe in grit, compared to other European nations. In Norway for example 26 percent of youth identify hard work as an important quality in life, while the level is 30 percent in Germany, 34 percent in France and 45 percent in the UK. In the USA fully two thirds (66 percent) of youth identify hard work as an important quality to have in life, while Poland tops the list with three out of four youth (74 percent) giving this response.³⁴ The global pattern of the norm of hard work as an important quality in life, and the evolution of this norm, suggest that it is lower in countries with higher taxes. High tax models like those as in Sweden reduce incentives for hard work, which explains how this norm is affected. Foreign born individuals in Sweden have more grit, which can be explained by this norm being unusually weak in Sweden, compared to in the rest of the world.³⁵ Figure 2 illustrates how youth in Sweden lack belief in hard work as an important quality in life, compared to youth in other developed countries. ▶

³⁴ World Value Survey database and own analysis.

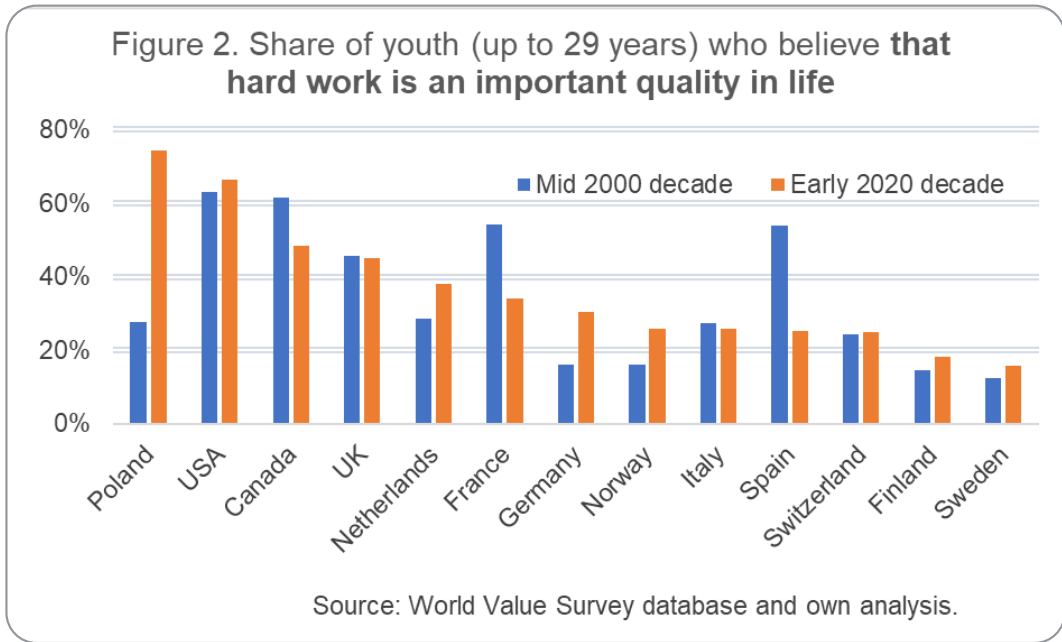
³⁵ Sanandaji (2025).

"In conclusion, Sweden is characterised by having unusually low share amongst youth who believe in hard work as an important quality in life, and high but diminishing levels of trust"

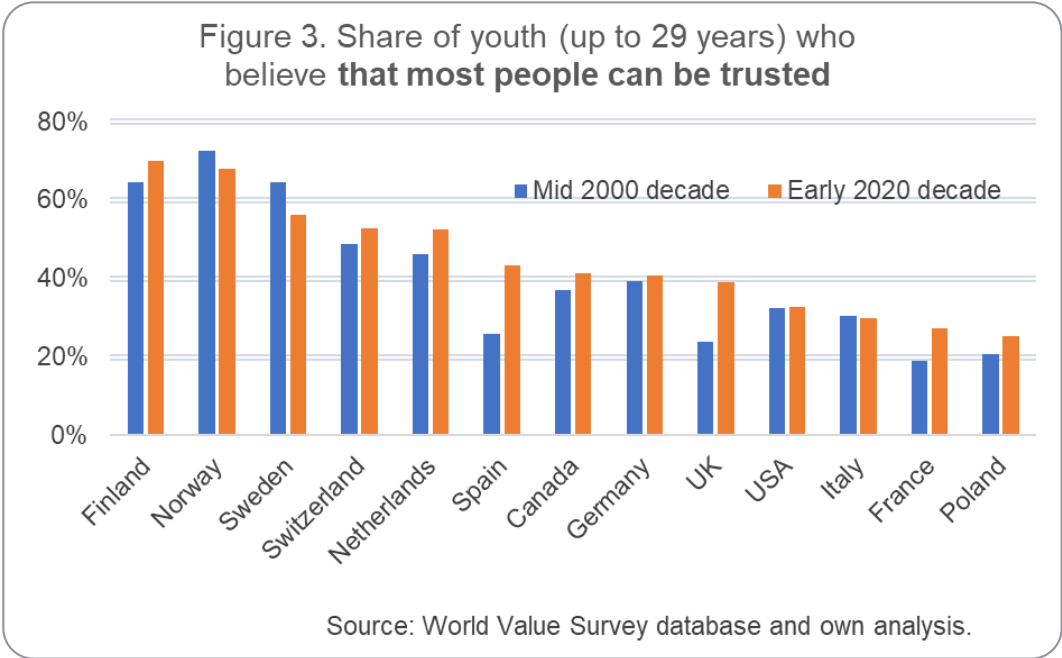
TRUST IS STRONG IN THE NORDICS – BUT REDUCED AMONGST YOUTH

A norm that over time has been strong in Sweden is trust. Nordic countries in general have societies characterised by high levels of trust to strangers. According to an analysis published by the Nordic council, trust is the Nordic gold – since it encourages cooperation, investments, and fosters entrepreneurship.³⁶ It is therefore also worrying that trust levels in Sweden which used to be some of the highest in the world, are currently lower than in other Nordic countries – and deteriorating over time. In the mid-2000s two thirds of youth in Sweden agreed with the notion that most people can be trusted, this had decreased to just over half (56 percent) in the early 2020s. As comparison, 68 percent of youth in Norway and 70 percent in Finland share this view. In other parts of the world, trust is lower than in Sweden, for example share of youth who believe that most people can be trusted is lower in Germany (41 percent), UK (39 percent) and USA (33 percent) compared to Sweden. Poland which has very strong grit amongst youth, has much lower level of youth who believe that most strangers can be trusted (25 percent). Figure 3 illustrates the lowering levels of trust in Sweden.

In conclusion, Sweden is characterised by having unusually low share amongst youth who believe in hard work as an important quality in life, and high but diminishing levels of trust. There is also a worrying collapse in benefit morale in Sweden, which might explain in part the shift in trust. Benefit morale is measured by looking at what share of the population who believes that it might be justifiable to claim government benefits that one is not entitled to.



36 Andreasson (2017).



SIGNIFICANT REDUCTIONS IN BENEFIT MORALE

In Sweden, norms against benefit fraud have been somewhat strengthened recently: in the latest World Value Surveys of the early 2020s, 33 percent of young people in Sweden believe that benefit fraud is never justified. Despite this, Sweden is still among the countries where the lowest proportion of young people agree that benefit fraud can never be justified when compared to half of young people in Germany, Italy and the UK. Swedes' norms towards benefit fraud differ greatly between generations. Only a third of young people (up to 29 years old), but two thirds of middle-aged people (30-49 years old) and three quarters of older people (50+ years old), believe that it is never acceptable to receive public benefits that you are not entitled to. Over time, there has been a significant change in attitude among young people. In the early 1980s, just over six out of ten young people believed that benefit fraud is never justified. This proportion has now stabilised at just over three out of ten young people.³⁷

The changes in benefit morale are relevant for society, and as more view cheating with public benefits as acceptable, this might lead to trust levels in society falling – since if you know that your neighbor willingly cheats with public benefits, this might undermine your trust in others. Norms such as grit, trust and benefit morale all affect society. While the school system has more focus on the two former, those who get a quality education and routines of hard work are less likely to engage in exploiting public benefit systems, and more likely to be able to support themselves through work. A school system that promotes grit and taking responsibility for ones own progress, is likely to also influence benefit morale.

37 Sanandaji (2025).

Fostering students with stamina

Having explained how and why grit, and other norms, are relevant for schools, for other work environments, and for society in large – the next question is what IES does to strengthen norms.

In order to answer this question semi-structured anonymous interviews with teachers from IES were carried out in February and March 2026 by the author of this study. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into how teaching is carried out at IES, in relation to fostering grit in education and physical mobility, while encouraging respectful social relations. This and the following chapter present insights from these interviews.

STAMINA MATTERS IN EDUCATION LIKE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

An emerging perspective from the interviews with IES teachers is about the importance of fostering students with stamina. Teachers compete with social media, screen time, and other factors for the attention of students. The studies that teachers want students to focus on require mental stamina, in comparison to the short attention span needed for information on social media, and other digital media. Different forms of digital communication create short-term dopamine rushes in the brains of the students. An important part of education is to create a focused environment, where students have peace of mind to focus on complex tasks as part of their education. This not only is about learning, but also about fostering mental stamina.

In an environment with peace and calm the opportunity to learn is much better, since students do not need to divide their focus between studies and distractions. Having classrooms free from mobile phones helps in creating focus on studies. Being in an environment where mobile phones are not constantly disturbing people leads to more sense of presence which also makes students feel safer. This also allows focus on respectful interactions in the school environment. Therefore, it is a question of being able to feel more safe, respected, and focused in the learning environment.

GRIT IS FORMED BY MOTIVATION AND PAYBACK

As students begin to feel safe and are more anchored in the present, they can also form better bonds with classmates and teachers. Safety can foster trust to others. Safety also allows formation of role model relationship between teachers and students, which is relevant for endurance in studies and building up of work ethic. ►

Environments with high academic expectations create opportunities for individuals to climb. The students are made aware of the high expectations and that their teachers want them to climb – this engagement in turn builds trust.

A perspective that arose during the interviews is that teachers are aware of the overall demands that teenagers face, and the value of fostering grit in order to be able to handle the challenges of life. Demands are high on various aspects of life for many teenagers. Grit is an important ability to have, in order to strive through adversity – to keep working hard when it is most challenging, and when it is simple. The motivation is the feeling of accomplishment, as well as reaching higher grades. Working hard even when it feels frustrating and challenging, allows for the satisfaction and gratification that comes afterwards with success. Part of the education process is about learning resilience. Teachers at IES express during interviews that they want their students to, when faced with challenge, have the experience of previous resilience, and therefore know how to handle challenges by staying calm and focusing on the work. Part of fostering grit is about encouraging long-term focus. Grit gives the students the ability to appreciate the process of gradually moving forwards in small steps. Part of it is therefore to accept that things move in small steps, instead of trying to leap forwards and getting frustrated with the lack of results.

“As students become feel safe and are more anchored in the present, they can also form better bonds with classmates and teachers. Safety can foster trust to others. Safety also allows formation of role model relationship between teachers and students, which is relevant for endurance in studies and building up of work ethic”

WORKING WITH YOUR HAND AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Part of the IES educational model is focus on the ability to not only use digital tools but also be proficient with pen and paper. This includes working with hand motoric, to be able to write better. Working on handwriting is relevant, as many youths today seem to lack their own identity with their handwriting. Reading paper books is likewise important as a compliment to digital media, for fostering mental cognition.

A criterium in education is that students can gather information and determine what is relevant for their texts to refer to. The students need to rearrange the information in their own words. It is important that part of this work is done through paper books, pen and paper. This allows for fostering writing and reading skills, and limits students from building the habit of using digital tools as short-cut in their education.

IES teachers also focus on encouraging students to take accountability for their own goals and achievements in education. The importance of students delivering their assignments on time is stressed. A part of education is to explain why it is important to be on time, as this is in line with current demands on education, and prepares students for future demands of higher education and work. A perspective from the interviews with IES teachers is that being transparent about why the work is being done, what expectations are, and how the student is performing, allows trust to be built up. Through this communication students can gain a better understanding of the relationship between expectations, their own work, and the outcomes. It is critical for students to understand why the work is being done, have good expectation of what they are required to do, and get feedback on how well they are doing. This allows for productive and focused studies, and for building habits of grit and responsibility.

Grit is contagious, it spreads

The core perspective of the interviews with IES teachers is that grit is not only about studies, but also relates to physical movement, and maintaining social relationships.

In order to succeed in life, individuals need to build positive reinforcing routines in various areas of life – the same mindset, to keep going at it with your best effort is needed in the gym, in school and other workplaces, as well as when it comes to building social relationships with others. If you want to succeed in sports, not only should you keep working hard at it, but also surround yourself with others with a similar mindset. The same goes for studies, it is a good idea to study in group, to learn with others and get encouragement when you are stuck. Positive self-reinforcing behaviour is contagious – it can be shared with others.

ORGANISED SPORTS EVENTS DURING BREAKS REDUCE SOCIAL TENSIONS

The interviews with IES teachers relate to the perspective of stamina, in education as well as in physical activity. If you do not have the character to work on something with focus continuously you lack stamina, and therefore you lack grit. An example is going for a long run. The individual might not love every second of it, but has the stamina to push through, and feels better at the end for having finished the run. In the same way teachers at IES wish to instil in the students the ability to dedicate themselves to finishing academic assignments, overcoming obstacles along the way. In many IES schools, organised sport events take part during the breaks. Since these were introduced, in the participating schools, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of conflicts amongst students. More of the students started joining in social interactions with other students. Organised sports help IES schools to create safer and more active environments, with less bullying. ▶

"In many IES schools, organised sport events take part during the breaks. Since these were introduced, in the participating schools, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of conflicts amongst students"

THE SAME MENTAL MUSCLE ALLOWS YOU TO SUCCEED IN SPORTS AND IN MATHEMATICS

One of the interviewed teachers drew on her own personal experience, of how focus on hard work in sport, can be transferred into same focus on education. Often as individuals we do some activity such as a sport or a game, get tired but keep going. The same mental focus is needed as when solving a challenging mathematical puzzle. It is about persevering until you reach the goal. Sometimes you miss the goal and disappoint yourself, this is also part of the journey. You need to be able allow yourself to learn from obstacles and failures. You also need to manage your time. The same basic principles thus go for succeeding in athletics as in studying, for example, mathematics. While growing up the teacher had tested this mentality, by progressing from having grit in sports, to applying the same mindset to mathematics.

“Something flipped in me,” the teacher explains. “My old schoolmates said that I changed character, stopped misbehaving and started behaving better. I started sitting in front in school. I started taking notes. I asked follow up questions to the teacher if I did not understand, and did not care if I looked stupid. I asked the teachers to explain in another way, if I did not understand. This open drive to learn soon engaged other students, who came to me in order to get help with their studies. As a youth the teacher went from having focus and perseverance in sports, to also applying the same mindset to mathematics and other studies. Part of this was applying long-term planning, for example writing schedules of how to begin studying during the long terms ahead, and sharing these schedules with friends. The life lesson that the teacher learned, and as an adult aims to communicate to students, is that planning-ahead, having goals, and working with perseverance can be rewarding, likewise in sports and education – it even can help you gain friends.

POSITIVE SELF-REINFORCING ROUTINES

The interviews with IES teachers touched on the importance of students learning positive self-reinforcing routines, such as actively taking charge of their own studies, keeping working on a problem, getting reward in terms of better grades, becoming encouraged by this progress and taking accountability for their own progress. Engaging with other students about how they study, their goals and strategies, is a way of building social relations. These social relationships can help in further progress, it is easier to build up hard-working routines if your friends encourage you to do so. The same applies to sports, if you engage in training and also talk with others who are training, this builds social relationships that are likely to help you keep up the training routine.

If you show that you are someone who is focused on succeeding in education, want to invest in building social networks with others, and want to engage in physical activity, this is likely to attract others who have a similar mindset. Keeping healthy and social are important part of grit. This is an emerging aspect from the studies, since

teachers identify that overall health of students is vital for their academic success. During the interviews IES teachers discussed the importance of fostering positive self-reinforcing routines, and on how physical movement needs to be encouraged as well as academic studies, since healthy minds and healthy bodies go hand in hand. Organised sports activity also significantly reduces bullying, in stead allowing more students to form positive relationships, which leads to less stress from conflicts distracting the students.

GRIT IS CONTAGIOUS, IT SPREADS

An emerging perspective from the interviews with IES teachers is that there is not one but many ways for students to build up grit. They can have it as an intrinsic part of their personality, evolve it from role models such as parents, get engaged in sports, get engaged in education, find role models amongst their teachers who inspire them, or turn to grit as a necessity to pass school. Regardless, it is difficult to achieve success alone for humans who are social animals. Even those who focus on individual sports typically succeed more when they engage with others in the same gym. Encouraging others to train can ultimately be the best thing you can do to boost your own long-term progress in the gym, since if you make no friends in the gym, you will not get the encouragement to push yourself forwards. The same goes for building stamina in education. Grit is ultimately contagious, it spreads.

Another IES teacher also drew from own background, in order to inspire students. Having grown up riding horses, the teacher appreciated the clear adult leadership associated with this sport. Growing up, the horse-riding club offered a place with focus on passion and hard work, shared with others who had a similar mindset. This environment contributed positively to the personal development of the teacher while growing up, and created a desire as an adult teacher to share a similar positive learning environment for the students.

CONCLUSION: SWEDEN NEEDS MORE GRIT AMONGST YOUTH, AND MORE ORDERLY CLASSROOMS

Leadership matters for progress. When there are leadership gaps bullying starts as students aim to create their own social hierarchy of control. Organised sports during breaks allow for interaction within the rules of sports, reducing social tensions, while activating youth in beneficial physical movement. Study environments which are calm and orderly can allow pupils to focus their working memory to the task at hand, with minimal distractions. Such school environments, which allow the focus needed to build up grit, are needed in Sweden. Sweden needs orderly school environments that foster grit, since according to the latest OECD review Sweden is one of the countries with the most problems with disorder in classes amongst the countries taking part of the international PISA study, and since youth is far behind other developed countries in the share who identify hard work as an important quality in life. ▶

School models that focus on calm and orderly classrooms, respectful behaviour, and high expectations are beneficial for the success of students around the world, and in particular needed in Sweden, where there is a clear lack of order in the typical classroom, lack of grit in the school environment, and lack of youth believing in grit as important in life. School models that foster grit are beneficial to students in general, and in particular relevant for creating opportunities for students from homes with a limited academic background – the result is therefore better and more even outcomes.

About the author

Nima Sanandaji was born in a Kurdish family in Iran during the war with Iraq, came to Sweden as a refugee, and grew up in part with welfare support, and in four different foster families. He studied towards a master’s degree in biotechnology at Chalmers, and carried out research at Chalmers, Cambridge University, University of California Santa Barbara, and KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Nima has published research in biotechnology, physical chemistry, polymer technology in which he holds two PhD:s from KTH, economic history, and economics. He is the author of 32 original books, some of which have been translated to various languages. Nima is director of the think tank ECEPR (European Centre of Entrepreneurship and Policy Reform). His hobbies are strength training and Muay Thai.



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