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# De Marillac Academy: Perseverance, Purpose, and Promise

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## De Marillac Academy: Perseverance, Purpose, and Promise

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*For many years, the Catholic school system within the United States was considered the preeminent educational institution, particularly for poor and marginalized students that live in low income, inner city areas. Now, given the large number of school closures, the Catholic school system's long-standing goal of educating economically disadvantaged students in inner city schools is in peril. In this study, the researchers examined De Marillac Academy, a Catholic, tuition-free middle school, located in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, CA, to identify both the non-cognitive skills students have learned and the organizational factors in place, which have contributed to these urban students' success in high school and beyond. The authors discuss how the concept of what Angela Duckworth calls grit and Swadener and Lubeck's notion of students-at-promise contribute, in part, to the students' academic success. They also offer a perspective on how to best teach grit in urban Catholic schools.*

### Keywords

Urban Catholic schools, San Miguel schools, grit, students-at-promise

For many years, the Catholic school system within the United States was considered the preeminent educational institution, particularly for poor and marginalized students who live in low income, inner city urban areas (Horning, 2013). According to Ladner (2007), Catholic schools traditionally have outperformed public schools and are considered the highest performing schools for students living in U.S. inner cities. Grogger and Neal's (2000) work demonstrated that urban minority students obtain the most benefit from attending a Catholic high school as evidenced by achieving higher high school and college graduation rates than their peers in public schools.

Though historically successful, Catholic schools have experienced a growing crisis over the past decades, resulting in thousands of school closures due, among other factors, to declining enrollments, the reduction of lower paid religious, and Catholics exiting to the suburbs. This has placed the Catholic

school system's long-standing goal of educating economically disadvantaged students in inner city schools in peril (Brinig & Garnett, 2009). Despite the decline, Catholic schools are well regarded by Catholics with an 88% approval rating as well as non-Catholics with a 66% approval rating (Hamilton, 2008; Saroki & Levenick, 2008).

In the Fordham Institute study, *Who Will Save America's Urban Catholic Schools?*, networks of schools run by religious orders such as San Miguel and Cristo Rey schools were identified as promising options for invigorating urban Catholic education (Hamilton, 2008). The San Miguel schools are tuition free, generally middle schools, with an extended school day and year, extensive counseling and tutoring support, and follow up through high school and post-secondary education. De Marillac Academy (DMA), a San Miguel school and the focus for this article, offers fourth through eighth grade students a high-quality, Catholic education in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco. The majority of the children who attend De Marillac live in the Tenderloin area, a district known for homelessness, drug dealing, poverty, and crime, and walk the city streets to get to the school.

One hundred percent (100%) of the students are students of color with Latino students representing 70% of the student population. DMA's cumulative high school graduation rate is 88% while the national graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students is 75%. Additionally, 64% of all DMA graduates are enrolled in or have graduated from higher educational institutions (De Marillac Academy, n.d.). In contrast, nationally 53% of economically disadvantaged youth (De Marillac Academy, n.d.) and 35% of Latinos, the largest percentage of students at De Marillac (Krogstad, 2016), are enrolled in post-secondary institutions.

In consultation with De Marillac Academy leaders, the focus for this case study was to identify those non-cognitive skills and attributes the students were developing at De Marillac that could help explain, in part, their impressive rate of high school graduation and enrollment in post-secondary educational institutions. The research was inspired by the theoretical work of Angela Duckworth, who determined through her research that self-discipline and grit are better predictors for academic success than are grade point averages, standardized tests, and other quantitative measures (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Though grit is a relatively new concept being explored in education research, it is similar to a much-studied concept: resilience. In a 2013 published conversation, Duckworth noted that though resiliency and grit are often used

interchangeably and have similarities, they are different constructs. Resilience is generally seen “as a positive response to failure or adversity” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). While grit has this characteristic in common with resilience, there is another component that Duckworth and others have identified, namely, having focused passions over time. In other words, individuals choose to do something in their lives and have to give up a great deal to stay focused on this goal. They “have deep commitments that [they] remain loyal to over many years” (p. 16). This latter aspect of grit is similar to the concept of life purpose, which is described as a “stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to yourself and of consequence to the world beyond yourself” (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003, p. 121).

In this article, we first begin with an overview of the research literature on grit followed by a brief description of the research design and De Marillac Academy. We next present the findings from our study and offer our insights about the role grit plays in the DMA students’ success.

### Literature Review

The concept of grit was popularized in the 2012 best-selling book entitled *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough. However, Duckworth and colleagues first published their research on grit in 2007. In that 2007 article, the authors discussed how they developed and validated the Grit Scale, which is composed of two elements: consistency of interests or long-term goals and perseverance of effort (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). The authors also reported on their findings using the Grit Scale with six different populations. In brief, they found that grit was positively associated with desirable outcomes such as grade point average, cadet retention, performance on a national spelling bee, and educational attainment.

Subsequent studies have correlated grit with positive outcomes such as grade point average, teacher retention, and academic motivation (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014; Maddi, Matthews, Kelly, Villarreal, & White, 2012; Pina-Watson, Lopex, Ojeda, & Rodriguez, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014). Though these findings are impressive, researchers cautioned that the Grit Scale is a self-report measure that is focused largely on past events and in these studies, was not correlated with other variables such as self-efficacy that are associated with achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014)).

Addressing the criticism of the Grit Scale as a self-report measure, Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth (2014) conducted two longitudinal studies with novice teachers ( $N = 154$  and  $N = 307$ ) in low-income districts, using an alternate method for assessing grit. Coders reviewed anonymous resumes to measure perseverance and passion in college activities, using a seven-point rubric. The researchers found that “grittier” teachers (i.e. teachers who scored higher on the Grit Scale) were less likely to leave teaching after midyear, and their students outperformed less gritty teachers (i.e. teachers who scored lower on the Grit Scale) as measured by one-year student academic gains. This study supported the findings from an earlier study (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009) conducted with novice teachers in under-resourced public schools.

In contrast, West, Kraft, Finn, Martin, Duckworth, Gabrieli, and Gabrieli (2016) identified a negative correlation between non-cognitive measures and academic achievement in a study with eighth graders in public and charter schools. While the charter school students achieved the greatest gains on standardized tests, they had lower scores than students in the district-run schools on the self-report non-cognitive measures. The researchers conjectured that a reference bias might offer an explanation for this paradox, noting that, “students attending academically and behaviorally demanding charter schools may redefine upward their notion of what it means to demonstrate conscientiousness, self-control, and grit—and thus rate themselves more critically” (p. 165). The authors recommended that researchers continue to develop non-cognitive measures that are less susceptible to reference bias.

Though the published research offers promise that the Grit Scale is a predictor of desirable outcomes, the research and the concept itself are not without controversy. Even in a United States Department of Education document that focused on promoting grit, tenacity, and perseverance, the authors cautioned that grit “can be detrimental when it is driven by a fear-based focus on testing and college entry” (Shechtman, De Barger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yamall, 2013, p. 9), thus affecting students’ creativity, mental health, and conceptual learning. Additionally there are many detractors, especially among educators and most noticeably found in alternative social media such as blogs and online articles. For example, Zakrzewski (2014) warned against grading students on grit as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools do, especially since educators do not know how to teach grit nor do they know if it is a stable personality trait or a capacity that can change over time. She pointed out that grit requires passion for long-term goals, and there is not a great deal of evidence that students have these.

In another commentary, Alfie Kohn, a proponent of progressive education, questioned the value of unexamined persistence, criticized the grit research methodologies, and challenged the values underlying the construct. He contended that when present-day discussions emerge about non-cognitive factors, “it’s usually in the context of a conservative narrative ... that sounds very much like the Protestant Work Ethic. We’re told what kids need to succeed is old-fashioned self-discipline and will power, persistence, and the ability to defer gratification” (Kohn, 2014, p. 2). Related, in an Education Week blog, Harold (2015) contended that grit harkens back to the eugenics movement, which purports that certain racial groups are more likely to have “desirable” traits over other racial groups. He shared the perspective of Pamela Moran, the Superintendent of Albemarle County public schools in Virginia, who challenged educators to explore their own beliefs about grit, “We keep hearing this narrative that the only way children in poverty are going to succeed is by working harder than their peers who are middle class... We have to think about our own cultural biases, why grit appeals to us, and why we want to focus on it in our schools” (Harold, 2015, para.4).

### Method

This research began in the Fall of 2014 as a discussion between the lead researcher and several leaders at De Marillac Academy (DMA)<sup>1</sup> and continued through the Spring of 2015. After reading Paul Tough’s (2012) book *How Children Succeed*, the DMA staff desired to understand more about the non-cognitive skills and attributes that the students learn at the school, which perhaps could account for their success in high school. Additionally, they were actively pursuing ways to measure non-cognitive skill development and considered using the Grit Scale as one such measurement. After considerable discussion, two research questions were identified:

1. What DMA practices and policies, if any, make it possible for students to develop the non-cognitive skills that enable them to succeed in high school and beyond?
2. What specific skills and attributes, if any, are the students at De Marillac Academy learning that enable them to complete high school and beyond at high rates for this population?

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1 The researchers received permission from the school leaders to use the real name of the school rather than a fictional one.

### Study Setting

Founded in 2001, De Marillac Academy is a Catholic school co-sponsored by the Daughters of Charity and the De LaSalle Christian Brothers, two religious orders committed to serving the poor through education. The school is located in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, CA, which has often been described as the “wounded part of town...It is the go to neighborhood for illegal drugs, saturated with ex-prisoners on parole and with children – more than 3500 of them” (Chase, 2013). Part of De Marillac’s vision is to “liberate students to lead lives of choice, meaning, and purpose,” helping them see they have choices in contrast to what they see everyday in the Tenderloin area. As a San Miguel school based on Lasallian principles, it follows the model of other San Miguel schools throughout the United States. For instance, the school day and school year are longer; extensive support is provided to help bring students to grade level and beyond; in addition to religious education, other virtues such as responsibility, compassion, perseverance, leadership, gratitude, and integrity are emphasized; parental involvement is required; numerous co-curricular activities are offered; and extensive support is provided to graduates to help them enroll and persist in high school and later in college. The school serves approximately 120 students in grades 4 through 8, 230 students enrolled in high school and post-secondary institutions, and 230 families. The average student retention rate for the past five years is 95% (C. Giangregorio, personal communication, December 11, 2016).

As part of its mission, De Marillac intentionally admits students who fall below their grade level on standardized tests and who often face significant economic, family, and social challenges. As such, extensive assessment and counseling is offered, often provided by volunteers or through partnerships with such organizations as the California Pacific Medical Center. Specifically 50% of the students receive individual counseling, and all participate in regular class meetings—generally weekly—to discuss challenges they are encountering and to identify strategies for dealing with conflict and stress. To provide individualized attention within the academic realm, the school maintains a 12:1 student teacher ratio, supplemented with a cadre of volunteers (Daniels, 2015).

Through the support of the Daughters of Charity, De La Salle Christian Brothers, individual donors, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and corporate sponsors, De Marillac, like other San Miguel schools, provides a full scholarship program for all enrolled students. In fact, 95% of the school’s

budget is funded through donations, and the average family pays \$500 per year in tuition (Daniels, 2015). To extend the programs it provides, the school has developed numerous partnerships within the Tenderloin and with neighboring communities. For example, community organizations provide space for De Marillac's academic and co-curricular activities; the school staff participate with other community agencies to bolster neighborhood safety, and relationships with neighboring technology companies such as Twitter and Microsoft have yielded employee gifts, corporate-sponsored grants, and employees who have volunteered at De Marillac.

### Data Collection

The research team consisted of three faculty members and one doctoral student from St. Mary's College of California, located in the San Francisco Bay Area. Prior to conducting the study, the researchers did not know any of the staff, teachers, or students at De Marillac and had only limited knowledge about the San Miguel school model. After receiving approval from the College's Institutional Review Board, the research team collected data from the following sources:

**Internal documents.** Documents such as the founding mission and values of the school, materials on the San Miguel schools, and quantitative data about the De Marillac students and graduates

**Classroom observations.** Notes from five classroom observations of approximately 45 minutes each

**Interviews.** Transcripts of interviews with 30 members of the school community. Interview participants were selected using a combination of purposive and random sampling. Ten staff members and teachers were selected because of roles they play in the school. In addition, 10 parents and 10 alumni were randomly selected for interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The questions varied slightly by group, but centered on prompting reflection on the participant's experiences at DeMarillac. Sample questions from the alumni interview are below:

- Can you explain why your parents (or guardians) wanted you to go to school at De Marillac?
- If a stranger were to ask you to tell him or her about De Marillac, what would you say?
- What do you think are the greatest strengths at De Marillac?
- Related, what are the greatest needs for improvement at De Marillac?

- In your own words, what do you see as De Marillac's mission?
- When you think about your time at De Marillac, what are some of your strongest memories?
- What were some of the most important lessons that you learned at De Marillac?

**Student essays.** Twenty-one essays written by eighth grade students. In their essays, students reflected on their experiences at DMA, the lessons they learned at DMA, and their future goals; one student in the class of 22 opted out of the study.

### Analysis

To analyze the interview data, each research team member reviewed the interview transcripts, which totaled over 256 single-spaced pages, to identify codes, which “[are] most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). Next we compared individual codes and consolidated them into larger categories. During a third and final step in the transcript analysis process, we condensed the categories into five themes that represented patterns found by the three researchers: *Living the Mission*, *Like Family*, *Student Learning Expectations*, *The Student Comes First*, and *A Safe Haven*. Then we compared the archival documents and classroom observation notes with the interview data to identify similarities and differences among the three sources of data.

For the eighth grade essays, we used a similar qualitative analysis method to identify the non-cognitive skills and attributes learned at De Marillac. Once the major themes were identified, namely, *Perseverance*, *Setting Goals for the Future*, *Service to Others*, and *Socio-Emotional Skills*, we identified the frequency with which each theme was discussed. We also reviewed and tabulated the transcripts from the alumni interviews to supplement the data from the student essays.

Though this research was not to assess grit per se, the DMA leaders were particularly interested in exploring the concept of grit and its relevance at De Marillac. Most of the research on grit has been quantitative, correlating the Grit Scale with predetermined outcomes and using statistical methods to verify the correlation. In contrast, this study was a qualitative study, offering a different method of examining non-cognitive skills including grit and exploring the organizational factors that help foster the development of non-cog-

nitive skills. Using a qualitative approach, we sought to examine whether or not grit was a non-cognitive skill present within the DMA student population. Further, if grit was present, we sought to understand whether grit can be taught and fostered within an educational setting—a question that cannot be determined by correlation studies alone. In the Discussion section, we offer our insights and conclusions on the ongoing discussion of whether grit can be taught.

### Findings

In this section, we pull together the multiple sources of data to summarize our findings and answer the two research questions that have driven this research.

#### Practices that Support Non-Cognitive Skill Development

After reviewing the data, we identified the most important factors that contribute to students' development of non-cognitive skills and attributes, thus helping to answer the first research question. Before discussing each of these factors, however, it is important to acknowledge that the San Miguel model is foundational to De Marillac's success. The small school setting, longer school day and year, low student-teacher ratio, committed leaders and staff, and the Lasallian and Vincentian charism of the Christian Brothers and Daughters of Charity all shape the academic and spiritual culture that enables students to learn and develop. In fact, the factors that we describe below are embedded in and grow out of De Marillac's academic and spiritual culture.

**Shared mission.** De Marillac Academy is clearly a mission-driven organization, grounded in the Lasallian and Vincentian mission to serve the poor. As such, the DMA administrators, staff, and teachers exist to serve the mission, rather than the mission serving them. In fact, “when the mission becomes the focus for organizational decision making, all other priorities such as personal and political agendas become secondary” (Proehl, 2001, p. 12). In this type of organization, all members within the school have a legitimate right to question any decision that is not reflective of the mission. In practice, this is a radical organizational type though many non-profit and public service organizations purport to be mission-driven organizations. As described by Peter Senge, a noted author and consultant,

It [having a mission driven organization] is so profoundly radical. It says, in essence, that those in positions of authority are not the source of authority. It says, rather, that the source of legitimate power in the organization is its guiding ideas (Senge, 1999, p. 60).

Though interviewees used different words to describe the mission, they generally agreed that DMA exists to educate the poor, helping them break out of the cycle of poverty while having more meaningful options in their lives. Impressively, a cross section of employees—from staff members who are not centrally involved in the students' education, to teachers who interact each day with students, to the president and principal—all had similar understandings of the school's mission. For example, one staff member described the mission in the following way,

De Marillac's mission is to give students from underserved families an opportunity to get the best education that they are able to get, so that they can be self-sufficient adults who are able to make a difference in this world—for themselves, for their families, and for others, in a positive way.

The interviewees discussed the importance of helping students believe they have options in their lives including the opportunity to move out of or to stay in the Tenderloin community if they so wished. This teacher's explanation of the school's mission was typical of others' responses,

I think our mission is to educate children of under-served backgrounds and to empower them to utilize their God-given gifts and to discover new gifts, so that they can lead a life of meaning and purpose and also a life of choice. I think something that's very unique about the model is that it really does focus on empowering the student so that they have choices.

To create and sustain this mission orientation, De Marillac hires employees who are aligned with the mission, provides on average 20 full days of professional development annually, involves the organizational members in decision-making, and always keeps the mission focus in the forefront. One of the teachers discussed the professional development she received, especially in her first and second years at the school, explaining that it "had everything

to do with understanding what we do here and understanding Lasallian education. I think that because we are taught that from the beginning and constantly reminded that this is what we do, people buy into it.” In addition to emphasizing understanding of the Lasallian and Vincentian roots of the school, the administration emphasizes understanding the students. One administrator stressed, “Our orientation is very intentional. We focus a lot on the needs of the students, so it’s not just logistics. It’s having the faculty understand where the students are coming from.” She went on further to describe the message delivered to new teachers:

You don’t come here to teach a subject. You come here to teach students. You need to understand that because their head is down on their desk or they’re falling asleep, that’s not disrespect to you. That’s because they didn’t sleep last night because mom and dad were fighting and they didn’t have dinner.

Central to the shared mission is the belief that though the students often come from troubled backgrounds, they are nevertheless *children-at-promise*. In this respect, students at DMA are viewed through a strengths-based lens, coupled with an understanding that strong community support is necessary to help students reach their goals and dreams in life (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). In contrast, the notion of *at risk students* dominates educational discourse. Labeling a child “at-risk” is to say that she or he will potentially have learning delays, drop out of school, use drugs, have poor self-esteem, become violent, and/or become pregnant. In other words, educational research reinforces links between negative environmental factors and experience of the abovementioned challenges for economically disadvantaged minority students.

De Marillac, similar to other San Miguel schools, has been forward-thinking in embracing an empowering, strengths-based model of education rather than the typical deficit model. With the belief that the students are children-at-promise rather than children-at-risk, the teachers challenge them, introduce them to new options and choices, and offer them multiple ways to succeed. In essence, they are living the mission of helping students find “options and choices in their lives without being limited by their geographic or economic circumstances.” The students and graduates also embrace this notion, as described by a graduate who offered this advice to DMA students:

Become limit breakers and do not be average. Once you graduate from De Marillac Academy, everyone will have lots of expectations of you, so never, ever, be afraid of becoming extraordinary.

**The family culture.** The one word that repeatedly surfaced during our interviews regardless of the interviewee was family. Interviewees shared examples of how the students are like family; the parents discussed how they feel like family at De Marillac; the way in which the teachers care about the students is like family; the staff and teachers, working together on a shared mission are like family; and even the outside partners and donors who make education possible for the DMA students are like family. The way in which parents were warmly greeted in Spanish upon entering the building, the support provided to students when challenged or struggling, the close peer relationships established over the five-year period, attending mass together with the teachers and staff, and the class meetings and retreats all created a closeness that was often associated with a family. When asked to describe what they liked about De Marillac, one student replied, “De Marillac is a place where my siblings have gone and where I wanted to go.” Another indicated, “De Marillac is the family that I have in California because I don’t get to see my family in Mexico.”

Given that the vast majority of students are Latina/o, the importance of family is perhaps even more prominent than in other settings with a different student population. The concept of *familismo* or the identification and attachment with the family within the Latino culture is well documented in the research literature (Smith-Morris, Morales-Campos, Alvarez, & Turner, 2013). It is also a popular notion within educational circles, frequently explaining why Latino students do well in school to please their parents or do poorly because they are pulled away from their studies due to family responsibilities. In either case, “first suggested as a core cultural value more than 40 years ago, familismo involves the elevation of the needs of the family (both nuclear and extended) over the needs of the individual” (Smith-Morris et al., 2013, p. 36). Thus, the family becomes the primary focus of responsibility and obligation as well as source of economic and emotional support. Smith-Morris et al. warned, however, against oversimplifying or extolling this concept, for as with any generalization, there will be exceptions to the rule and both positive and negative consequences of, in this case, familismo. Even so, throughout the interviews, it appears that the participants were pleased that De Marillac was like family.

Not surprisingly, intertwined throughout the interviews and the eighth grade essays were comments about the parents' role in the educational process. The students wanted to make their parents proud, the teachers consulted with the parents frequently, and the parents supported the lessons their children are learning at DMA. De Marillac cultivated a culture in which different organizational members pulled together to help the students and their families. For instance, one parent said, "I feel very supported by all the staff especially in this country where I don't have a family. I feel like I found a family here." Similarly another parent expressed, "I never thought that people who did not know me whatsoever would worry about my family and me. I feel blessed by this opportunity."

One of the school policies specifically reinforced this focus on family. When new students are enrolled into the school, family members are often accepted first. If there is a brother, sister, or cousin who is in the school, the goal is to keep the family together, and as noted by one administrator, the families appreciate this policy. The connections with the school are reinforced by the expectation that parents will be involved in their children's education. As noted by a counselor, in addition to parent-teacher conferences,

The parents are here generally at least once a month to gather with other parents...for the coffee meetings with the principal, we send a newsletter home every week in English and Spanish, we have counselors available to support the families. I believe [these things] personalize the experience...Plus we begin interviewing families and working with them through the admissions process when their children are in the third grade. We make clear that this commitment is beyond just the next 5 years but is really 9+ years in terms of the partnership we hope to have with them.

**Schoolwide learning expectations.** Though academic achievement was strongly emphasized at DMA, so were non-cognitive skills identified in the schoolwide learning expectations (SLEs). Six virtues—responsibility, compassion, gratitude, perseverance, leadership, and integrity—were practiced and taught throughout the curriculum and co-curricular activities. They are prominently placed on the walls, integrated into the curriculum, emphasized in counseling sessions, and rewarded each quarter. For example, one teacher talked about the virtue of perseverance, indicating,

Perseverance is another one of our school-wide learning expectations... When we read about, maybe in social studies or in religion, a group of people persevering, we talk about that and also students share personal examples.

Throughout our interviews and the eighth grade essays, the participants frequently referred to the SLEs. As noted by one of the teachers, just by identifying and focusing on the learning expectations, the students' attention is brought to the importance of these virtues. When the virtues are integrated into the curriculum and become a focus for counseling, they become prominent in the students' education. As one student expressed, he wanted to "live a life of virtue," even though when he first came to De Marillac, he did not even know what the various words in the SLEs meant.

The SLEs helped the students construct a foundation, a set of values, beliefs, and behaviors for how De Marillac students and graduates are expected to be. As pointed out by one teacher,

There are expectations that go along with [being a student at De Marillac], not just with your academics, but as a human being and a young adult in your community. The whole social skills piece... there are so many soft skills that they leave with, and they know that we have high expectations and hopefully that is instilled in them, so that they have it of themselves.

It was striking how important the SLEs were in the students' lives, as evidenced by the graduate interviews and student essays. Many schools have stated values and/or virtues, but they are not necessarily understood by or embraced by the various organizational members. In contrast, the DMA students, staff, and teachers knew the SLEs, readily discussed examples of each virtue, and understood their importance in the DMA approach to education.

**The student is first.** As noted from the interviews, the staff and teachers did whatever it took to help the students at De Marillac: The teachers engaged in differentiated instruction; the students received tutoring when needed; and assessment and counseling were available for students. Classroom discussions were held to help students develop their socio-emotional skills, and parent and teachers met to discuss student progress and/or challenges. The teachers arranged service projects and field trips, and students engaged in extracurricular activities.

Given the population that makes up the DMA student body, the staff members recognized the full range of needs the students had—from a nutritious breakfast to awards for hard work; from psychological testing to sports activities; from incremental discipline to opportunities to serve; and from spiritual development to school retreats. There was a great emphasis on tending to the whole child and to the unique needs and aspirations of each child. As described by one of the teachers,

With everything De Marillac provides, from the academic, spiritual, physical, emotional support, we [expect that] students, by the time they get out of here and out of our hands, are able to make decisions in life. Whether they are as important as school or work choices, or just who their friends are... [we hope] that they'll be able to [take actions] based on who they are as individuals, how they've been guided and directed, and feel wholeheartedly in themselves that these are the right choices for them.

The student focus extends past the eighth grade graduation. Staff members in the Graduate Support Program, one of the most important features of the San Miguel model, follow the graduates through high school and beyond. The importance of this ongoing support cannot be overemphasized as is evident from the eighth grade student essays. One student, who spoke for many, emphasized the relief she felt since “DMA still helps out all of us even when we graduate and they give us all advice on how to do great in high school.” Staff members shared anecdotes of graduates returning to DMA to receive support and counsel even when they were discouraged about how their lives were turning out. This ongoing support is part of the blend of services that enable De Marillac students to feel special and valued.

**A safe haven.** Some staff members expressed concern that students may receive too much support at DMA, and when they go to high school, they will flounder without the high level of attention and concern. Yet, researchers have found that students are more likely to thrive academically when they feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe. Synthesizing research on this topic, the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of educational organizations dedicated to improving learning in public schools, has identified four elements that promote safe and supportive student learning environments, three of which have particular relevance for De Marillac. They include: Creating a supportive yet challenging curriculum that emphasizes respectful

relationships and student involvement; implementing systematic approaches to supporting safety, including orderly classrooms and a continuum of support for the students; and involving family, students, staff, and the community (Learning First Alliance, 2001). As has been discussed throughout this article, De Marillac excelled in challenging students within a culture of support, providing ongoing support through high school and post-secondary education, and involving parents and others in the students' education.

The school also provided a safe environment in which students know what is expected, classrooms are orderly, and students feel protected. One of the graduates described what it is like within the grounds at De Marillac, "Walking outside is just like poverty, drugs, addictions, a lot of things that younger kids shouldn't be seeing in the neighborhood and once you step into the door, it's like a whole different world." In this different world, the staff and teachers intentionally emphasized that the student has a job—not to be a babysitter, breadwinner, or translator—but merely to be a student. In the words of one staff member,

Their first job here, and we tell them repeatedly, is to be a student. Your mom and dad are at work. That's their job to take care of you. Your job is to come here every day and to learn, so redirecting them or helping them to understand that, I think that those small things help them learn.

Many interviewees discussed the sense of safety the students felt within the actual school grounds and the sense of emotional safety they felt as a member of the school "family." A teacher explained that students are able to feel vulnerable and thus are able to excel academically by challenging themselves, thinking creatively, taking risks, and rebounding after failure while feeling supported in their school environment. Continuing to explain why the students felt safe at De Marillac, one administrator stated,

I think that they see us as being a safe haven, where there's structure and there's expectations of them, and where they're free to be kids. They come here, and they know what's expected of them. They know that there are adults who care about them, who can greet them by name.

In addition to safe classrooms, there were regular classroom meetings to discuss interpersonal challenges and other structures in place to foster a

supportive school culture. In addition, De Marillac ran a counseling program where issues of emotional safety were addressed. Since many students have witnessed or have been the victims of trauma and some suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, the counseling program helped them process their feelings and also deal with learning disabilities. One graduate reported in his interview that at De Marillac he was diagnosed with depression while others found out they had learning disabilities. In these instances, the students were provided the support and skills needed so they could succeed in school without feeling anxious, distressed, and frightened.

### Student Skills and Attributes

As previously mentioned, the driving force behind this study was to examine the skills and attributes the students at De Marillac Academy learn that enable them, in contrast to many of their peers in public schools, to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education at very high rates. To answer the second research question, we drew from what participants identified as the most important lessons students learn at DMA. We focused on responses from the students and graduates, and to a lesser extent, responses from the staff members and teachers. Each theme is described below.

**Perseverance.** By far, the attribute most frequently mentioned when asked about the most important lesson learned at DMA was perseverance. For example, one student wrote, “Probably the most important lesson I’ve learned is to never give up. To continue no matter what. To get up when I fail.” This young male student went on, “They have taught me that there is always hope and that anything can be achieved if you want it badly enough.” Similarly the graduates discussed the importance of working hard and persevering in order to achieve their goals. One graduate, who is enrolled in college, said, “Just growing up in the Tenderloin, I learned to stick to things being hard. Having a school in the Tenderloin was important because it made you want to get out—to have choices—not to stay there forever.”

One of the teachers, who interacts daily with students, also discussed how he sees the students focusing on perseverance,

They see themselves as persevering and you can hear it if you read the poetry of the eighth grade students. You can hear it in how they talk about their struggles and overcoming the challenges of their lives even though they are only 13 and 14 years old.

Numerous administrators and teachers suggested that the students enrolled at De Marillac have already developed determination and resilience especially those from immigrant families. For example, one teacher expressed, “I think the resilience of our students ... in overcoming the variety of adversity they encounter is one of the strongest attributes that our students bring to the De Marillac community and then bring toward their own success.” Another teacher stated his belief that the students recognize how critical perseverance is for their future success. “They recognize that if they don’t have perseverance in their character, then they are not going to get very far, and the wonderful thing is that the students know that.” He later emphasized, “That is one thing they truly know when they leave here.”

The parents also play a critical role in helping to instill within their children the need to persevere. Many parents talked about their responsibility to work in collaboration with the DMA staff. For example, one parent underscored, “It is not just the teacher’s responsibility; it is the parents and the teachers; we are a team. We have to work as a team so it can work effectively.” Similarly another thoughtful parent remarked,

As parents we also have a heavy responsibility, which is to model the same values and to support the school. The school cannot do everything, they can’t make miracles ... To begin with, the parents are the first educators and we have to instill proper principles and give good guidance.

**Setting goals for the future.** Many participants discussed how DMA helps students identify their passion, envision their future, and then undertake short-term actions to accomplish the long-term goals. The focus on the future begins with the admissions essay written in the third grade, asking the prospective students to describe what their life will be like in five years and continues through to the eighth grade when students are asked the same question, among others, about their future. The future focus continues throughout high school when the graduates interact with DMA staff especially the Graduate Support Program staff members who help them shape their goals as they finish their high school education.

Both the eighth grade students and graduates shared how DMA staff members helped them envision their future. For example, one of the graduates emphasized that De Marillac taught him to “really find what [he is] passionate about and stay with that... If you’re not truly satisfied, then what is the point?” An eighth grade student, who is just embarking on a major

change in her life, wrote, “De Marillac has helped me discover my goals and learn how to achieve them...By using the virtues, also known as our SLEs [Student Learning Expectations], I have learned how to reach my goals.” Many of the students have identified ambitious goals while at De Marillac such as this female student who declared in her eighth grade essay,

I have a long-term goal of becoming President of the United States. Becoming President of the United States would be meaningful to me because it would be a goal and a dream come true... I am going to be able to show the world a woman can run a country, and that women and men are equal in all jobs not just politics.

In contrast to these lofty ambitions, some students were motivated in a different way, namely, to transcend their life circumstances, being aware that they live in an area inhabited by persons struggling with financial, emotional, and chemical addiction issues. This student pointedly spoke to her goal, “I have to show others that not every person who lives in the Tenderloin is going to become a drug addict or homeless.” Largely feeling that De Marillac gave them the tools to transcend their life circumstances, another student pinpointed this sentiment, saying, “De Marillac has given me the opportunity to rise above the community that I live in and make a change in the world.”

Many students recognized that they have options and choices in their future that their parents did not. They wanted to make their parents proud of them as they continue their education and pursue meaningful employment. To be the carrier of a family’s hopes and dreams is not uncommon in families with limited financial means. The DMA students appeared to feel this sense of duty acutely, but also willingly. As one student shared, “I want to give my parents what they never could have and I want to show them that I can go far. I just want to make them proud.” From the parent interviews, it is evident that the parents were gratified with their children’s academic accomplishments as well as other lessons learned at De Marillac. A parent spoke about the impact the school has made on her children’s discovery of who they want to be,

Students leave with a desire of wanting to become a part of something. And some of their goals are connected with De Marillac’s goals, for example, my daughter wants to be a sheriff because she wants to help the people. My son wants to be a counselor, as he wants to help people as well. That is a goal. They leave with that seed planted in them that they want to become something and help others.

**Service to others.** De Marillac, like many Lasallian schools, has the motto, Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve, that focuses on service. Though most graduates did not cite this motto, they spoke about learning the importance of service to others and giving back especially to the school and community. They discussed the role that the Graduate Support Program plays in helping them sustain their commitment by requiring them to come back for service projects after leaving DMA. One of the teachers reinforced this view, saying,

On our walls we have *Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve*. Even though they are young here and they really don't grasp the concept yet, when they leave and come back, it's so clear and evident that they understand that message.

Even the eighth grade students were aware of the impact the service projects have had on them. For example, one of the females described how "many service trips helped me realize that by doing something so small as volunteering at the food bank or making sandwiches for the homeless, you can make a HUGE change." She concluded, "De Marillac Academy changed the way I view my future and the world." Countless teachers, staff, administrators, and graduates identified the numerous ways in which the students have engaged in service projects. And, given the students' indebtedness to DMA, how committed they are to giving back to De Marillac and the Tenderloin community, especially the homeless.

Many graduates discussed how they have become more compassionate and generous with those less fortunate. For example, when asked about the most important lesson he learned at De Marillac, one graduate quietly revealed that when he came there he hated homeless people, disclosing that they harassed him all the time. He went on to say,

[the teachers] taught me not to...because you do not know their story. That, to me, just opened up my mind. I was like, 'Oh, that's right!' They could've come [*sic*] from a war, war veterans, just bad luck in general, just all around. Then I remember we actually made some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless and gave them out ... for me that was more valuable than anything.

This lesson to serve was also reinforced by the parents. Many parents who are so grateful for their children's education at De Marillac recognize the

importance of their children returning the gift of generosity as reflected in this parent's comments,

Above all I think De Marillac prepares the students and they let them know that they have to prepare themselves in this life and in the future. The students need to give back the help they received—they need to be generous. People can always give back, they can smile at others ... they can be compassionate and respectful toward others. I think this school tries to teach students to ... give back whatever [they] can.

**Socio-emotional skills.** Socio-emotional learning is a catchall term that covers such skills as being able to manage emotions, build long lasting relationships, communicate effectively, work well in groups, and show empathy among other skills. At De Marillac, this category also can include the social skills of being able to make eye contact and shake hands with others, speaking forthrightly in groups, and as one graduate said, “just hav[ing] manners.” Through the counseling program, classroom and family meetings, class retreats, and extracurricular activities, students are taught to express and manage their emotions, deal with disappointment, handle conflict, and be respectful. Again the parent's role is critical in helping to reinforce the importance of these socio-emotional skills. As one parent emphasized, “If at school they tell the kids to shake everybody's hand with respect and at home we tell them, ‘don't shake his hand, don't shake her hand,’ the kid will be confused.”

The Schoolwide Learning Expectations also help students develop the skills needed to interact effectively with others and in groups. Many eighth graders wrote similar statements as this young man, “The most important lesson that I have learned are the Student Learning Expectations (SLEs). They are Responsibility, Compassion, Gratitude, Perseverance, Leadership, and Integrity. They helped me think before I do.” The teachers emphasize basic social skills that enable the students to have greater confidence in their interactions with others including with adults. Here is one teacher's explanation,

We offer students opportunities to be leaders in so many ways, to participate in choir, to be student ambassadors who greet visitors. They learn how to make eye contact, to give a hearty handshake, and to be self-confident. The teachers make efforts to have them get up in front of the classroom and read aloud, or do presentations to gain poise and confidence.

Another teacher shared his perspective on how students learn the socio-emotional skills that help them as they transition to high school. He discussed the annual fundraiser, which is a very professional event held in one of the top hotels in San Francisco, noting,

[The event is] largely student driven. They are the presenters. They are the singers. They are the poets. They are the hosts of that event and ... compared to the other schools I'm familiar with, more responsibility is given to the students, and it's the philosophy that if you give them the responsibility, they'll rise to the occasion, and I think our students do very well with that.

### Discussion

Seeking answers to what accounts for the students' success in high school and beyond, the DMA leaders were interested in identifying the non-cognitive skills and attributes that students developed at the school and also the policies and practices that enable students to develop them. Though many non-cognitive items were identified in this research, the most prominent were students being able to persevere in the face of challenges, set goals for the future, commit to serving others (especially the De Marillac and Tenderloin communities), and develop strong socio-emotional skills such as communicating effectively, dealing with conflict, and working well in groups. Having recently read *How Children Succeed* (Tough, 2012), the DMA leaders were especially drawn to the concept of grit and its significance, if at all, at De Marillac. Further given the discussion and controversy surrounding the concept of grit, we were particularly intrigued with the question of whether or not grit can be taught.

As a qualitative study, we realize that we cannot identify a cause-and-effect relationship between non-cognitive factors such as grit and student achievement. From our research, however, though not substantiated by quantitative measures, it appears that DMA students have what Angela Duckworth (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007) describes as "grit." For example, according to the students and graduates, the two most important lessons learned at De Marillac were persevering in the face of difficulty and setting short-term and long-term goals including career goals that make a contribution to the common good—both of which comprise grit. Through the school's shared mission of providing choice and options for the poor; the

family atmosphere with its emphasis on building relationships; its holistic education, which is embodied in the Schoolwide Learning Expectations; the staff's commitment to student-centeredness and high expectations; and the safe learning environment, there is a consistent focus on helping students identify options for their future and developing persistence in the face of obstacles. We believe that the combination of perseverance, clearly identified short-term and future goals, and well-developed socio-emotional skills as identified in the SLEs offer the DMA graduates a springboard for success in high school and beyond.

Though we are confident that De Marillac has helped students develop the two elements of grit—as well as other non-cognitive skills—it is not, in our opinion, because they are teaching to a trend that has gained prominence in educational circles. Rather as noted in our interviews, the staff and teachers believe the students, given their life circumstances, already have what Duckworth (2016) calls “grittiness.” When they arrive at De Marillac, which teaches the virtues that Duckworth and others have found to be embedded in grit, they thrive. It is likely that there is a psychosocial interaction between what the students bring with them as incoming students (their psychological being) and the curriculum, support, and safety they experience (the social environment) when they are enrolled at De Marillac. Additionally the San Miguel model tempers its focus on individual grit by recognizing the importance of other non-cognitive skills such as those embodied in the SLEs.

As researchers, we focused on collecting multiple sources of data as dispassionately as possible to identify ways in which De Marillac helps its students develop non-cognitive skills. We never used the term “grit” in our interviews, and we were not looking for evidence that De Marillac helps students develop grit. In fact, we were quite surprised that the most important lessons that the students and graduates learned at De Marillac coincided with the concept of grit. Even so, we are not certain that grit *can be taught* in our schools by instituting a curriculum and reward system that emphasizes grit. We do believe, however, that the two components of grit *can be reinforced* as at De Marillac, that is, with several caveats. At DMA, it is likely that students and graduates further develop grittiness because the focus on perseverance and purpose is and always has been aligned with the school's mission, culture, and values. The emphasis on persisting through challenges, seeking and receiving support when facing struggles, identifying short-term and long-term goals, having life-changing service experiences, and developing empathy and gratitude were all part of the students' education at De Maril-

lac before the concept of grit was first identified in 2007. We doubt that if DMA tried to integrate a standardized curriculum designed to develop grit, which was divorced from or contrary to the mission, culture, and values, that it would be successful.

We also suspect that perseverance has particular relevance for the DMA students precisely because they live in the Tenderloin District. As noted in the interviews, the students and graduates recognize that they must develop perseverance to move out of the neighborhood in which their parents are trapped, believing that education is their means of escape. From their own words, they feel the contrast between their experience of hope and endless possibilities at De Marillac and what they observe when walking to or from school. Perseverance and goal setting may resonate less with students enrolled in suburban or affluent neighborhoods where the drive to escape is less profound.

Sylvia Chase, prominent journalist, has her own insights about why De Marillac is a special place, using video and narrative to describe the school, noting that,

De Marillac is like a sparkling jewel in a worn out setting. Surrounded by poverty, drugs, gangs, violence, De Marillac's precious light glows. It is a loving and well-organized, highly-principled family made up of donors, volunteers, students, their parents, teachers, staff and counselors. And, more pro-bono counselors than I have ever seen in any school in the country! And always, there are the Daughters of Charity and De La Salle Christian Brothers whose mission is to serve and educate the poor. (Chase, 2013)

### Conclusion

De Marillac Academy, as urban Catholic schools before it, is an effective educational alternative for inner city youth. The San Miguel model itself, which focuses on the critical middle school years and a favorable teacher-to-student ratio, is designed to help children who are below grade succeed in college preparatory high schools. DMA does this not only by emphasizing academic quality, preparedness, and extensive support, but also by helping students develop a set of skills such as persevering, setting goals, managing emotions, communicating effectively, working well in groups, and the like so they can successfully transition into high school. Based on the students' and

graduates' perceptions, it is likely that DMA graduates are "grittier," using Duckworth's (2016) term, than when they arrived, given the emphasis that is placed on the virtues of perseverance, responsibility, and compassion in curricular and co-curricular activities and in interactions with staff and teachers at the school. It is not possible, however, from this research to single out grit as the most important factor leading to the graduates' success in high school and beyond; it is likely one among many factors such as described by Zakrzewski (2014), "[Grit] is only one piece of the puzzle of human development. Cultivating other qualities such as meaning and purpose, empathy, compassion, hope, forgiveness, and gratitude are also part of being human" (n.p.)—and possibly of being an achieving student.

With urban Catholic schools closing at unprecedented rates, often being replaced by "religious charter schools" (Proehl, Everett, & Starnes, 2015), lessons can be learned about how to sustain Catholic schools for the urban poor by examining the successful San Miguel schools. De Marillac Academy is such a school that offers hope for the children and their parents in the Tenderloin District, offering a model for creating a culture that treats students as though they are at the threshold of being "at-promise" rather than being "at-risk."

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