

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

GRIT: The Power of Passion and Perseverance

by Angela Duckworth

New York, USA: Scribner, 2016, 329 pages

ISBN: 9-781501-111105 (hardcover)

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Do you have what it takes to be successful? Can you help your students develop passion and perseverance? What's more important: talent and ability or hard work and stick-to-itivenesss? Angela Duckworth argues effectively that what you need to succeed is a passion for what you do and the perseverance to stick with it. These characteristics she defines as "grit."

Duckworth is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2013 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship (the so-called Genius Award) in part for her work on grit. It is perhaps the research she conducted at West Point and reported in the magazine section of the Sunday New York Times that first caught the attention of much of the general public (Tough, 2011). The West Point study "showed that grittier cadets were more likely to complete their first summer of training" (Duckworth, et al., 2007, p. 1096).

Duckworth's approach to telling the story of grit is best described in her own words. She concludes the book by telling the reader that this book may be thought of as a conversation over coffee. A conversation over coffee is, in fact, a good metaphor for the style of the book. To extend the metaphor she has coffee with two distinct but overlapping

types of readers. One of her coffee partners is an academic (student or professor) who is knowledgeable in a general way about the field of psychology but is not a specialist in positive psychology. The other person engaged with her in this coffee conversation is an educated and interested individual who does not study psychology but is widely interested in understanding her fellow humans. Duckworth includes both persons simultaneously in one conversation, interweaving the two themes of the conversation. These themes alternate as she provides examples and explanations of each. This approach allows her to inform the readers about her research without either dumbing-down the extensive research that she has done, or talking over the heads of non-psychologists.

This conversation over coffee is framed by twin storylines, which in one form or another embody one or more characteristics of grit. One set of characters comprises the people who possess grit. She often calls these people paragons. The role of the paragons provides a near first-person understanding of grit: the story as the possessors of grit tell it. These portraits are often derived from interviews she conducted with the subjects. The second storyline is how she came to develop and test grit. Again, interviews with researchers who have contributed to some of the building blocks of the theory are valuable sources, but she also uses ideas gleaned from her wide reading of psychology. Even when not using the extracts from interviews, she presents her understanding of what she has learned from other psychologist in a storied manner.

Getting back to the questions that began this review, that is, do you have what it takes to be successful? Can you help your students develop passion and perseverance? What's more important: talent and ability or hard work and stick-to-itiveness? Duckworth presents the beginning of an answer in her second and third chapters, "Distracted by talent" and "Effort costs twice." She makes a case that we as teachers, students, parents, coaches, and others have fooled ourselves and been fooled by others, including psychologists, into thinking that talent is the characteristic that is most needed for a person to succeed and excel. No, says Duckworth, effort, and persistence or perseverance are the key elements in success. Once she has convinced us that research and observation have demonstrated that talent is less important than effort, she goes on to demonstrate how effort counts twice. Her simple but instructive explanation is that effort allows for a person to build a skill, and once the skill is developed, more effort is needed to achieve. She formulates this idea thus: Talent x effort = skill; Skill x effort = achievement. Talent is needed, but skill counts twice.

These two ideas, as explored by experts in human behavior and exemplified by the stories of individuals identified as having reached high levels of achievement, are woven throughout these chapters and the rest of the book. The general plan of each chapter is to begin with an exemplar or what she calls a paradigm of high achievement, followed by a story of a researcher who has contributed one element of understanding to the role of grit in achievement. This back and forth storytelling provides a uniquely comprehensive understanding of grit, how it developed as a theory, and how it has been used by these successful people, and by implication, how we might make use of these ideas for ourselves, our children, and our students.

See how you measure up on your effort and perseverance in Chapter 4, “How Gritty are you?” Then follow this narrative that continues for eight more informative and lively chapters. A careful reading will provide many personal insights and point you toward a better understanding of the role of character in education. See one of her more scholarly articles to gain a wider perspective on her scholarship (Duckworth, 2007).

The task of the reviewer is to review the book at-hand, not the book you wished the writer had written. That being said, I will make a very short incursion into that forbidden terrain. Given Duckworth’s extensive work in education (she was the founder and director of Summerbridge Cambridge, academic enrichment program, a mathematics teacher in different schools, and the Chief Operating Office for GreatSchools.net), she might have provided more information on how grit and some specific teaching strategies work together. For this reviewer, it would have been of interest to see more of this integration into her book. But the book that Duckworth actually wrote is invaluable to a wide audience of teachers, coaches, scholars, and parents. This is a book worth reading, re-reading, and passing on to others.

References

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