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Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance

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Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance.

Duckworth, Angela, 2016
New York, New York: Scribner

Reviewed by Emilie K. Hoffman

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In her six-minute *TED Talk*, Angela Duckworth concluded, “We need to be gritty about getting our kids grittier” (Duckworth, 2013). Her presentation took the education world by storm, and since 2013, over nine million people have listened to Duckworth’s words in order to better understand what grit entails and its relationship with success. With the release of her new book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Duckworth presents an in-depth look at her research on how grit, not talent, is the most influential trait in an individual achieving her or his potential.

Simply put, grit is “passion and perseverance for long-term goals” (p. 269). Duckworth refutes the common assumption that natural talent or intelligence, such as IQ, is the most determinative factor in student achievement. Not only is grit critical to success, but it is also a trait that can be grown and developed in any person. These two ideas provide the framework for her argument about the importance of encouraging grit in the realm of education as well as all areas of a person’s life. I found the book worthwhile and challenging, as it caused me not only to carefully consider my own commitment but also reflect upon the long-term vision I have for myself and for the students I serve.

Grit begins with a personal story in which Duckworth recounts a conversation with her father from her youth. Duckworth describes her father's obsession with being talented or smart. She shares his bluntness in telling her and her siblings, "You know, you're no genius!" (Duckworth, 2016, xiii). Years later, when Duckworth received the MacArthur Fellowship, also known as a "genius grant," she flips the title on its head by not attributing her success to any natural ability but instead to her intentional passion and perseverance for her research. Following the preface, the author divides the book into three parts with the first section outlining the essence of grit and its importance, followed by the two latter sections describing internal and external processes to grow grit. Duckworth constructs her argument by intertwining her own empirical research and other psychologists' findings. Alongside the research, she uses personal narratives throughout, drawing from her own life and the lives of participants from her studies.

Duckworth acknowledges that talent and skill matter, but not as much as effort. She breaks down the concept into two formulas. First, in order to build skill, invest effort in your talent. Then, if you want to achieve, "take your acquired skills and use them" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 42). So talent plus effort results in skill, and skill plus effort becomes achievement. She moves on and provides a version of the Grit Scale, allowing readers an opportunity to reflect upon their own grittiness. After the reader determines his or her score, Duckworth concludes the first part by reminding readers that grit is built over time and with life experience.

In the second part of the book, Duckworth provides four psychological assets for growing grit from the inside out: (1) identify an interest; (2) practice a lot; (3) find purpose in it; and (4) lean into hope, which she defines as the belief one's efforts can improve the future. The final part of the book focuses on growing grit from the outside in, or in other words, the external influences on grit, such as teachers, mentors, context, and culture. This last section reinforces the means of developing grit and the understanding that grit is a characteristic capable of being encouraged and fostered in others.

Duckworth's research has implications for individuals attempting to develop their own grit as well as for parents, educators, and leaders who are seeking to empower others to pursue their long-term goals. The author challenges the promotion of talent or an innate x-factor. As an alternative, Duckworth emphasizes the mundane ability to engage in attitudes and practices to attain one's goals.

While achievement matters, is it the end Christian educators ought to desire above all others on behalf of their students? As Christians, we must carefully consider the cultural obsession with competing, winning, and being better. Today's college students describe feeling overwhelmed from the rising pressure to perform (Schwarz, 2015). We notice a generation wrestling between the cultural infatuation with résumé virtues or seeking meaning and purpose over the grind of climbing the ladder (Brooks, 2015). Does grit encourage *doing* over *being*? Duckworth admits that if forced to choose, she wants her children to develop goodness over greatness. In this case, how might parents or educators promote both character (*being*) and grit (*doing*) in the journey of intentional living? Duckworth acknowledges early in the book that her theory of achievement is not complete, nor is it all that matters. Perhaps, future research might seek to understand the importance of goodness (*being*) alongside greatness (*doing*) and its relationship to human flourishing.

Grit challenges educational structures that are blindly committed to knowledge transmission or to rewarding natural intelligence and instead reinforces the importance of education, which promotes social and emotional formation in students. While Duckworth touches on her concern for students with a relative lack of parental support or opportunities, specifically students of low socioeconomic status, she does not fully address a plan for helping such individuals in improving their grit and life circumstances. She plainly states, "They need all the things you and I give to our own children. What poor kids need is a lot" (p. 238). Rather than being overwhelmed by this conclusion, let us as educators respond with a deeper commitment to developing relationships with marginalized students and transforming structures to empower them.

As Christians in higher education, Duckworth's research has implications not only for developing our students but also for improving our leadership and campus culture. In the changing landscape of higher education, faith-based institutions face concerns over funding, meeting the needs of the changing demographics of students, and maintaining mission amid fears over religious freedom. Carefully clarifying our long-term vision while simultaneously improving our grit will benefit Christian higher education. At the same time, being gritty does not negate the need for wisdom as institutions discern next steps toward helping students meet their goals. In a world where small actions toward long-term commitments may not be making headlines, Duckworth reminds us that the quiet work of effort and practice is imperative for achievement.

Emilie K. Hoffman will complete her Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University in May 2017.

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