



True Grit: The Key to Future Academic Success

In 2010 the Cohen brothers directed a remake of the 1969 movie *True Grit* which starred John Wayne and was based on a novel by Charles Portis. The story follows a young woman who hires a U.S. Marshall to track down her father's murderer. She picks the meanest, most determined Marshall to find him, saying, "They tell me you are a man with true grit." Turns out true grit isn't just a movie or a character trait, it's the basis for a plethora of research in education.

Traditionally, academic success has been linked to talent – measured by test scores – that is linked to innate traits that we are born with. Einstein was born with the physics gene, Tiger Woods was born with the golf gene; of course, hard work and practice was involved as well but that doesn't make up for a biological lacking. Or does it? Maybe surprisingly, there is no PGA gene. The intrinsic nature of talent is overrated. Research is proving that talent is deliberate practice and work – grit!

Paul Tough's book *How Children Succeed* argues that the qualities that matter most in being successful in life are those that have to do with character: perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism and self-control. For the first time, researchers and educators are using the tools of science to peel back the mysteries of character. Early adversity affects the conditions of children's lives, but it also alters the physical development of the brain. Much of this research is being led by Angela Duckworth, a current psychology professor and former middle and high school math teacher.

As a teacher Duckworth noticed what most of us know: students who tried hardest did the best, and the students who didn't try very hard didn't do very well. She started looking at the role of effort in academic success and her research focuses on "grit," or what she defines as "sticking with things over the very long term until you master them." She has concluded that grit is as essential as intelligence when it comes to achievement.

We know how to measure intelligence in a matter of minutes, but intelligence leaves a lot unexplained. Why, for instance, do many "smart" people under-achieve? Why do some high-achievers score low on the ACT or TCAPs? Duckworth's research found that smarter students actually had *less* grit than their peers who scored lower on an intelligence test. Often people who are not as "bright" compensate by working harder and with more determination. In her studies, the "grittier" students actually had higher GPAs than the "smarter" students.

Tough's studies have shown that a good GPA, even from a low-performing high school, is a better predictor of whether a student will finish college than a high mark on the ACT or SAT. GPAs reward perseverance, character, time management, and just plain old-fashioned hard work.

Think of the NFL Combine: players perform in short bursts under conditions of high motivation. The purpose of the event is to see what the players are capable of, to determine their potential. The problem is that the NFL "real world" doesn't resemble the NFL Combine. Instead, success in the real world depends on *sustained* performance, on being able to practice, to work hard, to be determined and persistent.

Of course, this new research begs the question, "Can grit be taught?" In his research, Tough visited schools for the elite and the poor and found that both sets of students have a problem with failure: the wealthy kids don't see enough of it to learn resilience and the poor kids see too much to learn persistence. There are examples of teachers and schools who are taking their foot off the grades-homework-tests gas pedal and are being successful using discipline, habituation and a careful reframing of the way students react and think.

His point is that an easy A will help kids less than a hard-won B. Levine, a family therapist to the wealthy, has spent years counseling students whose high academic performance left them emotionally frail. Her advice is less emphasis on grades and more emphasis on values such as determination and perseverance. Success is never easy. Thomas Edison made over 1,000 unsuccessful attempts at inventing the light bulb. But he gave us some good advice: Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.