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Book Review: Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance

Abstract

I first stumbled across the research of Angela Duckworth after she was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 2013 for her work investigating the character traits that impact the achievement of long-term goals. So, when it was announced that she would be publishing a book in 2016, I immediately pre-ordered copy so that I could dig into her insights as soon as possible. When I received my copy of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* in the mail, I was excited to crack it open... and then the self-doubt settled in. "What if, after reading the brilliant ideas of a scholar whom I highly regard, I realize that I have no grit... What if I don't have what it takes?" I was terrified. But, I am convinced that I am not alone. In our current educational culture, one that reinforces a transactional ideology that success is unequivocally defined by test scores and GPA, what is one to do if they literally do not "measure up" to the competition? Is that the end of the road? Is success forever out of reach?

Book Review**Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance**

Matthew L. Johnson, Bryan College

Duckworth, A. L. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY: Scribner. ISBN 978-1-5011-1110-5, 330 pages, hardcover.

I first stumbled across the research of Angela Duckworth after she was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 2013 for her work investigating the character traits that impact the achievement of long-term goals. So, when it was announced that she would be publishing a book in 2016, I immediately pre-ordered my copy so that I could dig into her insights as soon as possible. When I received my copy of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* in the mail, I was excited to crack it open... and then the self-doubt settled in. "What if, after reading the brilliant ideas of a scholar whom I highly regard, I realize that I have no grit... What if I don't have what it takes?" I was terrified. But, I am convinced that I am not alone. In our current educational culture, one that reinforces a transactional ideology that success is unequivocally defined by test scores and GPA, what is one to do if they literally do not "measure up" to the competition? Is that the end of the road? Is success forever out of reach?

Fortunately, Duckworth, much like noted scholar, Carol Dweck (2006), has found in her research that success is not wholly based on innate cognitive skill, natural affinity toward a given task, or raw talent. Rather, she characterizes the non-cognitive character trait of grit, something that Duckworth classifies as a strength of will, as a critical factor in success and long-term goal achievement. In this book, Duckworth recounts her interviews with a broad and varied group of grit paragons, including academics, CEOs, athletes, and concert musicians. The book is divided into three sections, the first offering an extensive conversation regarding what grit is and why it is worth talking about within the broader context of our human experience. In the midsection of the book, Duckworth discusses the internal characteristics that impact grit, with the

final section investigating the influence of external environments on an individual's grit development.

In a previous work, Duckworth defined grit as the convergence of the personal characteristics of effort and interest (Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth, 2014). Additionally, she states that the grit process "entails working strenuously toward challenges ... despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1088). In her initial section of this book, the never give up mantra rings loud and clear. As indicated in the book subtitle, as well as the empirical research that Duckworth cites, this combination of passion and perseverance is the critical key to grit development. She reinforces the importance of this combination by addressing, not in an overly formulaic way, the mixture of resilience and hard work, as well as a clearly defined and directive purpose, as necessary elements for developing grit.

Additionally, Duckworth unpacks our cultural construct of talent being a key predictor of long-term success. She certainly does not completely discount natural ability, but states that "talent is no guarantee of grit" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 10). This is a statement that is qualified within the framework of potential being a starting point, but the individual's use of his/her potential – how that potential is acted upon – as being a truer path toward success. This might also be conceptualized by differentiating the ideas of aptitude and perseverance. A student can have a high aptitude in a given subject, but that does not guarantee a high level of achievement. The persistence piece comes into play when a student is faced with an instance of failure – will they give up or will they try again until they achieve mastery? Is failure a speedbump or a roadblock? Passion, the other component of Duckworth's definition of grit, is what keeps the individual coming back after a failure. A high level of interest in a given task provides motivation to rise in the face of adversity. If an individual is passionate about what they are

working toward – whether that is learning to play the cello, working an algebraic equation, or beating their own personal record for running a marathon – the impact of intentional and effortful practice when the task gets difficult is an important component of long-term success. Duckworth powerfully drives this point home in stating that, if effort is not part of the equation, “your talent is nothing more than unmet potential... your skill is nothing more than what you could have done, but didn’t” (Duckworth, 2016, p. 51).

That idea of intentional and effortful practice implies that grit can be developed, which echoes what Duckworth has found in her study of human performance and persistence. This may be illustrated by the admiration of a highly skilled athlete or musician. Often, we idolize the exhibition of what we consider immense talent without regard for intense hours of practice that led to the world-class level of excellence that we see performed. If the circumstances are right, Duckworth indicates that grit can increase. In addition to interest and perseverance, and clear purpose, she also highlights the importance of hope in the grit development process – the mention of hope is not added as an isolated idea, but rather a foundational component of passion, practice, and direction. These four factors – interest, practice, purpose, and hope – are aspects of grit that Duckworth proposes can be developed from within the individual. Additionally, there are environmental factors that promote grit development, some of these that are related to parental and home influence, while others are related to school or long-term commitment to accomplishment in athletics, the arts, or other extracurricular activities.

So, why does this matter? What difference does considering the impact of a book like *Grit* make on how we prepare future teachers? First of all, teaching is a vulnerable profession, and teachers often take the brunt of frustration from students, parents, and others. Teaching is not for the faint of heart. It takes energy, expertise, and long-term commitment. Teaching takes grit. This book could be impactful as a text in an introductory or capstone course in any teacher preparation program. From the introductory point-of-view, *Grit* could be used to help prepare the prospective teacher for what lies ahead of him professionally. This book could be a meaningful tool for helping cultivate grit in his own life as he considers if a career in teaching is a good fit for him. Additionally, from the

capstone perspective, reading *Grit* as a part of a student teaching seminar could help a preservice teacher rediscover her passion for educating young people as she considers her role in the grit formation of the students in her own classroom. Finally, as we consider the idea of life and learning being a continuous and multifaceted journey, our work as Christians in teacher preparation programs also demands that we consider how what we do in the classroom impacts the spiritual development of our students. There are some strong connections between faith and grit and hope and purpose. Guiding students toward becoming the best versions of themselves takes time and dedication. It requires that we strive to wisely aid them in exploring their individual purpose in this life while also cultivating the idea that the work of the profession of teaching strongly connects with the work of the Kingdom. Intentionally helping students develop a persistently gritty faith in the face of difficulties, trials, and challenges is certainly the ultimate aim of Christian higher education.

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