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How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character by Paul Tough

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How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character

Paul Tough

Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2012.

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In an effort to help students succeed we steep them in homework, emphasize the importance of grades, and, to some extent, convey that test scores are the only goal that students should aspire for. There is probably an underlying assumption that somehow test scores will translate into an ability to navigate difficult life circumstances and also lead to a happy life. Paul Tough questions these well-intentioned assumptions in his book *How Children Succeed*. He grapples with questions that we as educators, policy-makers and parents constantly struggle with: “Which skills and traits *really* (italics added) lead to success? How do these skills develop?” (p. xvii)

In chapter 1, Tough delves deeply into the cognitive and physical effects of poverty-related stress. His quest leads to an unexpected journey from schools to clinics, where he tries to connect the dots. By juxtaposing the story of a pediatrician and a school principal surmounting similar odds for improving the lot of disadvantaged youth, Tough expands on the pathways through which stress manifests itself for disadvantaged youth. He then connects these research findings to well-known studies that indicate the importance of close nurturance provided by caregivers. Where he goes beyond is by providing evidence that these parenting skills can be taught to parents, even to parents who face stressful life conditions. This is especially beneficial because, rather than assigning blame or presenting a myopic view by speaking to only one segment of the population, Tough suggests ways to improve outcomes for all children. Thus, he teases out effective research-based strategies applicable for helping parents from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter 2 is the holy grail of this book, since Tough researches a contemporary definition of character and its role not only in academics but also in life successes and failures. The articulation of character and the role of character strengths in success make this riveting chapter the essence of this book. Tough skillfully traverses through two diverse schools and their struggles with defining and applying character strengths into their school curriculums. While doing so, he explores the notion of character in the educational domain and provides examples of recent initiatives to quantify and measure it. He draws on research conducted by Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, Angela Duckworth, Walter Mischel, Carmit Segal, Brent Robert, and Gene Smith. Tough reports that “strengths of character,” which included being “conscientious, responsible, insistently orderly, not prone to day-dreaming, determined, persevering” were “three times more successful in predicting college performance than any combination of cognitive rating including SAT scores and class rank” (p. 72). Tough articulates the notion of grit that Angela Duckworth proposes and argues for the importance of character strengths.

In chapter 3, Tough examines the world of chess and chess masters, yet again exploring the question of which children succeed. He seems particularly intrigued by the successes of Elizabeth Spiegel’s students. Spiegel is a chess teacher in a school that serves students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. What intrigues Tough is the consistent success that her students achieve in chess championships. He infers that this is because Spiegel perceives her job as not of preventing student failure but “... to teach them how to learn from each failure, how to stare at their failures with unblinking honesty, how to confront exactly why they had messed up” (p. 183). Tough reasons that that the character strengths of grit, optimism, self-control, and practice that Spiegel builds in her students are what lead to her students’ success in chess.

In chapter 4, Tough looks at efforts made by Jeff Nelson and his One Goal program to improve the prospects of “underperforming, undermotivated, low-income teenagers into successful college students” (p. 175). Throughout the chapter, he examines the importance of “noncognitive skills like resilience and resourcefulness and grit” as “highly predictive of school success” (p. 168). Yet again, he strongly argues for the importance of non-cognitive skills and questions the IQ is destiny hypothesis. He does so by providing real-life examples of students enrolled in the OneGoal program. His argument for the importance of character strengths that can overcome life circumstances provides a ray of hope and stands in contrast to the cognitive hypothesis that places an undue emphasis on IQ scores only.

In chapter 5, Tough summarizes his thesis and provides a call for action. Indeed, he concludes that

...character strengths that matter to young people’s success are not innate; they don’t appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or good genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry and they are molded in measurable and predictable ways by the environment in which children grow up. That means the rest of us – society as a whole – can do an enormous amount to influence their development in children. (p. 196)

Tough insists that we create opportunities for all students to develop character strengths, lamenting the lack of available opportunities for students at the extremes of the socioeconomic ladder. Because of his particular concern for the lack of opportunities for this population of students, he spends a good portion of this chapter reasoning for its need.

In conclusion, Tough’s book is a brilliant analysis and critique of the cognitive hypothesis. He contemplates which skills lead to success, critically analyzing who is successful. While doing so, he draws on his earlier work *Whatever It Takes* (Tough, 2009), and builds on his thesis by using primary resources such as research studies, interviews, and personal observations. I find compelling reasons for reading this book: First, the author does not pitch a product but articulates the issues thoughtfully, proposing empirically supported strategies that build on human potential. Secondly, he uses evidence not just from education but also from diverse fields, including medicine and psychology, to weave a compelling rationale. Readers seldom are treated to a *gestalt* and it is particularly for this reason that this book stands out.

Note. All quotations are taken from *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. Paul Tough. (2012). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

References

Whatever it takes: Geoffrey Canada’s quest to change Harlem and America. Paul Tough. (2009). New York, NY: Mariner Books.