

# insights

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## The Road to Success is Paved With ... Grit!

**Before entering her graduate program in psychology, University of Pennsylvania professor Angela Duckworth held a number of positions, including teaching math to middle and high school students in New York City. What fascinated her as a teacher was that the students who had the most aptitude for math, the “quick studies”, were often outpaced by students for whom she had less hope for success. Wanting to better understand this phenomenon, she left teaching to delve into the psychology of achievement.**

Before Duckworth, most researchers studying achievement had focused on measures of intelligence and innate ability. But Dr. Duckworth makes a strong case for the role of “Grit”, that is, perseverance and passion for very long-term goals, as the most significant predictor of success.

In her 2016 book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Dr. Duckworth discusses her numerous studies over the years involving diverse populations such as West Point cadets, high school juniors, national spelling bee contestants, sales people, and new teachers. Along with her team, she developed the “Grit Scale”, a self-report questionnaire that measures focused effort and interest over time. In these studies, individuals’ “grit scores” were calculated and then related to various measures of success.

One study in the Chicago Public Schools determined that high school juniors with the most grit were more likely to graduate from high school than their less gritty peers. This finding held up even after accounting for other factors, including standardized test scores, school safety, support from teachers, parents and peers, and conscientiousness.

Duckworth identifies four psychological assets of people with grit: Interest or passion, the capacity to practice, a sense of purpose (that is, connecting one’s passion to the well-being of others or the world), and hope. She emphasizes that while all four characteristics can be developed, little is known on the best strategies to foster grit in students. She cites Dr. Carol Dweck’s work on mindset, however, as a reasonable

starting point: that is, teaching students a growth mindset (“my brain is a muscle that can be developed”) as opposed to a fixed mindset (“my intelligence is fixed; what you’re born with is what you’ve got”) is a way to foster grit.

Duckworth implores educators and researchers to be “gritty” in collaborating to find answers, but in the meanwhile, some ideas for fostering the components of Grit are:

- Be aware of the bias to focus on intrinsic talent as the key to success. Provide as much support to the “strivers” as to the “naturals”.
- Help students cultivate “deliberate” practice habits; that is, the ability to identify and focus on their weaknesses rather than on things already within their comfort zone.
- Teach the “10,000 hours” rule to impress upon students that it takes time to reach goals. Numerous writers have identified that 10,000 hours of practice over about 10 years are required for someone to become an expert at anything.
- Conduct “purpose” exercises. Ask students to reflect about how school lessons might connect to a larger life goal, to making the world a better place, etc.
- Ask students to identify an inspirational role model in order to foster the sense of purpose that is necessary for grit. ■

### Resource:

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit, The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner.

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