How Children Succeed:

Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character

By Paul Tough

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Summary: Who succeeds and who fails? That is the main question which is revisited time and again by author Paul Tough in his book *How Children Succeed*. Paul’s book challenges the long held belief that intelligence is the main indicator of success. This book explains how several other factors are actually better indicators of success. The two main areas being: how parents affect children and how character influences outcomes. (Tough, 2012) The results of multiple research projects and alternative teaching methods are presented.

Researchers are now able to prove that children who are subjected to highly stressful environments actually have multiple measurable physical stress responses like high cortisol levels, high blood sugars, and altered brain function. The area in the brain responsible for a child’s ability to concentrate, control impulses, and perform other higher mental abilities is highly affected. It demonstrated that those stress responses can be lowered with positive support from a parent or caregiver. (Tough, 2012) What this means is that even when children are subject the most stressful of situations, they have a chance to overcome it if they are raised in a loving environment which provides nurturing care, support, and encouragement.

Tough argues that character development is a more powerful indicator of long term success than pure IQ. The book discussed how IQ is resistant to improvement after age 8 but how character traits can be developed into adolescence to help children deal with adversity. (Tough, 2012) Tough also gave insight into the importance of a strong character development for children from affluent families. Because of parental influence and control, these children can sometimes be too protected from adversity and often find themselves depressed and afraid to try new things. Many of the scholars and researchers disagreed on which character traits were the most important indicators of success, but “grit” was defined as a passionate commitment to a single mission, and most agreed it plays a strong roll in success. (Tough, 2012)
Tough’s book can best summarized in two key points. First, that poverty matters; and second, that non-cognitive qualities may be just as important, and perhaps even more important, than IQ and test scores. Tough (2012) writes “What matters most in a child’s development is not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years. What matters, instead is whether we are able to develop a very different set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence.” (pgs. 7-8)

**Reaction:** I have always felt that helping children build strong character traits is as important as teaching academic concepts. We all know the “brilliant student” that did not succeed to the level of expectation after high school. We also know those who have accomplished more in adulthood than any test score could predict. I feel like Tough’s book gave a little credence to the old adage that “street smarts” is just as important as “book smart.”

The science of stress and its effect on students’ learning gave me a clearer understanding of what some children go through on a daily basis. The profound effect of a dysfunctional family/home environment was thoroughly described and gives a strong argument for reaching beyond the classroom and into the community when determining ways to benefit our kids. I’ve always known we can do everything right at school but what happens at home has a greater impact on their lives.

Today’s education challenges are increasing with governmental reform demands and financial limitations. I agree with Tough that the current system of social services is expensive and has low success rates. More change is needed and many of the ideas in this book although impressive, have not reached acceptance in the mainstream. It will continue to be a daunting task to gain that acceptance and implement successful programs.
References