

A Message from the Head of School

It's Not About Talent, It's About What You *Do* With It:

The Importance of Grit to Success and Fulfillment—Part 1

By Robb Gaskins, Ph.D.

Take a moment to formulate a mental image of Michael Jordan. What comes to mind? If you are like me, it is an image of him soaring over defenders on the way to an emphatic dunk, or rising for a textbook jump shot after creating space between himself and his opponents. Either way, it is an image of effortless grace and consummate skill. In watching him play, it is difficult not to conclude that he was simply blessed with a level of talent that far exceeded anyone else's. But what if I told you that as a sophomore in high school, Michael Jordan didn't make the varsity basketball team? To be sure, he was a very good player, but he certainly was not mistaken for the greatest player the sport would ever know. He was not even recognized as one of the 12-15 best players at his high school!

Consider John Irving. Having received a National Book Award for *The World According to Garp* and an Academy Award for his screenplay for *The Cider House Rules*, he is widely acclaimed as one of the most exceptional American storytellers of our time. What if I told you that he worked hard to earn C minuses in English, he scored a 475 (out of 800) on the verbal section of the SAT, and his teachers identified him as "lazy" and "stupid" (rather than "dyslexic," as he identifies himself today)? He would be the first to tell you that he was anything but a "natural" as a writer.

I could continue with similar examples, but these cases are representative. Taken together, they beg the question: If talent is not the defining characteristic that distinguishes leaders in their fields (and it is not), what is? A growing body of research suggests that one of the most central characteristics of individuals who achieve extraordinary levels of success and fulfillment is *grit*.

What is 'grit'?

Grit is unwavering perseverance focused on your deepest passion for an extended period of time. More elaborately, it is sustained hard work, "ferocious determination" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 8), and unflappable resilience directed toward an enduring goal that you recognize as fascinating and deeply important. Note that both perseverance *and* passion are essential to grit.

Why is 'grit' important?

Life is full of difficulties, challenges, frustrations, conflicts, anxiety, ambiguity, complexity, stress, diversions, pain, doubt, loss, and hardship. The trick is being able to navigate these obstacles and still persist toward your goals. To be sure, talent can help, and some people naturally have a greater affinity for certain tasks than others. But, as suggested earlier, talent is not a particularly good predictor of high



achievement. Many gifted individuals fail while many with far less talent succeed. Ultimately, it is not about talent, it's about what you *do* with it. Are you willing to cultivate the talent you have—investing countless hours, overcoming obstacles, persisting through challenges, and enduring failure over and over again to achieve mastery? People with grit are, because they are intensely committed to fulfilling their purpose *and* they know how to persistently and productively work in service of their ultimate goal. Not surprisingly, people with grit are much more likely to achieve success and fulfillment than those without it, and that is why it is so important.

How do you develop 'grit'?

There are two main parts to developing grit: (1) fostering a passion and (2) building perseverance. In the present column, I will focus on fostering a passion. In the next issue of the magazine, I will focus on building perseverance.

Fostering a passion

There is a brilliant scene in the 1991 movie *City Slickers* where Curly, the grizzled and intimidating trail boss, provides advice to Mitch, an ad salesman from NYC participating in a two-week cattle drive experience while in the midst of a mid-life crisis:

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is? [*holds up his index finger*] This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean (anything).

Mitch: But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly: [*smiles and points his finger at Mitch*] That's what you have to find out.

We repeatedly hear advice to "follow your passion." It sounds so simple. The problem is: it's not! At the very least, it seems logical to assume that highly successful people who embody grit had a lightning bolt of inspiration early in their lives that provided clear evidence of their life's path. It turns out that identifying your passion is not obvious for them either. Most paragons of grit report that they took years exploring many different interests and their ultimate passions were not evident when they were first introduced (Duckworth, 2016).

In fact, realizing your life's passion is more accurately recognized as "...a little bit of a *discovery*, followed by a lot of *development*, and then a lifetime of *deepening*" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 103). The "discovery" of one's passion does not

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typically occur in early childhood. You may identify activities and topics you like and dislike, but that is usually as far as it goes. Eventually, an interest sparks your attention. Then, you have repeated encounters that reinforce that interest, while the interest is “developed” further by positive reinforcement, encouragement, and added information from parents, teachers, coaches, and peers.

As an interest develops toward a passion, one’s fervor and fascination grows in a different way. When you are just discovering an interest, it holds your attention because everything is new. As you begin to develop expertise, it is the nuances of the area of focus that “deepen” your interest. That is why it is common to hear experts relay that the more they know, the less they understand. The subtleties that would have gone unnoticed or been deemed uninteresting before are now wellsprings of fascination.

Multiple passions

You may wonder what happens if you have many passions. Can you exhibit grit toward all of them? Duckworth (2016) suggests that it depends on whether or not your passions are unified and aligned. Grit is about perseverance toward *one* underlying, long-term goal over an extended period of time. Consequently, if you have one goal hierarchy consisting of a single top-level goal about which you are supremely passionate supported by a number of mid- and lower-level goals about which you are also passionate, pursuit of any of these mid- and lower-level goals works toward your ultimate goal and reinforces your grit toward it. However, if you have multiple goal hierarchies consisting of competing top-level goals supported by different sets of mid-level and lower-level goals, you will be diffusing your energy and diminishing your grit the more top-level goals you pursue. Having said that, as adults, it is reasonable to invest in one overarching professional goal (e.g., using educational research to help students thrive in school and life) and one overarching personal goal (e.g., to live mindfully and share peace and contentment for the benefit of my family, friends, and community). Realistically, focusing on either your overarching professional or personal goal to the exclusion of the other would establish extraordinary grit at a steep cost.

A higher purpose

For people who exhibit grit, fostering a passion is not just about discovering something we enjoy and find interesting; it is also about discovering something we see as meaningful on a grander scale. Passion involves both interest *and* purpose (Duckworth, 2016). A passion usually starts with a self-oriented interest and, as one’s self-discipline grows, builds toward the intention of contributing to the well-being of others. As the passion matures, no matter the focus, those with grit are more likely to recognize a higher purpose in its pursuit. Consider the parable of the bricklayers:

Three bricklayers are asked: “What are you doing?”

The first says, “I am laying bricks.”

The second says, “I am building a church.”

The third says, “I am building the house of God.”

The first bricklayer has a job. The second has a career. The third has a calling (Duckworth, 2016, p. 149).

Those who see their work as a calling consider their actions to be making the world a better place. Not surprisingly, they also find greater satisfaction in what they do, which would seem to only fuel their passion and perseverance.

The path to finding purpose


Stanford developmental psychologist Bill Damon is an expert on how adolescents learn to find meaning and purpose. He suggests that the research data presents a consistent path to finding purpose:

- There is a spark of interest in something that initiates the journey.
- You observe a role model (family member, mentor, historical figure, or other inspiring person) who takes actions to make a difference in others’ lives.
- You discover a problem in the world that needs resolution. This can arise from an issue that affects you personally or a problem facing others.
- But, it is not enough to see the need for a problem to be resolved. You also have to come to believe that you *personally* can bring about change and make a difference.

Conclusion of Part 1 – Discovering the “One Thing”

At Benchmark School, we believe that success in life is not determined by one’s cognitive profile or innate talent. It is determined by what individuals *do* with their capabilities. A central component of our curriculum is the active development of the characteristics that comprise grit. Related to “fostering a passion”:

- We provide a range of engaging activities that may spark our students’ interest.
- We discuss examples of people whose actions have made (and/or are making) a difference in the world.
- We nurture students’ growth through modeling, guided practice, encouragement, and support.
- We get students asking questions and investigating problems that need resolution.
- We support the realization that they can make a difference in the world by having them take actions to help others.
- We seek to demonstrate every day that we consider working with them our calling.

It is continually rewarding to not only support students on their path toward the “one thing” that will serve as their central passion, but also to see our graduates demonstrating grit across their lives. 

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York: Scribner.