

Book review

How Children Succeed

Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character

Category: Book Reviews / Non-fiction

Author: Paul Tough

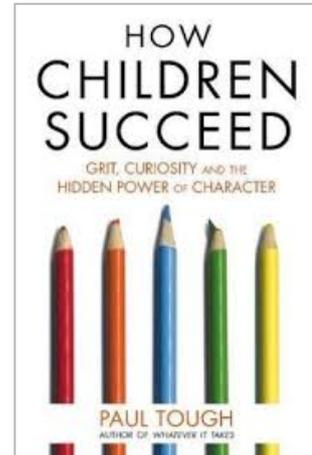
Year: 2013

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, US

ISBN: 9780544104402

Audience: Supporting Others, For Schools & Education

Summary: A treatise on character skills and a clarion call to educators and governments to make these skills central to education



The recommendations on the back of *How Children Succeed* suggest the audience for the book is parents. For example, "in his personal, thought-provoking and timely book, Paul Tough offers a clarion call to parents who are seeking to unlock their child's true potential – and ensure they really succeed". And maybe for the publishers, this is just the audience they wish to attract: parents with money to spend on self-help books. And, true, understanding the science and economic arguments Tough so clearly and carefully uses, as well as the real-life examples drawn from his meticulous research, probably will inform middle-class parents and strengthen the skills many of them already have in ensuring success for their offspring.

But the real purpose and strength of this book, I believe, is the clarion call to educators, social workers, health professionals, policy makers and, particularly, politicians who have the passion to make a difference for those most at risk of failure in society; those living in poverty.

A beautifully crafted book

This beautifully crafted book argues the life chances of those most at risk of poor outcomes can be changed, especially in the first 15 years of their lives. The main message: in the right conditions, character can be taught and learned. Character Tough defines as skills like perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism and self-control. It is one of the most convincing arguments I have read that IQ is a myth; that we can change both how we think and how we behave under certain productive conditions.

The author presents an argument that builds from early life experiences through childhood and adolescence, bringing together examples from (among others) health, psychology, chess and education to demonstrate why character matters, what it means, and how this might be achieved, particularly for those most at risk of failure.

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Tough structures an argument for changing social outcomes through integrated health initiatives, parenting, social policy AND education. He convincingly argues why it is not raising achievement levels that will save both individuals and economies (although that is one enticing outcome of this argument), but rather through addressing the character development of our children. This is not an easy-to-read self-help book. This means those most likely to buy and read it are probably those least likely to need it!

Reviewed by Dr Mary F. Hill

Mary Hill is an associate professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. Her research and teaching addresses educational assessment, particularly teacher classroom assessment practices. Currently her main research concern is preparing teachers who can teach children from all backgrounds and cultures how to take responsibility for their own learning by using assessment for learning.

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