THE BLOG

Brain Science Gives Us Evidence That Effort -- Not IQ or ZIP Code -- Paves the Path to Success

As it turns out, we are not "set in stone" at birth -- not by genetics, not by the luck-of-the-draw of our ZIP code.

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Click here to watch the TEDTalk that inspired this post.

The question of how one achieves academic "success" has been explored and debated for years, but only recently have we acknowledged the role of "effort" in the equation.

Call it resilience, perseverance or "grit" -- as Angela Lee Duckworth did in her TEDTalk and as Paul Tough wrote in his recent book, How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character.

Or you could call it by the name Alona -- a special-education student in New York City whose frustrated teacher told her she had no future. But then Alona transferred to a school in Connecticut, where neuroscience was inspiring culturally responsive teaching that was introduced to boost student achievement. Teachers there are "fearless leaders" who use affirmation, inspiration and pedagogical practices to create a "growth mindset" learned from the work of Carol Dweck of Stanford University, as Duckworth referenced in her TEDTalk in their students.

> *"As it turns out, we are not 'set in stone' at birth -- not by genetics, not by the luck-of-the-draw of our ZIP code." -- Eric Cooper*

Alona and her classmates bridged the gap between potential and achievement, repudiating the racial stereotypes associated with the "achievement gap" between white and black students.

In a videotaped interview, Alona said effort, teachers' belief that she could do well, and the application of engaging instructional strategies enabled her to master rigorous content and earn top test scores. In the videotape, it is clear that Alona was transformed by this learning experience. "Without reading," she said, "Where are you? What can you do in life?"

Now on what she called a "regular academic" learning track, Alona said she has learned to believe in her ability to succeed, think critically and develop academic vocabulary not used in her home.

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