

The Importance of Perseverance

SEIU

Presenter: Dr. La Tia Collins

Article from Studies Weekly

As educators striving to encourage and ensure student well-being, we often work with students who seem to give up too easily.

Some students are excited by a new, challenging task — seeing it as a mountain they can summit, if they just start hiking up. Other students see the challenge as an unsurmountable Mt. Everest, and don't even want to take that first step.

But before we label either of these types of learners, we need to realize that all students are capable of tackling the mountains in their learning, and in their lives. Some students just need to realize they can.

“All kids come to school capable of persistence, no matter how disengaged from academics they may seem. To see an excellent display of persistence with a child you think does not have any ‘stick-to-itiveness,’ I recommend getting into a power struggle with that kid. You’ll quickly see that the ability is there,” Steve Heisler, author and instructional consultant, said in a [2018 article for EdWeek](#). “We first learn persistence in pursuit of fun: in play, sports, arts, or even the joy of learning shoe tying!

All of us are amazingly persistent at those things that excite or amuse us. However, we can be stunningly lax at applying persistence when we're feeling less motivated — that's where teachers come in.”

Heisler believes teachers can help students identify times their persistence led to success, and how that skill can be applied in many situations.

“Helping students recognize the power already in them is where a good teacher or parent starts; helping students internalize that power as a habit is where great facilitative parents and teachers continue,” he concluded.

To create space within the classroom for students to try, fail, recover, persist and succeed, we need to include the following elements:

1. A safe place to try and fail

As Chrystal S. Johnson and Adrian T. Thomas explained in their [2009 NCSS article, “Caring as Classroom Practice,”](#) we need to create a safe learning environment that values and encourages individuals, allows them to feel safe asking hard questions.

This type of environment gives [students space to try, fail, and achieve](#). Often, because we must assess and grade students on their knowledge and skills, this makes students afraid of failure. But in an effective safe learning environment, students understand that mistakes and errors are part of the path to success.

In this type of classroom, they stay motivated, learn to persist, and come to understand the power of collaborating and problem solving with others to achieve goals.

2. Have a Growth Mindset

Carol S. Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, developed the concept of a Growth Mindset. She’s explained in numerous presentations that a growth mindset is where “people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work — brains and talent are just the starting

point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.”

A growth mindset, especially in the classroom, allows students to [harness the “Power of Yet,”](#) a power she described in her [November 2014 TedTalk](#). The power of yet shows students that failure, hard work and perseverance are all integral to learning.

3. Encourage Grit

Angela Duckworth, psychologist and CEO of Character Lab, postulates that grit is a key factor in every individual’s success level. She defines grit as a combination of passion and persistence.

But grit is not just slogging through something strenuous, and persistence does not just equal more time doing something. It’s concentrated, “quality practice,” Duckworth said in a [2017 EdWeek presentation](#).

“Grit is about working on something you care about so much that you’re willing to stay loyal to it... it’s doing what you love, but not just falling in love — staying in love,” she explained in her book, “Grit: Passion, Perseverance, and the Science of Success.”

To facilitate this in the classroom — a place some students don’t love — we need to give students more choice in their learning, said Judy Willis, teacher and neurologist, in a [2019 Edutopia article](#). This will keep students motivated and engaged in their own learning.

“[Choice] appears to increase students’ levels of intrinsic motivation, supporting their sustained effort and persistence in academic tasks,” she explained. “As you offer more opportunities for choice and expand students’ boundaries as self-directed

learners, you'll see further increases in their confidence and motivated effort toward their chosen goals."

4. Model perseverance and show examples of it from history

For students to understand they are capable of hard work and effort, educators should incorporate grit and a growth mindset in themselves and model it to their students. This can be done through class efforts in the classroom, or by sharing personal stories of perseverance.

But don't forget, you don't need to pull from just your own experiences. History is packed with examples of perseverance. Here are just a few examples:

George Washington Carver — George Washington Carver was born into slavery, but went on to "[become one of the most prominent scientists and inventors of his time](#)." He initially learned to read and write from his mother, as no schools would accept him because of his race. He received further education, and ended up with a master's degree in botany. But the very first college he was accepted to denied him admittance because he was black.

He went on to pioneer research and inventions in agriculture. His research led to crop rotation and alternative cash crops — both of which helped the livelihood of former slaves and homesteaders.

Carver, did not invent peanut butter, but according to [Biography.com](#), "Carver's inventions include hundreds of products, including more than 300 from peanuts (milk, plastics, paints, dyes, cosmetics, medicinal oils, soap, ink, wood stains), 118 from sweet potatoes (molasses, postage stamp glue, flour, vinegar and synthetic rubber) and even a type of gasoline."

The Wright Brothers — Wilbur and Orville Wright never went to college, but their forays into flight led to the worldwide air travel industry we enjoy today.

When trying to fly, failure means hitting the ground very hard, and the Wright brothers both did so multiple times while making [more than 1,000 test flights with their gliders](#). But each time, they got back up and figured out what part they needed to fix, and what skills they needed to be better pilots. They also learned as they went.

“They had no college education, no formal technical training, no experience working with anyone other than themselves, no friends in high places, no financial backers, no government subsidies, and little money of their own,” said David McCullough in his book, “The Wright Brothers.”

Bessie Coleman — Born in 1892 of African American and Native American parents, Bessie Coleman faced prejudice and discrimination because of her race and her gender. After hearing stories about pilots in World War I, and learning from her brothers that French women could learn to fly, Bessie hoped to become a pilot. According to [WomensHistory.org](#), “she applied to many flight schools across the country, but no school would take her because she was both African American and a woman.”

To circumvent this obstacle, she took French lessons and then moved to France, where she eventually got her pilot’s license. She was the first female African American and Native American pilot. She became famous for her stunt flying, and gave other African American women flying lessons.

She also stood up for equality, refusing to do flight shows at locations that would not admit African Americans.

We can do it!

Persistence is just one of the life skills our students need today, but studies at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning cite evidence that life skills, such as developing a growth mindset, lead to improvements in academic success.

Screen grab courtesy casel.org

Educators are some of the most “gritty” and persistent people on the planet. And honestly, they have to be, because the task of managing a classroom and school is akin to managing a large business — one full of “workers” (students) who sometimes aren’t all that excited to be there.

So, digging deeper into that persistence and staying power allows us to encourage grit, determination, and success in our students.

“One form of perseverance is the daily discipline of trying to do things better than we did yesterday.” We can all take heart from these thoughts from Duckworth’s book on grit.