

Teaching Grit: How to Help Students Overcome Inner Obstacles

Teaching Grit Cultivates Resilience and Perseverance (Research Made Relevant Series)

Amy: Kenny is a student that participated in my grit program last year.

Kenny: This is my evaporator.

Amy: He's a perfect example of a ten year old with grit. In New Hampshire, we do a lot of sugaring, which is the term for making maple sugar and it's a whole ton of work.

Kenny: This one's actually kind of-- got some in it.

Amy: And he does it all on his own. He'll collect the sap with the steers, boil the sap and then get the end result of the syrup.

Kenny: Easy.

Amy: He will be able to accomplish anything that he sets his mind to. I'm Amy Lyon and my goal is to spread the good word about grit.

Angela: Grit is a disposition to pursue very long term goals with passion and perseverance. It shouldn't look the same in a four year old as it does in a forty year old, because developmentally, at the beginning of life, your job is to figure out what you're gonna do, the little place that you're gonna hold in the world and how you're going to add value and survive. And I think children are exploring lots of things.

My goal is to pitch more strikes.

To become a better short stop.

To lift a slap shot.

To get a ninety in math.

To hit the bull's eye.

To find diamonds in Minecraft.

My goal's to draw better dinosaurs.

My goal's working on division.

Amy: I was introduced to grit through an article called "The Secret to Success is Failure." Angela Duckworth was mentioned. She had been studying this topic of Grit and it made a whole lotta sense for me, because Angela had defined it and was able to measure it, but nobody had really talked about teaching it yet.

I want three examples of goals that you could think about for yourself that are years out from now.

Student: Making it on the A team for my first year in middle school, for the baseball team.

Amy: Okay.

Student: Getting into a really good college.

Amy: Yeah, you guys can be thinking about that now. Did you know that the United States has the most kids accepted in the college, but we also have the highest dropout rate. What does that tell you?

Student: That it can be--

Student: That we give up easily?

Amy: We give up too easily, don't we?

I think a lot of schools tend to incorporate the idea of Grit, but I don't know that there's actually direct instruction to lead kids to become grittier. So that's why I tried to do, was to create a curriculum that would get right to the heart of grit and have kids practice becoming grittier throughout the year.

Student: Steady persistence in a course of action, a purpose, especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles or discouragement.

Student: When you're discouraged or there's a bunch of things that are going on, it's hard to focus and say to yourself, "Well, I know it's a hard time right now, but I'll get through it." And not a lotta people can do that, and it's a really good thing to know how to do, because there's so many things people give up on that are just so easy.

Amy: If you're setting a far off goal, if you're setting a goal that's years and years and years out, it may not be an easy track. Things will get in the way, for sure and you have to figure out how to manage them, deal with them, move on and keep working towards your goal. And that's what resiliency is about.

Angela: It's never too early to start thinking about, you know, how do we teach kids how to set goals, how to stick with goals, how to stay persistent in the face of temptation and distraction and adversity? And the idea is that if you can put those skills in place early on, that's just as important as teaching a child how to, you know, read, how to write, how to count. We read lots and lots of articles. We think about research designs, but teachers have a different kind of knowledge and it's been really profitable, in particular with our partnership with, for example, the KIPP schools, where we've been doing research for five years. Many of our research ideas were truly a marriage of insights from KIPP staff, married with our scientific expertise together.

Beth: People who have self-control have a lot more power to change their

future, to reach the goals that they want to reach.

When we decided to integrate Grit into our curriculum, one of the first concerns was, "Where am I gonna fit it in my otherwise very busy day?" But what it turns out is, you're doing it already. Every time you teach children the process of writing and generating ideas and sticking with writing over a long period of time and revising, that's teaching them the skills that they need to have Grit. It's probably all around you and the trick is to just highlight it and make your students more conscious of it. That will help them develop Grit themselves.

Angela: It's been said, the point of life is to love, to be loved and to be useful. I think Grit is very important, at least for that third thing, right? To be useful, to be useful to our fellow human beings, and kids have a natural instinct. When you give a six year old a task to do, "Can you please clear the table?" and they successfully do that and you praise them for doing that, it makes them feel terrific. And I think it makes them actually feel more terrific than an ice cream cone. And as we get older and older, I think the importance of being useful becomes more and more salient to us. So I think for kids, you know, the idea of being gritty enough to learn something, to master it, so that you can be good at it, that you can be useful, is very important, no matter what it is that in fact you choose to do.