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I Can Climb the Mountain

Maddie Witter

By helping students set goals and find pathways to reach those goals, educators can give them the gift of hope.

Within minutes of starting his first day of school at the Melbourne Youth Justice Center, 17-year-old Andrew exploded when the teacher asked him to start reading. Andrew had dropped out of school after being expelled numerous times, and he had spent most of the last two years on the streets. Now he was incarcerated.

Three weeks after refusing to read, Andrew had proudly finished the entire *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series.

Andrew's attitude began to change when Jess, his teacher, asked her students whether they thought she could bench press 200 pounds. Laughing, the class decided she could probably do 5 pounds at most. She asked how they thought she could increase from 5 to 10 pounds. The boys, many of whom were weight lifters, brainstormed different strategies, such as incrementally increasing the weight over time. Jess then held up a 300-page book.

"Do you think you could read this book?" The boys, acting like she'd just asked them to climb Mount Everest, shouted protests.

"How about five pages?" Nodding, Jess's students agreed that amount was reasonable.

Jess explained that today they would start reading for five minutes, moving on to six minutes tomorrow and slowly building until they could read a book like the one she was holding in only a few days.

"We will develop your academic fitness, and with your hard work, finishing a book like this will be doable. You can read books like this."

The Pathway of Hope

Helping kids succeed is about boosting their resilience and attitudes toward learning. Hope is an important component of resilience—not only for at-risk students like Andrew in juvenile justice settings, but also for students at all achievement levels, of all ages, and in all kinds of schools. A hopeful student looks at a challenge and says, "I'll find a way to get this done" (Marques & Lopez, 2011). Such willpower is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2011; Snyder, Cheavens, & Simpson, 1997).

The good news is that hope is not a fixed trait; it's malleable. We can enhance hope in students by developing their ability to set goals and evaluate their own progress—teaching them how to master large, difficult tasks by breaking them into smaller parts and persistently meeting the smaller benchmarks (Snyder, 2002). When a pathway to their goal becomes blocked, people with low resilience may give up; in contrast, those with high resilience persist in taking one step at a time, and they find alternative paths to get the job done. I can climb Mount Everest when I focus on the path, not the peak.

Creating, evaluating, and meeting benchmarks require self-discipline. Successful individuals have not only the self-discipline necessary to accomplish a difficult task, but also the belief that they can do it. According to the research of Angela Lee

Duckworth and Martin Seligman (2005), *grit*—the ability to set goals and persist in working toward them—is a better predictor of academic success than is IQ. Duckworth (2007), one of the leading researchers studying the effects of grit, says, "the gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina" (p. 1,088). Grit sustains not only a mountain climber in reaching a challenging summit, but also a 4th grader in completing his or her homework.

Teachers can do much to foster a hopeful work ethic, boosting achievement and lifelong academic resilience. The suggestions below can help teachers provide the differentiation, motivation to work hard, and time necessary for individual students to grow and achieve. The strategies can be implemented regardless of subject area, age level, curriculum, geographical location, ability level, or school funds. By incorporating these practices in your instruction, you can achieve immediate results and build the long-term pathways that students can follow to and through college.

Build Stamina

More time for deliberate practice equates to greater learning. But kids need stamina to practice for long periods of time. Although some individual students may already have such stamina, a group of 30 together may not.

Start small. I liken it to push-ups: It's better to do three perfect push-ups than 30 sloppy ones. I'd rather have a class working hard with excellent stamina for three minutes than have some students working off-task for 30 minutes and drifting into behaviors that can lead to discipline problems. Build up the time each day until you reach your desired end point.

Use a Stamina Checklist

Create a stamina checklist to show what great focus looks like and to give learners a repertoire of strategies to tackle challenging tasks. Halfway through independent work, ask students to self-assess using the checklist. Then ask them to identify one criterion from the checklist to work on for the rest of class. Include general stamina strategies (see "[Stamina Checklist](#)") or content-specific strategies. For instance, a checklist for writing could include the following suggestions:

- Stuck? Before starting today's task, do a three-minute free write on what you want tomorrow to be like.
- Write without stopping for two minutes more than you did yesterday.
- Create a list of the revisions you want to accomplish today.

Hold an "A-Thon"

One fun way to boost stamina is with an "a-thon." I created a read-a-thon for my students. For a month leading up to the event, we practiced independent reading stamina. We brainstormed stamina boosters like incorporating comics and munching on snacks. Students read for hours, even as teachers tried to distract them by blowing trumpets! Those who demonstrated excellent stamina for the longest time won prizes, such as the opportunity to arm wrestle with the principal.

A-thons can be adapted to work with any content, from a multiply-a-thon to the traditional dance-a-thon. Turn it into a fund-raiser to raise books for classrooms in need. Allow students to design their own a-thon plans, as shown in "[My Read-a-Thon Plan](#)," to use the strategies that work for them individually.

Track Growth

Benji teaches math to at-risk high school students in Australia. Students started the year struggling to invest the time needed to complete independent work. Benji created a tracking system, called the Stick-To-It Plan, using a template with two side-by-side thermometer outlines. Students filled in the thermometer on the left to show how long they thought they could work. After independent work, students used the thermometer on the right to fill in the amount of time they were actually able to concentrate. Within two weeks, Benji's students tripled their ability to focus, with many approaching the goal of working for a full 40-minute session.

Inspire a Growth Mind-Set

Psychologist Carol Dweck (2006, 2007) tells us that some people suffer from a fixed mind-set—they believe that their basic qualities or abilities cannot be developed or changed, so they are less motivated to work hard and learn. Those with a growth mind-set, in contrast, believe that if they work hard, they can become smarter. Below are some strategies that teachers can use to inspire a growth mind-set.

Celebrate Growth

Consider a popular tradition in most schools: the academic honor roll. For a student who lacks resilience, getting on the honor roll may appear unattainable. She thinks, "I will never be smart enough to make good grades."

To counter this negative belief, celebrate effort instead of grades. Foster resilient self-talk so that students believe, "My hard work led to this grade." Instead of celebrating the honor roll during assemblies, principals can develop a growth mind-set by celebrating effort: "Dominic continues to work hard during science. He embraced challenges by being receptive to feedback on his labs. I'm proud of his persistence and continued love of learning."

Curb Catastrophic Thinking

For the student with her head down in the back of your class, publicly celebrating hard work may not be enough. According to [Robert Marzano](#) and Debra Pickering (2010),

How students answer the emblematic question "Can I do this?" very much defines their sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is quite possibly the most important factor affecting engagement. ... If a student's answer to the question "Can I do this?" is no, then most if not all engagement is lost. (p. 117)

Jim Fay and David Funk (1995), authors of *Teaching with Love and Logic*, suggest the one-liners below to curb catastrophic, fixed-mind-set thinking. When a student says, "I can't do that" or "It's too hard," these responses can overcome a fixed mind-set for even your least resilient students:

- "Aren't you glad I don't believe that?"
- "You got four questions right (when they also got eight wrong). I want to focus on the ones you got right. How did you do that?"
- "I notice this answer was the most complete. What were you thinking?"

Use the Magic Ratio

Dave Levin, cofounder of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), once shared with KIPP teachers the concept of the magic ratio coined by psychologist John Gottman. According to Gottman (1994), it's easy to predict divorce. When analyzing a marital conflict, look at the ratio of positive to negative interactions. Marriages that will likely stay together have a magic ratio of 5 to 1. Relationships that will likely end in divorce have a ratio of .8 to 1.

Levin takes Gottman's research and applies it to his own classroom by incorporating lots of positive interactions. The strategies below maintain the magic ratio while promoting a stronger work ethic.

Give the Right Kind of Praise

A fast way to increase your magic ratio is through strategic praise. Praising ability perpetuates a fixed mind-set. (For instance, try not to say, "You are so good at math!") Instead, build academic resilience by praising effort, pathway thinking, and grit. (Say, "I noticed that you tried a different strategy to solve that story problem," or "You worked through your essay even when it got tiring. Great stamina!")

Make Positive Phone Calls

Call a parent, guardian, or advocate when a student shows growth. Cite clear, specific benchmarks that promote pathway thinking—for example, "Shirley is now able to read for six minutes on her own. I'm so pleased with her progress. Next week I'd love to see her read for eight minutes." Try to commit to making one call a day and to reaching each student's parent or guardian every term.

We called Andrew's foster mom to share how he had finished the *Wimpy Kid* series. Used to receiving only negative phone calls from schools, she was obviously on edge as we started the phone call. We described how Andrew had made a plan to start his nightly homework with reading. Thrilled, Andrew's foster mom bought *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* for Andrew's younger brother so that he could emulate Andrew. Later, Andrew read one of the chapters aloud to his brother.

Stimulating Hope

Hope is an essential condition for building resilience. To create hope, we need to show students how to focus as much on the pathway as on the long-term destination. We can do this by patiently building students' stamina, their growth mind-set, and their work ethic. Such nonacademic skills stimulate the hopeful thinking necessary for students' short-term progress and long-term success.

My Read-a-Thon Plan

Check the types of texts you want to bring to the read-a-thon. Remember, choose the ones that help you focus!

- Favorite books you'd like to reread*
- Books from a favorite series*
- Nonfiction books about a topic of interest*
- Graphic novels*
- Newspapers*
- Magazines*

What will be your first text? Why?

What text will you read when you feel your stamina slipping?

What will you do when you notice you are losing focus?

- Read standing up
- Read and do stretches
- Read and enjoy a snack
- Change my book
- Reread where I start to get confused

Stamina Checklist

When students are halfway through independent work, have them self-assess using criteria such as these:

- Yesterday I focused for ___ minutes, and today I can focus for ___ minutes.
- Before reaching out for help, I have tried to figure out what is confusing me.
- I created a "daily planner" for the work I need to accomplish today.
- I did the most difficult part of the work first.
- I identified when I started daydreaming and brought myself back on task.
- I focused on the work despite distractions.
- If I got tired, I worked on a different part of the task to give myself a break.

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