

Grit Curriculum Overview

From “A Bit of Grit” by Amy Lyon

The curriculum I designed for my dissertation, “Teaching and Fostering Qualities Related to Grit,” was built specifically for fifth graders, as they are developmentally age-appropriate metacognitively (i.e., able to think about their own thinking), and have not yet reached puberty. Ten- and eleven-year-olds are at a perfect age to be exposed to lessons about gritty characteristics.

While conducting research for my study, I investigated character qualities that contribute to grit. I chose to include three traits in my year-long curriculum: optimism, self-control, and perseverance. The curriculum is comprised of ten lessons, intended to be taught throughout the school year. They scaffold upon each other, starting with optimism, moving to self-control, and ending with perseverance. Although the lessons in the grit curriculum are only taught once each month, I take care to reinforce the language and concepts throughout the year.

OPTIMISM

The first four lessons incorporate activities created by psychologist Martin Seligman related to building optimism. The fundamental idea is that optimism is not about being happy all the time. It’s about having a “growth mindset” (a belief that one’s intelligence is malleable), seeing difficult situations realistically, knowing which parts of a situation one can control, and making a positive plan for resolving the situation. These four lessons of my grit curriculum teach students to identify and understand the difference between optimistic and pessimistic language, thinking, and behavior. Students learn to “catch their thoughts,” so they can analyze them and recognize how those thoughts are linked to their feelings.

SELF-CONTROL

Self-control is the topic for the next three monthly lessons in the curriculum. I designed these lessons so that students have opportunities to set goals about skills they’d like to improve -- we use the S.M.A.R.T. criteria for developing our goals -- and then learn strategies they can use to practice those skills. The two main barriers that keep students from successful practice are feelings of frustration and distractions. Therefore, I teach them tools they can use to manage that frustration and avoid distractions, so that quality practice can take place.

PERSEVERANCE

And *voila*, we have arrived at the foundation of grit: the last three lessons revolve around perseverance. Students are asked to interview a person who has achieved a far-off goal that was life changing. They are then asked to storyboard a Perseverance Walk -- the interviewee’s story of managing obstacles on the way toward the goal, and how that achievement impacted the person’s life. Students share the chronicles with their class, so that everyone has a chance to tell another’s story. Finally, students themselves can showcase a talent they have worked hard to improve. We celebrate the skills that have been accomplished and the hard work it took for students to be successful.

It is these proficiencies that one hopes students will foster as they grow older to help them deal with difficult situations, work hard toward a goal, stick with it even when conditions get tough, all while they are systematically marching toward an important achievement.