

As discussed more in depth in my context paper, many of my students have low stamina; they want to find the “right” answer quickly and if they cannot do so, they often give up or look to sources outside of themselves (i.e. teachers and classmates) for the answer. Despite studies that support the common wisdom of “practice makes perfect,” my class seems enamored by the idea of instant success and gratification. Attitudes are formed by a myriad of factors and I do not presume to know my students’ exact thoughts. I do believe, however, that a couple specific factors have contributed to this attitude. First, I worry that students do not know how to meet goals that they might have, that they do not realize that what they do in school can aid them in their future. Second, I am concerned that students do not see themselves progressing and do not have a mental reservoir of role models to whom they can look when they feel frustrated and alone. Consequently, I wanted to design a unit that allowed students to consider their goals and give them tools to develop ways to measure their progress.

All aspects of life include the need for perseverance and every subject can deal with this theme. Language arts and social studies bring literary and historical examples to the students. In math, they can learn about tracking methods. Scientific progress essentially revolves around trying and trying again until a breakthrough is made. A historical lens of science provides a plethora of examples of the wonderful, universally beneficial results of persevering. As I designed this unit, I began to realize that this theme could be an overarching one for an entire school year. Throughout these two weeks, I hope to demystify success for students and inspire them.

As mentioned above, the field of neuroscience has helped prove what many have suspected for years- the brain is plastic, in that it can and will forge new pathways as humans continue to practice a new skill. This perseverance eventually leads to “thick, hardy road maps

that link various parts of the brain,” causing neuroscientists Judy Willis to say that “practice makes permanent.”<sup>1</sup> David Levin, one of the founders of KIPP schools, has latched onto this theory, recently affirming that the character trait of perseverance is as important as academic subjects. Many of the KIPP schools are fortunate to have a school-wide culture surrounding this.<sup>2</sup> I have not noticed the same at Lea, but I think it is feasible to create a classroom culture around this and doing so would be relevant for students.

My CM recently asked the students if they thought she was born knowing how to write (grammatically) perfect sentences and they all nodded, yes! I believe they see the “end” products: a teacher, a professional athlete, or a “model” student and not the path that those individuals traveled to get where they are now. I want to shine light on the journey, as I consider it be as important, if not more, than the final result.

While working towards the enduring understandings (see Backwards Planning Template, the “Template”), the students will also be fulfilling mandated curricular standards. As explained above, perseverance is a strand that runs through all academic subjects. As students are presented with literature with a theme of perseverance, they will need to synthesize what they hear and read. In order to do so, they will be meeting the language arts standards listed on the Template. Furthermore, by studying about Jackie Robinson, India’s anticolonial movement, and the Sudanese refugees, the students will be introduced to the specific strands of the National Curriculum for Social Studies Standards included on the Template. Finally, math allows the lofty topic of perseverance to be grounded by data. According to the Common Core, students must be able to analyze data. For the purpose of this unit, the data being analyzed will tell

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard, Sara. Neuroplasticity: Learning Physically Changes the Brain. Edutopia (Dec. 2010). Available: <http://www.edutopia.org/neuroscience-brain-based-learning-neuroplasticity>

<sup>2</sup> Tough, Paul. What is the Secret to Success is Failure? NY Times (Sept. 14, 2011). Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>.

whether they are making progress towards their goals. In that way, the standard supports the unit and the unit gives context to the standard.

Earlier this term, students were very engaged in writing about their dreams for the future. Considering how flummoxed many of them were when I asked what they were doing now to achieve their goals, I think that explicitly teaching how to make goals and decide what steps to take to achieve them will be of interest. Furthermore, I believe that the combination of thinking about their own lives and studying how others have overcome difficulties to meet their goals will engage them. I selected literary and historical examples that I hope will be of interest to the students. When deciding to topic for one lesson, I polled the class to discover people about whom they would like to learn more. After a chaotic first round, I then narrowed the field to five options and the class voted on whom to study (Jackie Robinson). Furthermore, the selection of India was purposeful, as five students are from Southeast Asia. The characters from the literature are hopefully equally relevant. For example, the protagonist in *Thank You, Mr. Falker* suffers from dyslexia. While none of my students have that disorder (as far as I know), five have IEPs for literacy and many struggle with reading. I believe the guest speaker also will be of interest to the students, as she is a well-known eighth grader at the school. For eight and nine year olds, the distance between third and eighth grade likely seems quite large, and I hope that Shjuan's story of her journey over the past five years will inspire my class. Shjuan's speech combined with the interviews of family members should serve as explicit examples of perseverance surrounding the students.

Given the highly structured nature of current class assignments, I cannot give the students as much free reign as I would like to do. Nevertheless, opportunities for choice do exist. During Shjuan's presentation, students will ask questions about which they want to know the answer.

Similarly, during the interview protocol lesson, the class will develop a list of questions to ask their interviewees. In both these cases, I will guide the discussion if necessary, but I hope that students will be able to develop their own queries. During the math lessons of the curriculum, I intend to have students construct knowledge of what they see in the graphs by asking probing questions, rather than doing the “heavy lifting” and telling it all to them.

While some lessons have some “teacher told me to” tasks, the curriculum overall has a “this is pertinent to me right now” feel for students. What can a third grader do right now to start working towards his or her goal? Learning to conduct an interview, listen to and interact with a guest speaker, and analyze how a song can inspire are all skills that are meaningful outside the classroom. This is obvious to me and to make it such for the students, I will make sure to ask a question during these lessons about how students can imagine using whatever they are practicing in class outside of the room

I believe in perseverance, having seen many of my friends and family overcome obstacles of various sizes to succeed. More importantly, if my students are going to thrive, they are going to have to figure out how to keep going even when it seems impossible. Many of them have already overcome great feats in the young lives, and during the beginning of the unit, there is place to discuss and celebrate this. I passionately believe in the demystifying as much in the classroom as I possibly can and in this case, I care a lot about helping students see how others have gotten from point A to B and how they can do the same.

Despite criticism of his work, I believe it is useful to consider Piaget’s developmental theories, at least as a start. I believe my students are somewhere between concrete operational and formal operational, but, as Piaget’s critics point out, many have elements of both stages. In applying his work to my lessons, I note the need to address prior knowledge so that students can

assimilate or accommodate their existing schema as necessary.<sup>3</sup> As the unit progresses, I will provide more examples of perseverance, some of which the students probably have not considered to be exemplary (i.e. dyslexic girl learning to read). In doing so, I hope to meet children where they are and push them forward.

Still the point remains that my students seem to move between these two stages frequently, thus giving credence to the anti-Piaget movement that these stages are neither discrete nor pervasive; many variables affect where a particular student is on a particular day. Consider Jerome Bruner's theory that if presented correctly, no content is inherently beyond a child's comprehension.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, a study on India's overthrow of colonial rule sounds quite ambitious to teach third graders, when taken out of context. Since I know my students, however, I know that I will need to give some basic geography and history lessons, but by keeping the collective class "eye on the prize," I can steer the lesson in such a way that students will see the perseverance in that movement, while simultaneously understanding the very basics of it, albeit not the particulars. As one author says about the matter, "if you wait until you are certain that the children will understand every nuance of a lesson, you will likely wait too long to present it. If they understand every nuance, you're probably presenting content that they've already learned elsewhere."<sup>5</sup>

In order to ensure that students can access these lessons, I have paid close attention to my resources. For example, finding a picture book that summed up India's anticolonial movement was challenging, but the Internet led me to a publisher who donated a copy of an much praised book on the topic. Similarly, I am using a funny interview (Ellen Degeneres interviews Kermit the Frog) to teach about interview skills, since I believe that it will be more authentic if students

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<sup>3</sup> Byrnes, J. P. (2007). *Cognitive development and learning in instructional contexts*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Chpt. 2

<sup>4</sup> Willingham, D. T. (2008). What is developmentally appropriate practice? *American Educator*, Summer, 34-39.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

can see someone doing that task in “real life”, as opposed to just in the classroom. Bringing in community wealth is also an important component. Both my eighth grader and the family and friends that the students will interview are known to the students. This choice is purposeful, as I want students to see that perseverance is necessary for both “mundane” and momentous tasks, and that people they know have used it and continue to use it to achieve things in their lives. I would consider this unit a failure if students’ only take away was that famous people met success after hard work; I want them to see that they too have persevered and need to continue to do so and that there are an abundance of role models in the community for them to look towards when they struggle.

Perseverance is a macro and a micro issue. When people persevere, it can affect the world, the community, and the individual. Persevering is by its very definition an “inexhaustible quality;” it is done again and again, and often multiple times simultaneously as people work towards multiple goals concurrently.<sup>6</sup> By filling the unit with lessons that are pertinent to my students’ lives (setting goals, tracking progress) and inspirational success stories (Jackie Robinson, the lost boys of Sudan), I hope to guide the students to form a link between their struggles and those of others and ultimately give them hope and motivation to accomplish their goals.

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<sup>6</sup> Blythe, T., et al (1998). *The teaching for understanding guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass., 30.