Pathways

A Guide to Resilience in Learning

Tools and support for developing effective practice

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About the author

Andy Brumby taught in secondary schools for 20 years and worked as a teaching and learning consultant in a large local authority for a further decade. He now works with primary and secondary schools on raising the aspirations and achievement of disadvantaged learners. In his current role of Pupil Premium advocate, Andy is privileged to work directly with pupils, teachers, teaching assistants, parents, carers and governors, and is himself a governor at a primary school in Cornwall.

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been developed with senior leaders in mind, but it will also be of use to middle leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and governors who are in the process of developing and embedding a whole-school approach to resilience in learning.

Introduction

What is resilience in learning?

Why is it that some people turn out to be such resilient learners whilst others do not? Why do some learners appear to thrive on challenge, rapidly bouncing back from setbacks, whilst others all too quickly come to regard themselves as failures?

At a time when concepts such as grit, growth mindset and character education are being widely discussed in schools, this guide focuses on how schools can effectively exploit the ideas and key messages contained in the available research. This guide is principally concerned with how these concepts can positively contribute to a school-wide learning culture that genuinely enables all children to develop as resilient, self-regulating learners and thinkers. Above all, it aims to help schools avoid some of the pitfalls that can occur when research is popularised in such a way that it becomes the latest bandwagon, comprised of sound-bites and gimmicks.

In this guide we focus on four key elements of resilience in learning, each of which occurs frequently in much of the available research and online professional discussion:

1. showing perseverance when working towards learning goals (grit)

2. seeing failure as an inevitable and productive aspect of learning

3. welcoming and managing challenge

4. thinking about thinking (metacognition).

This guide provides advice and tools for building a learning culture in which pupils are consistently encouraged and explicitly taught how to embrace challenge, respond positively to failure, persevere in the face of difficulties and reflect on their progress towards learning goals.

> *Along with history and maths, teaching character and resilience should be an essential part of every school's ambition* [1]

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Part 1: What does the research say?

Grit: Angela Duckworth

The research of American psychologist Angela Duckworth points to 'grit' as one important factor that contributes to learner resilience. Duckworth defines grit as 'the ability to work towards long-term goals with passion and perseverance.'[3] She argues that the people who achieve the highest levels of success in many different walks of life are those that tend to approach learning as if it was a marathon rather than a sprint. They work doggedly towards their goals and are not easily deflected by failures and setbacks. In Duckworth's research 'grittiness' proved to be a more reliable indicator of an individual's future success than many other factors including wealth, health, family backgrounds and traditional measures of intelligence. Duckworth has worked with American schools, particularly those involved in the *Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)*.

"Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day-in, day-out. Not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years. And working really hard to make that future a reality. " [2]

Case Study

Egloskerry Primary School

Inspired by the research of Angela Duckworth, Egloskerry Primary School in Cornwall is actively exploring ways of helping pupils to persevere when they encounter challenges in their learning. Teachers encourage children to use 'gritty' language that promotes positive self-talk such as 'wrestling' or 'grappling' with tricky problems. They highlight examples of perseverance and tenacity in the curriculum and through assemblies, showcasing examples from within and beyond the learning community.

Of course, perseverance by itself will not always be enough to achieve a given learning goal. There is little point persevering with a strategy that does not work or a kind of thinking that is inappropriate for the task in hand. This links with metacognition (see page 6) because pupils need to develop the capacity to think about their progress towards goals and to change strategy if needs be.

Learned optimism: Martin Seligman

> *Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better.* [4]

Psychologist Martin Seligman is often referred to as the father of positive psychology. Traditionally, psychologists had believed that happiness causes positive emotions. Through his pioneering work on learned helplessness, Seligman came to the conclusion that positive emotions can cause happiness. His research across many different cultures showed that the happiest and most satisfied people were those who had discovered their 'signature strengths' and knew how to exploit them creatively to enhance their own lives and those of others. The exciting implication is that people can learn to lead happy, engaged and successful lives.

Developed in the USA in the 1990s and based on the work of Seligman, the *Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP)* has been employed in American schools to promote the teaching of 'signature strengths' such as 'zest, self-control, gratitude, curiosity, optimism, grit and social intelligence'[5]. Optimism and grit are particularly closely aligned with the development of resilience in learning. Optimism, for example, is defined as quickly getting over frustrations and setbacks and believing that effort will improve one's future. KIPP has had considerable success with young people from some of America's most deprived neighbourhoods, and the KIPP model is now being adapted and trialled in some UK schools.

Case Study

Mithian Primary School

Linked to Seligman's work on signature strengths and inspired by the *Knowledge is Power Programme*, pupils at Mithian Primary School in Cornwall have created two animated characters – Lift off and Crash Landing – who respectively embody learned optimistic and pessimistic responses to challenge and uncertainty. Lift off is open to challenges and manages doubts and fears associated with obstacles and setbacks, whilst Crash Landing is the exact opposite. In lessons pupils regularly talk about any 'red thoughts' they might be experiencing, for example, doubt, anxiety, unhelpful comparisons with others, and how they can manage them. They record more helpful and productive 'green thoughts' in their learning logs.

Growth mindset: Carol S. Dweck

According to another American psychologist, Carol S. Dweck, how resilient we are in our learning can be explained by examining what we believe about our own intelligence. Dweck's research rests on the premise that intelligence is expandable, and that all human beings have the capacity to increase their intelligence over time. Natural talent is merely a starting point and it is unlikely to blossom into achievement without sustained effort.

Resilient learners believe success in learning is achieved through openness to challenges, perseverance, practice and tenacity; what Dweck terms 'growth mindset'. Less resilient learners, on the other hand, tend to believe intelligence is a matter of being able (or not) to learn things quickly and easily with minimal effort; what Dweck terms 'fixed mindset'. Learners with a growth mindset are aware that failure is a necessary and inevitable stepping stone along the road to success; however, for less resilient learners failure is often the terminal point at which they decide to give up or disengage. Over the past ten years Dweck's work has had a significant influence on educators around the world and many UK schools are now attempting to help their pupils develop a growth mindset in order to become more resilient.

> 66 *The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.* 99 [6]

Case Study

Gerrans Primary School

Inspired by the research of Carol S. Dweck, Gerrans Primary School in Cornwall is working hard to embed the concept of productive failure across the whole school. Pupils have recently participated in workshops where a degree of failure was inevitable; they then discussed how they felt about this and what they learned from the experience. In daily lessons pupils are constantly reminded that real success comes when learners dare to have a go at tricky and unfamiliar tasks. Arriving at an answer quickly and easily probably means that a learner is choosing work which is too easy!

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Metacognition: John Flavell

'Metacognition' has become one of the educational buzz-words of the 21st century, but where did the term originate and what does it actually mean?

American developmental psychologist John Flavell introduced the term 'metacognition' in a research paper in 1976.

Often described as 'thinking about thinking', metacognition actually refers to any higher-order thinking that results in students being able to actively control the thought processes involved in learning. Activities such as planning how to approach a given learning task, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating progress toward the completion of a task are metacognitive in nature. Students who engage in metacognition:

➔ become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners

➔ make and review plans that help them to stay focused and motivated as they work towards their goals

➔ work more efficiently, choosing the right tools for the job

➔ learn from their mistakes instead of repeating them.

> *Teaching metacognition is arguably the most difficult aspect of developing a learner's thinking. It is, however, one of the key aspects to promoting deeper understanding and transfer of ideas and skills to all areas of learning.* [7]

> *I am engaging in metacognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A than B; or if it strikes me that I should double check C before accepting it as fact.* [8]

Case Study

Parc Eglos School

In schools inspired by metacognitive approaches, such as Parc Eglos in Cornwall, teachers encourage pupils to articulate their thinking by modelling sentence stems such as:

➔ *I'm wondering why … I've noticed that… I'm trying to figure out how… In my head I can see a picture of… It reminds me of…*

Teachers and teaching assistants use a repertoire of metacognitive questions to prompt reflection on learning:

➔ *Where have you come across something like this before? What would you do differently if you were to do this activity again? How does what we have learned here link to your learning in another subject? Where else could you use the skill we have learned today?*

Pupils regularly complete a learning log in which they record their learning experiences over the course of the previous week, reflecting upon their strengths and weaknesses. One increasingly popular technique is for pupils to write a 'nut' at the end of a lesson. This is where they write down on a post-it note something *new* (n), something *useful* (u) and something still *tricky* (t) from the lesson.

Part 2: Toolkit for embedding resilience across the school

How will we know if pupils are benefitting from our efforts to help them develop resilience? How will we know what needs to be done next to make them ever more resilient?

The following school improvement tools for resilience are designed to answer such questions. They will help leaders identify developmental priorities and monitor and evaluate the impact of subsequent actions taken. The tools can be used individually, but will have most impact when used together as part of an ongoing whole-school review process.

Tool 1: Whole-school resilience in learning evaluation matrix

This tool is designed to help you gauge where your school is currently and where it needs to go in order to move forward with resilience in learning. Look across the columns from left to right in order to identify what needs to be done next to secure ongoing improvement. You may wish to use a traffic lighting system as you audit your current status, prioritising amber and red statements, then revisiting and recolouring these to assess and demonstrate progress. Use this tool on a termly basis, in conjunction with the other tools in this guide.

Emerging	Developing	Embedding	Enhancing
Teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) starting to focus praise on pupils' effort, determination and persistence	Teachers and TAs focus praise on pupils' effort, determination and persistence, usually in relation to *challenging* learning goals	Teachers and TAs focus praise on pupils' efforts and persistence in relation to challenging long-term goals.	Teachers and TAs use praise sparingly to highlight excellent examples of intrinsic motivation over time
Teachers and TAs starting to actively encourage pupils to take risks in their learning	Teachers and TAs routinely encourage pupils to engage with challenging tasks and take risks	Teachers and TAs encourage pupils to reflect on the nature of the challenges that they have been set and set for themselves	Teachers and TAs seek and use feedback from pupils to plan future learning, which is genuinely challenging
Teachers and TAs ask some questions which encourage pupils to think about how they have learned	Teachers and TAs ask questions and give feedback that encourages pupils to reflect on learning and thinking	Pupils usually choose the harder option and equate doing so with success in learning	Pupils show very high levels of perseverance even when confronted with activities where failure is almost inevitable
Pupils do not give up at first attempt	Pupils persevere and change course where necessary	Pupils increasingly make well informed independent choices about the strategies, tools and approaches that they will use to learn and think	Pupils *expect* to have to think hard every lesson and expect to encounter obstacles and difficulties in their learning
Pupils are starting to choose harder options when encouraged to do so	Pupils are starting to choose the harder option of their own volition	When reminded, pupils use learning logs or similiar to reflect on their learning journey	Pupils independently use learning logs or similar to reflect on their learning journey and their strengths and weakness
Pupils have some simple strategies or routines for self-sufficiency	Pupils have a repertoire of strategies for self-sufficiency and independence		

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Tool 2: Whole-school resilience in learning audit and review statements

Use the audit and review prompts to identify key priorities for development in relation to resilience in learning and place them as statements in your audit table (see the example below). Revisit your audit termly.

Statement	Securely embedded	Partially developed	Not yet happening
E.g. Senior leaders and governors are aware of research findings relating to resilience in learning and understand the implications for schools.			

Audit and review prompts

- ➜ Senior leaders and governors are aware of research findings relating to resilience in learning and understand the implications for schools.

- ➜ Senior leaders and governors have identified resilience in learning as a whole-school priority and can articulate this in terms of desired outcomes.

- ➜ Resilience in learning is identified as a priority in current school improvement documentation with clear outcomes and success criteria.

- ➜ Ongoing CPD around resilience in learning is carefully tailored to meet the needs of different groups of staff and includes elements of action research and coaching.

- ➜ Teachers and teaching assistants routinely model and highlight resilience in learning and apply it to their own professional learning.

- ➜ Teachers and teaching assistants are actively developing, using and evaluating approaches and strategies that promote resilience in everyday learning.

- ➜ Pupils embrace challenge and persevere in the face of difficulties and setbacks. They do not always expect success in learning to come quickly and easily.

- ➜ Pupils are comfortable with uncertainty and are not easily deflected or discouraged by confusion. They see failure as inevitable and productive.

- ➜ Pupils are aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners. They reflect on their successes and failures. They learn from their mistakes and change course when necessary.

- ➜ Pupils are actively involved in shaping resilience in learning and making it their own. They play their part in developing a shared vocabulary around resilience across the school and in keeping resilience in learning at the forefront of everybody's mind through assemblies, posters, presentations etc.

- ➜ Parents and carers are well supported by the school in helping their children to develop as resilient and reflective learners.

Tool 3: Pupil resilience questionnaire

Use the pupil resilience questionnaire to find out whether learner resilience is increasing over time and, if so, in what ways. Pupils need to complete the questionnaire and then repeat it after a term has elapsed. It could be used with a whole class, whole year group or with a particular group of pupils such as boys or children entitled to the Pupil Premium.

Name: . . . .

Year Group/Class: . . . .

Date: . . . .

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly Disagree	Not Sure
I enjoy learning new things.					
I like it when I have to think hard.					
I keep trying when learning is difficult.					
I am not afraid to make mistakes.					
I learn a lot from my mistakes.					
I stay calm and think about the problem when I get stuck.					
I try to help myself first before asking an adult.					
I can make a plan that helps me to reach my goals.					
I stop to think about how I am doing and what I need to do next.					

Tool 4: Pupil interview questions

These reflective questions are designed to help you find out how resilient pupils are in their learning. They could be used with a focus group or during learning walks. Revisit the questions each term to gauge whether learner resilience is increasing over time and in what ways.

➜ Tell me about a time when you achieved success by trying hard and not giving up.

➜ Think about a breakthrough you have made in your learning and tell us how it came about.

➜ What are you learning at the moment that is difficult and why do you find it challenging?

➜ What would you say to someone who always chooses easy activities?

➜ What happens if your early efforts to learn something new result in failure?

➜ Do successful learners ever make mistakes?

➜ What do you do when you get stuck?

➜ Half way through a learning challenge, what questions could you stop and ask yourself?

➜ What advice would you give to someone who keeps repeating the same mistakes?

➜ Tell us one way in which you think you are now a better learner than you were last term.

Tool 5: Engaging parents and carers checklist

This list of questions is designed to stimulate thinking about how parents and carers can help their child develop resilience in learning. The questions identify possible actions your school might take to engage parents and carers. Revisit the questions each term, ideally as part of a wider review.

☐ Have you written to parents and carers explaining your focus on resilience in learning and suggesting ways in which they might support it?

☐ Is there any information and guidance for parents and carers on your school website?

☐ Have you provided any practical workshops and/or support materials to help parents reflect on the ways in which they praise their child, for example?

☐ Has the school report been modified to reflect your focus on resilience in learning and has this been explained to parents?

☐ Has the school rewards policy been modified to reflect your focus on resilience in learning and has this been explained to parents?

☐ Have you sought feedback from parents and carers on the impact that your focus on resilience has had on their child? What differences are they noticing at home? This might involve sending out a questionnaire.

Further support

Further reading

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Tough, P. (2013) *How Children Succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Useful resources on *Oxford Owl*

School Improvement Reports and Guides

Closing the Gap: Giving Every Child the Chance to Succeed

The Pupil Premium: Making it Work in Your School

Parental Engagement: How to Make a Real Difference

Link to Reports

Professional Development & Best Practice videos

Reaching Hard to Reach Parents

Link to video

Children Who Struggle with Reading

Link to video

School Improvement Pathways

Parental Engagement

Raising Boy's Achievement

Closing the Gap

Link to *Pathways*

Endnotes

1 Paterson, C., Tyler, C., and Lexmond, J. (January 2014) *Character and Resilience manifesto*: The all-party parliamentary group on Social Mobility.

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