

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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**Title of Project:** *Resilience in the AP classroom*

**Year:** 2013-2014

**School/Grade:** Byram Hills High School/11 - 12

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context**

As a teacher of AP classes, both AP US History and AP Human Geography, I have students who are doing college level work for the first time in their high school career. This means that for many students, this class is the first class where their previous strategies are not enough to be as successful as they expect and desire to be. Thus, these students have to adapt and try new learning strategies in order to be successful; which is defined by most as getting A's on their tests and quizzes. Because AP courses are so in-depth and require high level analytical skills, I have a higher number of students who grow extremely frustrated with their inability to get A's on objective style tests and quizzes. In short, my classes require a high level of academic resilience. Students get frustrated, and they have to adapt and change. If they do not, they will not reach their potential. I get particularly worried when students come to me and say they tried harder and still were unsuccessful. One of the most important things I want my students to learn is that increased effort will lead to success; and that intelligence is not fixed, but rather something that can grow. If my students adapt and change and work harder, yet still do not achieve, that important lesson gets lost. With these concerns in mind, I decided to research the factors that promote resilience in students in order to find better ways to help students become more resilient.

In addition to my general motives for this research, this year I encountered a particular student who displayed an especially high level of frustration in class and thus a great incentive for my research. (*Some of the details have been changed to protect this student's privacy.*) Some sample behaviors included taking the first few quizzes of the year with a scowl on his face, sighing audibly a number of times, and putting his head down after spending only half of the allotted time. This same student came to my room multiple times after school totally despondent. He was demonstrating with words, actions, and body language that he did not believe in his own ability to succeed. Yet this student did not want to drop the course. When I offered new strategies and ideas he said they wouldn't help anyway and continued to complain about how all his hard work wasn't paying off. I asked to see the evidence of the hard work and he could not produce it. He seemed only to want to complain and for things to just be easier for him. This student would brush off compliments I offered, came in regularly for pep talks for the first quarter, but to my knowledge rejected any strategies I suggested. He also seemed sensitive to the opinions of others as he told me he wouldn't be likely to participate because students had made fun of him in the past. This seemed like classic learned helplessness

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that I later read about in my research. This student appeared to have very little hope, yet was unwilling to change, and unwilling to drop the course. This student seemed to lack resilience and thus I needed to find out how to help him.

## Action Plan

The first goal I had for my research was foundational in nature. I wanted to find out what factors *promote* resilience and what student behaviors *indicate* resilience. Once I would be able to identify resilience in my students, I would be able to focus on students who needed further instruction and support in developing resilience. My second question was both foundational and action oriented. I wanted to know how I could teach and encourage resilience and what I could change about my practices to support and encourage my students to be more resilient.

My foundational research was centered around articles found in the September 2013 issue of Educational Leadership that focused on “Resilience and Learning” as well as an article written by Andrew Martin in the June 2002 issue of the Australian Journal of Education. The article by Andrew Martin focused on motivation guzzlers and boosters and these gave me the specific ideas I needed to move my action research forward.

Based on these ideas I designed a survey (see attached) and decided to begin my action research with a lesson on the causes of the Great Depression. Economic ideas have often been a source of frustration for past students and this lesson required my students to digest and explain multiple different theories on the causes of the Great Depression without any direct instruction from me. I expected that they would find parts of this difficult so I thought this would be a good time to do some direct teaching about resilience and see if it had an impact in a short term situation. After we discussed the survey, I reminded them that a resilience booster was focusing on the learning rather than performance. Part of the lesson required the students to read passages and label different causes as foreign or domestic. I reminded my students that resilient students don't just skim to get the answer. Resilient students read for understanding and this might involve asking questions or re-reading difficult passages.

I also collected data at the end of the year where students were asked to comment about their own resilience and changes that might have occurred.

## Results

### Learning from Research

- *What is Resilience?*

Resilience manifests itself in persistence to difficult tasks, resourcefulness, hardiness, and “grit.” Grit is defined by Angela Lee Duckworth in <sup>1</sup>[The Significance of Grit: A Conversation with Angela Lee](#)

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<sup>1</sup> "The Significance of Grit: A Conversation with Angela Lee ..." 2013. 29 May. 2014

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... as both resilience in the face of failure, but also commitment to your goals over time. Duckworth's research demonstrated that "grit" is a better predictor of success than talent. Duckworth further explained that setting goals and sticking with them, exercising self-control, and maintaining a positive growth mindset are all parts of "grit."

- How can we identify and teach resilience?

- Thomas Hoerr states in his article about "Good Failures" <sup>2</sup>[Educational Leadership:Resilience and Learning:Good ...](#) that the starting point to teaching resilience is to "recognize that children cannot learn how to respond to adversity without experiencing it." This article suggests that teachers should use the term "good failure" more frequently and not jump to help our students too quickly. Allowing struggle is difficult but required of us, just as is consistency. The marshmallow test, a classic test of self control teaches us that the ability to exercise self control is greater in kids whose experimenters were consistent in keeping their promises. When we as teachers fail to be consistent, we play an inadvertent role in diminishing self-control. A final suggestion was to ask more open ended questions, use white boards so that all learners can respond to questions and increase wait time in the classroom. If we start small, track and celebrate growth, and curb catastrophic thinking, we can build up the resilience of our students.
- Nan Henderson in "[Havens of Resilience](#)"<sup>3</sup> identified internal protective factors that foster resilience as well as external factors that come from the teacher or the institution. Internal factors include positive relationships, being service oriented, sense of humor, strong impulse control, perceptiveness, independence, positive view of future, flexibility, love of learning, spirituality, creativity, competence at something, and perseverance. Factors that teachers can impact include communicating high expectations, providing caring and support, setting clear and consistent boundaries, providing opportunities for meaningful participation, teaching of life skills and increasing social bonding.
- Carol Ann Tomlinson says in "[Growing Capable Kids](#)"<sup>4</sup> that "powerful teachers help students grow their capacity to be resilient by mindfully providing students with three elements: affirmation, opportunity, and support. Affirmation might be as simple as "*You are right. This is hard. You can do hard things.*" In this same article Tomlinson says that kids who feel connected are more resilient so we need to give them opportunities to help others.
- The research of Carol Dweck on fixed and growth mind-sets is cited by both Angela Lee

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<<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/The-Significance-of-Grit@-A-Conversation-with-Angela-Lee-Duckworth.aspx>>

<sup>2</sup> "Educational Leadership:Resilience and Learning:Good ..." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Good\\_Failures.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Good_Failures.aspx)>

<sup>3</sup> "Havens of Resilience - ASCD." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Havens-of-Resilience.aspx>>

<sup>4</sup> "Growing Capable Kids - ASCD." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Growing-Capable-Kids.aspx>>

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Duckworth in the "[Significance of Grit](#)"<sup>5</sup> and by Maddie Witter in "[I Can Climb the Mountain](#)"<sup>6</sup>." Both authors say a critical part of teaching resilience begins with inspiring a growth mindset in our students. When students think intelligence is fixed, they are less resilient than those students who believe intelligence is something that can be developed. To explain this, she says students who have a growth mindset tend to see learning as the goal rather than pleasing the teacher or getting a good grade. Students with a growth mindset see themselves as in control and see the teacher as a facilitator and a resource rather than just a source of rewards or punishments. Therefore we as teachers need to celebrate growth instead of grades as another way to support resilience.

- Students who have a growth mindset are willing to take risks and aren't worried about looking smart because they are learning focused rather than performance focused. In fact, Mark Jacobson in "[Afraid of Looking Dumb](#)"<sup>7</sup> points out that one way to identify a student who has a fixed rather than a growth mindset is to pay attention to what a student says when they offer an answer, and the teacher asks them to repeat it. The student lacking resilience often says "never-mind" because they assume they must have been wrong and they are afraid of taking a risk again. This unwillingness to take academic risks has many broad implications and essentially limits a student's potential in many ways.
- The article "Motivation and academic resilience: developing a model for student enhancement"<sup>8</sup> by Andrew Martin focused on resilience boosters and resilience guzzlers. Guzzlers include fear of failure, and their goal being simply not looking silly, having a low expectation of success, placing little value on what is being taught, and being focused primarily on outperforming others. Resilience boosters are being focused on mastering the material, feeling in control of their own learning, and success oriented. It is important to note that these resilience boosters are also the characteristics of students with a growth mindset. As teachers, we can improve their self-belief by maximizing opportunities for success through differentiation, and breaking tasks down into smaller components to allow for many small successes. Teachers can also focus their class on mastery and help their students see the relevance of what they are learning. Additionally flexible due dates, teaching study habits, giving feedback that is task based and descriptive, in other words based on actions and effort, and creating a climate of cooperation and self improvement does wonders for improving the resilience of learners.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Significance of Grit: A Conversation with Angela ... - ASCD." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/The-Significance-of-Grit@-A-Conversation-with-Angela-Lee-Duckworth.aspx>>

<sup>6</sup> "I Can Climb the Mountain - ASCD." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/I\\_Can\\_Climb\\_the\\_Mountain.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/I_Can_Climb_the_Mountain.aspx)>

<sup>7</sup> "Afraid of Looking Dumb - ASCD." 2013. 29 May. 2014

<[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Afraid\\_of\\_Looking\\_Dumb.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Afraid_of_Looking_Dumb.aspx)>

<sup>8</sup> Martin, Andrew. "Motivation and academic resilience: Developing a model for student enhancement." *Australian journal of education* 46.1 (2002): 34-49.

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**Learning and changes in my Classroom**

- The data from the surveys (see attached) show some interesting results. For the most part, my students who self assessed their own resilience demonstrate many of the resilience boosters. In all five of my classes, more of my students on average, were on the positive side of the resilience continuum. I collected the data by class and looked at the percentage of students for each class that ranked themselves on the positive half of the continuum for each of five resilience indicators. In all 5 classes, on average, students ranked themselves as being success oriented, learning focused, highly in control of their own success, having high expectations, and placing high value on their learning. My senior AP Human Geography classes had higher percentages and my 4th Period AP US History class had the lowest percentages. I found this interesting since my 4th period class was my highest performing and hardest working class, yet they were also my class where I received the fewest questions about the topics we discussed. I wonder if the fact that they asked fewer questions during the year actually reflects a greater focus on performance rather than learning and a lower value on the material itself.
- The key understanding from my lesson on the causes of the Great Depression was that direct instruction on resilience can make a big impact on the behavior of students in a single period lesson. For example, my reminders about resilience definitely resulted in deeper reading of the passages. Fewer students zoomed through the reading just to get the answer and more thoughtful questions were asked by those students. I assume and hope this led to greater understanding although I have no baseline data to use to determine whether more learning took place. In terms of behaviors, I did see a clear attempt by my students to be resilient learners.
- In addition to the data collected by the survey and the lesson that followed, I also tried to apply my research in small ways as the year progressed. Based on what I was reading, I kept reminding students multiple times and in multiple ways that progress was the goal. This is not a new practice for me but I am sure it increased this year. In the last few years, based on the words I heard a counselor say, I began to remind my students, “remember, what matters is progress not perfection” before I passed out graded quizzes. The article in the Australian Journal of Education, motivated me to try an experiment. I told my AP US students that on the next quiz, students would get the grade they earned and then an additional grade if they could improve. If their grade was higher than their average, they would receive another A in the grade book, higher or lower depending on how much improvement occurred. When I did a survey at the end of the year to ask the students about the impact of this “progress” quiz, the results were interesting. The vast majority of the students either rated this quiz as 8 or higher out of 10 in terms of its impact, or gave it a 1 or 2. It seemed to impact about 60% of the students, but its impact was very high.
- So when I reflect on my “helpless” student from the beginning of the year, I don’t have any huge changes to report. But taking my own advice, focusing on progress not perfection, I have to report that this student began to take his time on quizzes, and on a couple of occasions even arrived excited to take the quiz or test. I never was able to get this student to show me any evidence of active studying, but I can tell that studying did definitely occur which shows some definite change

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in attitude. The scowling stopped, full time was taken on the quizzes and tests, and the crying and whining after school dissipated. Objective test and quiz grades showed some measured improvement, especially considering that there were no more curves on quizzes after 2nd quarter. Quarter averages in order on quizzes were 68%, 81%, 72%, and 73% and the test averages were 76%, 74%, 78.5%, and 88%. At the end of the year, this student reported that his resilience had only grown a small amount because in junior year each grade matters so much. Clearly he remains focused on performance rather than mastery of the material. Overall, I feel that this student should feel proud for not giving up on himself and I hope he is celebrating the progress that was made.

- Another opportunity I found this year to apply what I was learning was the conversations with my parents during evening parent conferences. I shifted the focus of my discussion towards resilience and we discussed the obstacles to success for their particular child. We discussed *time*, *ability*, *study methods*, and a *fixed growth mindset* as possible obstacles. We discussed the role of each in success or failure. I had always discussed time, ability, and study methods as factors, but discussing fixed and growth mindsets was definitely new. I think the parents found the information interesting and I will certainly continue this in the future. Even parents need to be reminded that their child can do better if they try harder as long as the increased effort is made in the appropriate places. Since student beliefs will trump facts every time, I explained the importance of their son or daughter believing this key idea for improvement to occur.

### **Implications**

In my classroom, I will continue to use the survey with my students and directly instruct my students about resilience boosters and guzzlers. I will do this survey earlier next year and re-visit the resilience boosters and guzzlers more often throughout the year. Particularly when students are dealing with difficult text or difficult assignments, I will remind them what it means to be focused on the learning rather than on the performance. I will continue many of the other small changes I have made to the course including the progress quiz but I will have one during both second and third quarters.

I will also discuss these ideas with my parents at open house as I believe parents can play a big role in helping the students focus their attention on the right things. I hope that I can get parents to buy into the idea that if their son or daughter is in fact focused on the learning rather than performance, and see teachers as a resource, and develop a growth mindset, their son or daughter will be more resilient and ultimately more successful.

I also plan to use the term “good failure” more often with students who get low grades on tests and quizzes and do more to help students learn lessons from their failures and struggles. I see the important connection between this year’s work on resilience and last year’s research on quality feedback. If my feedback on essays remains focused on “steps to improve” and descriptive “stars” students will be able to focus less on the grade and more on the important learning from each

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assessment. It occurred to me as I was writing this, that my stars and stairs feedback journal idea could be applied to objective tests as well. So I made a feedback journal called the journal of trial and error (see attached) for objective assignments. There is a column to reflect on the “good failures” as well as a study strategy focus for each assessment. I hope this will serve as another reminder to my students to try new ways of studying and a way to record which changes were successful and which were not.

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**Identifying and Changing Resilience**

This survey will help you identify resilience “boosters” and “guzzlers.” These can be both thoughts and behaviors. If you have a lot of motivation “guzzlers” changing your thinking can be the first step. Thoughts affect behaviors.

*Mark the continuum with an X for the place that fits your profile now.*

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Failure Avoidant  
(driven by fear of failure)

Success Oriented  
(driven by achieving success)

**Need Focus**

Which need drives you the MOST?

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Low Value

High Value

**Value of School**

How much do you value  
the things you learn in this class?

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Low Expectation

High Expectation

**Expectancy of Success**

How much expectation  
do you have of success in this class?

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Performance Focused  
(outperform others)

Learning Focused  
(attain mastery)

**Motivation Orientation**

What motivates you?

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Low Control

High Control

**Locus of Control**

How much control do you have  
over your own successes  
in this class?



## Resilience in the AP Classroom

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. I appreciate your input and hope that you realize you have contributed both to my understanding of resilience and to that of my future students.

*Resilience manifests itself in persistence to difficult tasks, resourcefulness, hardiness, and “grit.”  
Grit is defined as both resilience in the face of failure and commitment to your goals over time.*

1. Please rate the degree to which the course required resilience.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

2. Please rate the impact of “Slay the Dragon” on your resilience.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

3. Please rate the impact of “remember, progress is the goal not perfection,” on your resilience.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

4. Please rate the impact of the “progress” quiz grade on your resilience.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

5. Please rate the impact of the feedback on your essays on your resilience.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

6. Please rate *the amount of growth if any*, in resilience, you feel occurred this year as a result of this course.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

7. Please comment if you can about your own resilience.

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Thank you again for your time.

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AP US History Writing Journal

Directions: Each time you get back an essay, choose one star and one stair to focus on as a way to improve your writing.

Name of Essay	Writing Focus	Stars – keep doing these types of things!	Stairs- focus on this next time!
New England vs. Chesapeake DBQ	Thesis Development & Macro-analysis		
Entrenchment of Slavery Essay	Micro-analysis		
Unit 2 Essay	Content, Thesis development and all types of analysis		
Supreme Court Research Project	Thesis development & Micro-analysis		
Unit 4 Essay			
World War I DBQ	Using Documents Analytically (micro-analysis)		
Unit 6 Essay			
Unit 8 Essay			

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**Journal of Trial and Error**

Name of Assessment	Study Focus	What did you do right? Celebrate your progress and small successes.	Good Failures- what mistakes did you make that you can learn from? What can you do differently next time to be better prepared for this type of assessment?
Chapter 2 & 3 Quiz	Studying the Right Info - Studying cause and effect, "why" and "so what" not just WHAT		
Unit 1 Test	Studying the RIGHT WAY – active studying – make study sheets, or flash cards...do something NEW with the information		
Chapter 6 & 7 Quiz	Frequent Studying – study a little bit each night		
Constitution Quiz	Using Daily Outlines and Class Notes FIRST and textbook SECOND		
Chapter 10 & 11 Quiz	Studying a little bit each night		
Unit 3 Test	Studying the WHY and the SO WHAT more than the WHAT		
Chapter 15 Quiz	Try studying with someone		
Unit 5 Test	ACTIVE and FREQUENT studying		

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