

Growing grit in boys through empowerment

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Abstract

This action research project investigated the effects of empowering boys aged 10 to 12 years old through the provision of leadership opportunities. The study looked at how empowerment can lead to a sense of satisfaction, which can then lead to greater resiliency in boys when engaged in other components of their school experience. Mindfulness and greater awareness of the boys' approaches to learning was a positive side-effect for the boys participating in this study.

The research findings clearly indicated that the boys involved wanted and, in fact, needed, early learning intervention in regards to resiliency education. As well, they needed to be provided with opportunities to practice and develop resiliency. Findings also revealed that the boys in this study believed that resiliency education and opportunities needed to be continued throughout their education in order to develop their resiliency to its full potential.

Introduction

As Crescent's Lower School is made up of grades 3-6, the students in grades 5 and 6 have the opportunity to participate in various leadership and co-curricular activities. As they are the oldest, most experienced Lower School students, these activities are often framed as opportunities of empowerment and leadership in the lives of these developing young students. Traditionally, these activities have been offered to students to ensure that they are exposed to, and gain experience in, the various components of school life. It was the intent and hope of this study to use these activities in the lives of students as the backdrop for education and feedback in regards to resiliency and grit.

For this study, students were deliberately selected in order to provide a sample population that reflected the various co-curricular and academic activities that the school offers to its students. Once this sample group was in place, the students undertook a 50 question Psychometric online test that focused on resiliency and the character traits that form resilient individuals (adaptability, self-control, self-sufficiency, optimism, and persistence). This test provided the students with a

“resiliency rating” and ample feedback that focused on the 5 main resiliency character traits. Not only did the students become aware of their score at their young age, but they also began to become familiar with what resiliency means, what makes up a resilient individual, and if they could (or could not) improve in this area of Character Education.

As soon as the boys finished this initial testing, they were already more aware of the different forces and criteria at play when working towards becoming a more resilient individual who can cope in many different situations. As they became more aware of what it means to be resilient, it was clear that the boys’ minds were moving from a fixed mindset to one of growth (Masten, 2001). They were becoming more focused on the fact that they could practice, learn about, and improve on their resilience characteristics.

The students were told that they would meet on a bi-weekly basis to review and discuss how their different experiences were going in the various areas of school life/leadership that they were involved in. The boys were aware that these activities were an opportunity to experience new and different situations that might require them to practice the traits central to resiliency.

At the end of the school year, the boys were interviewed one-on-one and asked to fill out a survey. The purpose here was to assess if the boys were more aware of resiliency, what it meant to them, and what activities (if any) would be beneficial to undertake to practice skills relating to resiliency and grit. The findings of the study showed that the students clearly believed that: they could work on these areas after they were more aware of them; there were certain activities that were more beneficial in facilitating heightened resiliency; and that they could continue to improve in this area throughout the coming years (even decades) of their lives. It became very obvious that these students wanted and, in fact, needed early intervention in regard to resiliency education and then be provided with the opportunities to practice and develop these traits.

Literature Review

It is common understanding in North American and European education systems that good character must be taught to our children and youth. Without character education being fully embraced by our schools and school boards, students will fall short of becoming well-rounded students and contributors to our greater society and communities. Philip Vincent (1994) states in his book entitled *Developing Character in Students*, character education is vital “to develop in

youth the skills needed for effective thinking and reasoning, as well as the habits of good behaviour that yield moral character” (p. 3). The education and development of our students is no longer merely focused on the content knowledge and “smarts” of the individuals involved. A greater purpose of education has arrived, and it is Character Education that must permeate all subject areas, all school activities and a school’s mission to ensure that educators are cultivating “the virtues of character associated with common morality” and “develops students’ understanding of what is excellent in diverse spheres of human endeavour” (Thompson, 2012, p. 14). To flourish as humans we must acquire and strengthen certain virtues, such as courage, justice, honesty, compassion, self-discipline, gratitude and humility, that enables us to possess the character that is required within a well-rounded life and functional society (Thompson, 2012).

It is imperative to teach character to all students in all schools. This will ensure that we, as educators, are doing our job in “helping young people develop good character and acting upon core ethical values” (Lickona, 1991, p. 51). As outlined by Thomas Lickona (1991) in *Educating for Character*, Character Education “must consist of operative values – values in action” (p. 51). Being made up of three essential elements, Character Education must facilitate, “knowing the good (judging what is right), desiring the good (caring deeply about what is right) and doing the good (acting out what is right)” (Lickona, 1991, p. 51). These essential components are needed to ensure that teachers and schools are doing their part in teaching the virtues and values required to “promote specific civic virtues, such as service, citizenship and volunteering, that help students understand their ties to society and their responsibilities within it” (Thompson, 2012, p. 3).

As Character Education is focused on providing and strengthening the skills and/or traits associated with being a positive, active member of one’s community, resiliency in children and youth must be taught to our students. Without this being taught, students can, and will, lack the skills and experience required to bounce back, overcome unexpected obstacles or enter into difficult conversations with their peers. As every individual has some degree of innate capacity for resiliency, this can only be heightened and strengthened when educators teach this to students and give them opportunities to practice their resiliency-building conditions in their lives (Bernard, 1995).

In her book, *Fostering Resiliency in Children*, Bonnie Bernard (1995) explains that “we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose” (p. 2). All students do, in fact, have a capacity for resiliency, but this “self-righting tendency” operates best when people are given opportunities, situations or events to experience which are characterized by moments of challenge and hard-ship (Bernard, 1995). We will not know how an individual will react to potential moments of resiliency without teachers giving them the opportunities to feel, react and attempt to overcome authentic situations in which resiliency would be a valuable trait (i.e. House Captain, organizing an assembly, taking on another leadership role).

Much of the research points to the fact that resiliency is not “a fixed attribute,” but rather a “set of processes that can be fostered and cultivated” (Masten, 2001). The role of teachers and schools is paramount, therefore, in building resiliency. Resiliency can only be grown and developed in young individuals through an interactive process that must take place “between the individual and environment and between risk and protective factors” (Masten, 2001). Simply, students need opportunities to plan, lead, participate and reflect on situations (activities, events, etc.) that are inherently characterized by challenge, conflict or tension. It is within and after these experiences that students will strengthen, and even obtain, the virtues / skills necessary to be resilient in their lives and communities.

Although there are certain attributes, such as high intelligence and easy temperament, that can help facilitate resiliency in students, external environmental factors are crucial. As resiliency is a process that must be taught, and is not a “stable character trait”, parents, teachers and schools are required to cultivate and nurture the skills and mind-set required to be resilient in our children (Malhi, 2012).

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 boys, aged 10 - 12 years old, from Crescent School in Toronto, Ontario. Data were collected and analysed from this sample group through the use of personal interviews and surveys. The goal of the study was to demonstrate how experiencing various empowerment activities can, and will, enable students to develop the skills and character traits required to be more resilient when faced with life’s challenges.

Letters were sent to all parents seeking permission for their sons to participate, and informing them that confidentiality and anonymity of information provided would be ensured. Only students with parental permission were able to participate in this study.

Methodology

The action research approach chosen for my project is one that brought the experiences, thoughts, feelings and feedback of the students directly into the research process. As we discussed the need for greater resiliency in the social, academic and emotional lives of today's students, we began to realize that this issue is a societal one that needs to be addressed. This study focused on the experiences of students as they participated in various opportunities for empowerment (i.e. House Captains, Outreach, etc.).

This cross-sectional study aimed to gather data from different "leadership" groups in the Lower School, Grade 3-6. Through the surveys and personal interviews, information and knowledge was sought in regard to what fosters and develops greater grit and resiliency in young students.

As school, life and job prospects become more challenging with time, students need to form and practice the skills that are required to create the conditions required for a happy, successful and productive life. As challenges and obstacles begin to mount, does a student simply shut down and quit? When mistakes are made and 'failure' is originally realized, does the student have "stick-to-it-iveness"? Do students see mistakes or short-comings as a chance for growth and learning? Are problems potential solutions? Do you give up before tasks are finalized when challenged? These are some of the questions that were addressed in an effort to provide colleagues and the school with greater insight into how we, as educators, can assist in developing resiliency.

These guiding questions helped and propelled me toward framing my ultimate research question as: *Can character education and opportunities of empowerment lead to greater resiliency in students?*

The Action

The action taken within this study was to provide participants with specific empowerment opportunities that inherently possess certain challenges and obstacles. Although there were existing opportunities for empowerment within the Lower School, the action that was implemented to frame this study was aimed deliberately at heightening and expanding the role of the student. Through our Outreach Program, House System, and Announcement Crew, students were given more responsibility and ownership in relation to eventual outcomes.

Students endeavoured to undertake these tasks and were asked in a number of ways, including interviews and questionnaires, for feedback in regard to their experiences. All questions focussed on grit and resiliency and how particular skills can be utilized to pull one's self through a crisis, challenge, obstacle, shortcoming or perceived failure. Examining the experiences of these students within different situations helped determine not only what characteristics and traits are valuable in building resiliency, but where personal growth is required in order to demonstrate and possess great resiliency in future contexts.

Data Collection

Throughout the intervention, data were collected through interviews and questionnaires. Through these processes, it was the goal of the study to determine the resiliency of students before, during and after they have taken part in various leadership/empowerment opportunities. The traits that were closely examined included adaptability, self-control, self-sufficiency, optimism, and persistence. The purpose of the initial survey, Psychometric's 50 Item Resiliency Questionnaire (see Appendix A) was to give students a resiliency score and have them begin to think about what characteristics enable them or will enable them to become more resilient and obtain "grit". This test was administered again after the students had participated in the various initiatives they had undertaken. The goal of study in using this test was to observe and analyse any changes in the students' perception of their own strengths and deficiencies in the various areas that form a resilient individual.

During and after the various student-led initiatives, another survey (Appendix B) was administered to gauge how readily students demonstrated the various "performance character" traits that are vital in being resilient and exhibiting grit. These traits included, "stick-to-it-

iveness”, never giving up when challenges arise, ability to overcome challenges/conflict amongst other students, and whether they complete all tasks that they begin or give up.

The final method of data collection was by interviews with the students. These interviews were an opportunity to discuss, question and gain insight from the students in relation to their thoughts and perceptions of how the empowerment opportunities provided them, or didn't provide them, with experiences and situations to practice their skills related to resilient behaviour.

The qualitative data and information that were obtained and recorded throughout the data collection process were analysed and coded. This was undertaken by coding all responses thematically in an attempt to gather an in-depth understanding of students' behaviour and the reasons that govern their behaviour.

Data Analysis

The Psychometric Resilience Test: This test provided each student with an over-all score for each of the five characteristics associated with resiliency. The scores were low, but this was expected because of the students' age, and the fact that they are just now gaining an understanding of what resiliency is, and if they could work on improving their resiliency over time. Through ongoing discussions, with the group and individually, it was clear that by merely completing this test the students were eager to work on this side of their performance character. They had not thought about it before, did not know it existed or could exist within them, and were energized to practice it in their lives at school. These findings suggested that education was needed in this area, along with ongoing, purposeful and meaningful interventions of resiliency education in their academic lives throughout their time at Crescent.

Interview and Survey: The data collected in this stage of the intervention were intended to provide insight in regard to: the participating students' awareness or knowledge of resiliency, if they felt it could be worked on and improved, and what activities might be best suited to practice these skills and gain further life experience. The data clearly pointed to the fact that the students had a much better understanding of what being resilient was all about, what traits are central to being resilient, and that they could improve their level of resiliency throughout their lives by engaging in particular activities and/or life experiences. As one student stated, “I do feel that I

could improve my resiliency because if I keep never taking no for an answer, eventually it will come to me.”

Even at a young age, the students demonstrated that never giving up and not losing hope are central to being resilient. In regard to optimism and persistence, one student wrote, “I have a long road ahead of me to improve my resiliency because lots of things get me down easily.” He is now more than aware that he could work on these areas of his performance character, but it was clear through the data and his comments that he was not demonstrating a fixed mindset. He had clearly moved towards a growth mindset and was eager and excited to continue working on these areas.

The data also provided some interesting information in relation to what activities or experiences may be best for these boys to practice their character traits that are central to resiliency. The students felt that opportunities that were new, challenging and out of their “comfort zones” were best to develop resilient behaviour. The top six empowerment opportunities, as defined by the students’ responses, were:

1. **Leadership Opportunities** – House Captains, Table Captains, Announcement Crew
 2. **Outreach** – community service initiatives, trips
 3. **Drama / Public Speaking**
 4. **Athletics** (inter-collegiate and intramural)
 5. **Music / choir** – performing on stage
- Residential camp** – experiential education

Conclusions

Through undertaking this action research project, it became very clear that the boys did not have much of an understanding of resiliency before they took part in this study. They did not know what it entailed, what made up a resilient individual, and they were not sure if resiliency was something they could improve on through practice.

My results point to the fact that greater, ongoing education is needed that focuses on resiliency and exposes students, at a young age, to the meaning, characteristics and benefits of this very important area of performance character. Through resiliency education, students can become

more comfortable with the terminology and can begin to practice the traits that are required to be resilient. Without character education, resiliency is merely a theoretical concept that teachers and principals talk about. It will have limited or no impact in the lives of students unless they are made aware of its various nuances and practical applications in their lives.

Furthermore, more opportunities in all areas of school life are required to be undertaken by students if they are to improve their resiliency. These activities will provide teachers and other educators with the foundation for discussions with their students as they relate to resiliency. Students should participate in what they enjoy and value, but should also choose one activity per year that stretches their comfort zone and exposes them to new situations. It is these new, “uncomfortable” and challenging experiences that will stretch the students thinking and provide them with the confidence required continue their “growth of grit.”

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of my research, I will look to expand student empowerment opportunities in the Lower School at Crescent. I will also ensure that my research findings are shared with the entire school community. In particular, I will engage those staff members who are actively involved in areas of leadership, outreach/community development, admissions, etc. to brainstorm and implement expanded and/or new opportunities (i.e. Junior Duke of Edinburgh). As well, teachers will be essential in helping to determine the best practices moving forward for the implementation of more formal work being done within the curriculum / classes between the grades of 3-6. Bringing the various stakeholders into the process is aimed at reinforcing the integrity of the study, and to enable others in the community to benefit from the findings. As well, the opportunity to discuss, provide feedback and ask questions in relation to the findings will enable other staff members to be better informed in this area of Character Education. With this knowledge, the community will be better situated to effect change and alter curriculum, co-curricular activities and empowerment opportunities to better foster the present and future resiliency within our students.

Reflection

This process and research has been a true pleasure and has heightened my awareness and understanding of the importance of meaningful interventions in the lives of students. As teachers, we can read about the latest trends in education or attend a two-day professional development seminar, but this authentic approach to evaluate practice has been so meaningful and provided so many valuable insights. As this research was done in collaboration with the boys, it is so much more meaningful (in practice and application) than reading a study or simply attempting to implement a new program because it is the flavour of the week. The findings were powerful and reflected the thoughts, aspirations and needs of students within this school. As a result, the findings of the study will most likely have a greater impact on the school, as the practical implications will be derived on months of research involving current students and school activities.

As the faculty member responsible for undertaking this research, the findings will continue to resonate with me and propel me forward in my implementation of future practices relating to resiliency and grit. This meaningful and authentic approach to research and pedagogical practice has made a much more powerful impact in my professional life than anything I have read or been exposed to thus far in my career. As a result, the findings, conclusions and implications of this intervention will prove to influence the students and school practices in much more significant ways.

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Appendix A

Surveys / Questionnaires –50 Item Resilience Questionnaire from Psychometric Tests

<http://www.psychometrictest.org.uk/>

This website is a collaborative project created by psychology postgraduates from universities across the UK. The personality questionnaires on this website are typically the result of research projects or on-going course material.

Other significant contributors currently include BPS Level A and Level B qualified Business Psychologists and Trainee Occupational Psychologists seconded from companies. This is an open and collaborative psychometric test resource.

Background / Information on Resilience Test (<http://www.psychometrictest.org.uk/>):

What is it?

The Resilience Test is formed of 50 self-report statements that have been designed to determine the strengths of certain personality traits from the individual's responses to them, which will provide a greater understanding of their current characteristics, helping to promote self-improvement by presenting possible areas of limitation. Career resilience is more important than ever given the current job climate, either to those who are seeking employment or currently in an occupation, it is vital to be able to keep up with changes or to accept difficulties when presented with a challenging situation. Resilience could in fact be considered a combination of strength and fluidity which allows an individual to adapt to new circumstances without compromising integrity.

The characteristics evaluated in the resilience questionnaire are:

1. **Adaptability**, which refers to the ability to accept changes in occupational situations and continue to work at a high level of performance. For example, the individual would be considered capable of taking criticisms and improving upon them in order to create a positive outcome, as opposed to paying no regard to negative feedback.
2. **Self-Control**, which conveys the likelihood of an individual's judgement or behaviour being affected by emotions or desires, which is important as it refers to the candidate's ability to make rational decisions, even when faced with complications or difficulties. It could also be regarded of an indicator of whether the individual will remain focused when given certain tasks, particularly those that may be considered uninteresting.
3. **Self-Sufficiency**, which is considered to include the ability to work autonomously without the need of guidance or relying on others to complete a task. Although some direction may be needed, self-sufficiency denotes a confident and capable attitude when undertaking a task, whether it require team work or individual attention.

4. **Optimism**, which refers to the candidate's outlook in regards to certain events and suggests whether or not they are likely to look upon them with positivity or negativity. For example, those with high optimism are more likely to look upon difficulties with hope, perhaps promoting a greater level of persistence during challenging tasks or circumstances.
5. **Persistence**, which conveys the individual's ability to overcome difficulties and can also indicate a willingness to work hard and to offer additional efforts when required. In the face of work-place challenges or disappointments, it is important that the individual is able to persevere with various efforts in order to achieve career success.

50 Item Resilience Questionnaire Results

Personality Trait	Low	Fairly-low	Average	Fairly-high	High	Score
Adaptability						0
Self-control						0
Self-sufficiency						0
Optimism						0
Persistence						0

Highly resilient individuals are likely to score highly in many, or even all of these measures, whereas individuals showing low resilience may express lower scores on many of these measures.

Appendix B

After Completing the Resilience Survey and discussing issues of resiliency/Grit...

Please respond to the following interview questions.

1. What does resiliency / Grit mean to you? Please explain.

2. Do you feel you could improve, grow or develop your resiliency? Explain why or why not?

3. Please list 5 activities, courses, programs, etc. that you think would be valuable in practicing your skills of resiliency (adaptability, self-sufficiency, self-control, optimism/positivity, persistence). For example, activities could include sports, camp, Outreach, Leadership opportunities, public speaking, Drama/play, music, etc. You may come up with your own.

4. Why and/or how do you think the activities that you listed could help you practice your resiliency?

Additional Comments/thoughts (optional):
