Collaborating with Confidence, Composure and Grace

Gabriella Brooks

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Looking for resources to strengthen your parent-teacher communication and foster productive struggle in your classroom?

Teacher’s Toolkit

Includes parent letters, parent-teacher conference resources, tips for teaching grit, lesson plans and more!

By Gabby Brooks
Dear Parents,

Every Friday, your child will be writing in their journals. They might tell you a little bit about what they learned during the week at school. They are encouraged to share a time with you that they were frustrated at school this week as well as a time when they were joyful or proud when they accomplished a goal or completed a task. We have been working on our letter-writing format, and we are doing our best to show you our best handwriting and our best spelling.

We worked diligently on these letters, and we are so excited for you all to see them! Please feel free to respond to your child’s letter directly in their journal or even leave them a post-it note inside, whatever your child prefers. :)

Your child really enjoys hearing from you and sharing what goes on in their classroom throughout the week. Journals will be sent home every Friday. Please return them on Monday so that your child can read your response and write a new response again on Friday.

Thank you so much and enjoy the rest of your day!

Sincerely,
Miss Brooks
You Want Me To Let My Students Struggle?

Reasons Why Productive Struggle is Important to My Student’s Learning

As a teacher, we often feel that when our students are frustrated and aren’t feeling successful, we have somehow failed them. We often jump into “rescue mode” working to break down the assignment and taking students step-by-step through any obstacles. Even though our intention is to help our students in this way, we are actually just being detrimental. By doing this, we are not only devaluing hard work and effort in our classrooms, but denying our students opportunities to engage with problem solving skills.

1.) Provides an opportunity to delve more deeply into understanding rather than just looking for correct answers
2.) Unproductive struggle means that students are not progressing by gaining skills to explain their findings or even problem solve.
3.) Teaching that fosters an environment for productive struggle leads to long-term benefits, including students having a better ability to apply their learning to new problems.

Note: It is extremely important as teachers to focus on how our students can productively struggle while we plan our lessons. We need to prioritize ways to support students thoughtfully in their struggle without minimizing opportunities to problem solve.
"But if we don't give much attention to how teachers and parents communicate with one another, we're missing an opportunity..."

**Entering Parent-Teacher Conferences with Confidence and Composure**

**What Do Conferences Look Like?**
Formal times throughout the year where parents and teachers come together to discuss how a child’s progress

**Tips to Consider:**

- When listening to a parent during conference, listen intently and avoid thinking about what you are going to say next.
- Take notes while parents are speaking. This shows that you value the input they are giving you and that you care about helping their child have a great learning experience in your classroom.
- If you are meeting in your classroom, make sure that parents are physically comfortable.
- Avoid sitting at a desk across from the parent as that can give the impression that you are the authority.
- Instead, sit with parents as if you are ready to collaborate.
- Think about sharing something personal about yourself to the parents, especially at the first conference of this year. This creates an environment where parents feel comfortable sharing as well.
- Begin every meeting with something you have noticed about their child that is positive. This is even more crucial if the child has been having trouble in the classroom recently.
- Try to think of a short story or moment with the parents that captures something about their child’s growth or even their personality. Parents love when you share little moments from the class and this also shows that you are devoted and care deeply about their child.
- Make sure you are facing the clock, so you can politely and discreetly keep track of time without looking down at your watch.
- It is important to also end the conference on a positive note. This could be reviewing expectations, talking about strategies moving forward, or emphasizing how you enjoy having their child in class.

**Good Sentence Starters To Get Parents Participating in Conferences**
1. “Please feel free to stop me if you have any questions or comments while I am sharing these assignments we have been working on...”
2. “What have I said that surprises you?”
3. “Is there anything you would like me to explain in more detail?”
4. “Is there anything your child has shared with you that you would like to hear more about?”

**Don’t Forget!**

- The child's parent should be able to recognize that their teacher knows and cares for their child.
- Parents and teachers are in agreement that they are working together for the child's unique needs.
- A teacher's priority is to make families feel comfortable and valued within the school community.
In 3rd grade, one thing I am doing well in is...

In 3rd grade, one thing I want to work on is...

One thing I want you to see in my classroom is...

One thing I want you to ask Miss Brooks is...
**Tips for Dealing with "Difficult Parents"**

*What to Do When Working with A Parent is Especially Frustrating*

**Tip #1:** Do your best to listen to parents as calmly as possible. In addition, speak with them respectfully and refrain from interrupting.

**Tip #2:** Make sure parents know their concerns and comments are valued and that you care about their child.

**Tip #3:** Identify areas that you and the parent share in common...their child who you happen to teach is an easy one!

**Tip #4:** Treat parents as professionals whom you respect.

**Tip #5:** Involve the student in the parent-teaching meeting if the situation is appropriate.
**Tips for Dealing with "Difficult Parents" Explained**

*Based on John H. Wherry Research (President of The President Institute in Fairfax, Virginia)*

**What Do Each of These Tips Look Like?**

**Tip #1:** Often when parent’s meet with their child’s teacher, they are immediately ready to share everything they need to say with the teacher and sometimes what they need to say can be frustrating. They initially must express several concerns, frustrations, and even fears. Give the parent your full attention while speaking. If they sense that you are focused on something else or multi-tasking, they might even be more angered by the situation. Use facial expressions to indicate to the parent you are listening and care about what they have to share. Take notes on what the parent is sharing as it may provide insight to you about their child. Do your best to be patient with the parent, even if they haven’t been very patient with you.

**Tip #2:** After the parent meeting, review their concerns and give them an opportunity to make any additional comments or correct anything that was misunderstood. Try your best to see the parent’s perspective of the situation and how they might be feeling. Some parents come to a meeting with a teacher ready to complain. There aren’t doing this to be a challenge or difficulty for the teacher, but because they are truly struggling in addressing a problem with their child and they are reaching out for help. It is your job as a teacher to be sensitive to this need. Often, listening carefully and genuinely showing that you care can let parents know that they are being heard. This can also often mitigate normally angry or agitated parents. Even if you can’t do anything to solve the problem they are sharing, listening really provides them with a source of support.
Tip #3: Recognizing that you both want the child to be successful and to have their needs met is important when interacting with parents. Saying something like, “I really appreciate your concern for your child and it shows how deeply you care about them. We are working together in that we both want the best for your child.” Don’t forget to mention positive things about their child. Avoid always pinpointing the areas of improvement and never call their child, “bad.” Continue emphasizing that you are here to work together with the parent to help benefit their child, but also stress that you can’t do this without their help and input.

Tip #4: Work closely with parents to make a plan of action to keep focused during your meeting together. Make sure they understand your job is to work with them to solve any problems their child might face at school. Avoid making any promises that you can’t fulfill, but make sure parents know you are devoted to hearing their concerns and trying your best to address them. Make copies of any notes from your meetings with parents and send them to the parent after the meeting. In addition, keep them on file for your records.

Tip #5: If a parent calls and is angry from what their child has told them about a situation happening at school, calmly ask the parent if they would be willing to meet with you and to have their child come as well. At the beginning of the meeting, ask the child (your student) politely to share what they told their parent about what happened at school. Based on the Parent Institute survey, nine out of ten times, the child’s story might be different than the one they revealed to their parent. This initial meeting gives an opportunity for you to make sure the information is consistent at the beginning and then move forward with reactions and responses to the situation from there.
WHY FOSTER Grit IN OUR STUDENTS?

Every teacher’s goal is to create a caring environment in their classrooms where students feel comfortable and excited to come to school every day. Sometimes, teachers feel that teaching grit within their classroom contradicts this creation of a caring environment, but it actually enhances each student’s experience. Fostering grit involves our students experiencing yet embracing frustration. If we prepare our students for life after school without having experienced frustration, they are going to struggle tremendously in knowing how to respond to frustrating circumstances. Learning how to respond positively to struggles is crucial throughout life. Equipping students to react appropriately when things don’t go their way, especially through turning rough times into positive, learning and growing experiences, is vital for preparation after school.
# WHAT DOES PROBLEMATIC STRUGGLE LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT IS EXPECTED OF STUDENTS</th>
<th>WHAT TEACHERS ARE DOING TO SUPPORT STUDENTS</th>
<th>WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Even though problem solving can be tedious and frustrating, persevering through obstacles is part of being a learner!</td>
<td>Create assignments and activities that encourage problem solving. Remind your students that pushing through even when problems are tricky is important. Look for ways to assist students without taking out all the challenges within an assignment.</td>
<td>Students are excited to keep working hard to push through frustration to solve the problem. When students are involved in higher level thinking and asking questions, teachers are fostering an environment that encourages productive struggle. When students get “stuck,” teachers encourage and support without eliminating opportunities for deeper thinking.</td>
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WHAT DOES PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

**WHAT IS EXPECTED OF STUDENTS**
Finding the correct solution is important, but being able to explain and consider how you arrived at your answer is even more critical.

**WHAT TEACHERS ARE DOING TO SUPPORT STUDENTS**
Require students to justify how they arrived at their answer. Make sure your students know that the explanation is just as important as the answer.

**WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM**
Students are discussing how they solved the task and providing feedback about their reasoning.
# What Does Productive Struggle Look Like in the Classroom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Is Expected of Students</th>
<th>What Teachers Are Doing to Support Students</th>
<th>What This Looks Like in the Classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If students are having trouble understanding something, teachers and other classmates are here to help! Students are expected to ask questions and voice when they need some help from a classmate or the teacher.</td>
<td><strong>Give opportunities for students to collaborate and talk about strategies they used to solve problems.</strong></td>
<td>Students are talking with each other and asking their classmates questions about their reasoning. In addition, they are reflecting on their own understanding of the skill.</td>
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# WHAT DOES PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

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<td>Utilizing diagrams, pictures, and hands-on materials are beneficial in better understanding and solving problems.</td>
<td>Provide resources for students to collaborate and talk about strategies they used to solve problems.</td>
<td>Students have opportunities to incorporate tools in their learning. This may include the use of technology to share their thought processes while solving a problem.</td>
</tr>
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# End of Year Survey

Thank you for the privilege of working with your child this year! Please share your comments about the year below! :)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall, my child's schoolyear met my expectations.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My child enjoys going to school.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My child feels welcome in their classroom.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am satisfied with my child's level of safety at school.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My child's academic needs were met.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My child's social and emotional needs were met.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I received classroom updates in a way that was beneficial to me.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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Additional Comments or Thoughts:
SIX STEPS OF TEACHING FOR GRIT
HOW TO PRIORITIZE GRIT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

1. Establish the environment.
2. Set the expectations.
3. Teach the vocabulary.
4. Create the frustration.
5. Monitor the experience.
6. Reflect and learn.

HOW STRUGGLING HELPS US GROW INSIDE THE CLASSROOM AND OUT
Before we start teaching for grit, we need to make sure students feel supported. They need to know that struggling and finding something challenging is not a bad thing and that we will never value them less because of their struggles. Teaching for grit involves us showing our students that frustrating moments bring successful ones.

It is important to think about how we approach the idea of success in our classroom. Other than academic successes, how do we recognize students when they are doing a good job? Do we acknowledge when students are working hard and improving? Do you give them opportunities to share things that are hard for them? Is your classroom a space where everyone is supported? What type of student work is posted in your classroom? Hard work needs to be valued and appreciated.

Let's think about the environment necessary to teach grit.
Appreciating the value of struggling to succeed is extremely important to fostering grit. Students need to learn that mistakes can be utilized as lessons. Consider posting a “grit chart” where students can mark times when they “toughed it out” to accomplish a challenging task.

Students have to understand grit, so that they can purposely work to develop it. More importantly though, they need to know that their teacher cares for them and wants them to do well even when she is pushing them through a really difficult task. Have opportunities for students to reflect on how they approach challenging situations.

TIP: START THE YEAR WITH A "GRIT SURVEY TO FIND OUT HOW YOUR STUDENTS APPROACH DIFFICULTIES."
All students need to learn the meaning of grit and use it frequently in the classroom. In order to foster this, we as teachers should use this language when commenting on student work. For example, we can say, “Sarah, this shows me you are using a great deal of grit!” In the same way we do this with student work, we should use the word grit when talking to parents as well to increase comfort with the language.

If your students are included in parent-teacher conferences, grit would be a wonderful topic to bring up in conversation. Parents and teachers can work together to help students develop grit. In addition, encourage the use of words that support teaching grit including failure, frustration, tenacity, perseverance, resilience, self-confidence, self-image, and comfort zone.

Don't be afraid to share this language with administrators and encourage them to use it as well.
STEP 4
CREATE THE FRUSTRATION

It is crucial to be aware of students’ emotions, attitude, and confidence when utilizing strategies to foster grit. Teach students to anticipate when they are about to get frustrated, allowing them to take a deep breath and move forward.

After forming supportive relationships with your students, you will better be able to recognize in what ways they should experience grit. Think about whether it’s appropriate to teach your students about grit before they enter a frustrating task or to utilize the moment when they are encountering a struggle as a teaching opportunity.

It is extremely important not to endanger a students’ confidence or self-image. A few ways to properly instill grit is by knowingly giving an assignment that is out of a student’s comfort zone, requiring a student to revise and revise again until his or her work is perfect, or telling a student to keep working even if the direction are unclear.

THINK ABOUT DESIGNATING A DAY AS "GRIT DAY" WHERE THE GOAL IS FOR STUDENTS TO WORK THROUGH FRUSTRATIONS.
STEP 5

MONITOR THE EXPERIENCE

We need to be sensitive of our students’ individual frustration levels and how they respond to them. Because responding to frustration can be expressed in different ways, it is important to monitor students’ effort, keep them focused on the individual task, and stop them from moving on to a different activity.

Ask your students questions like, “How are you feeling, and what are you learning about yourself?” How students answer these questions not only tell us how they are actually feeling but also alert them that their attitude is a crucial element in problem solving.

Throughout lessons or even at the end of the lesson, ask students to give a thumbs up or thumbs down to let you know how they are feeling during the lesson. This is a great indication to you of how your students are feeling and it gives them opportunities to reflect as well.

ENCOURAGE YOUR STUDENTS TO KEEP A CHECKLIST TO MONITOR THEIR PROGRESS ON GRIT.
It is critical for students to reflect on their experiences after using grit. We want them to reflect on what made them not give up on a task and what they learned that will help them next time they get frustrated. Having students create a grit journal where they keep track of what tasks were frustrating. In addition, they can think about how they felt about that frustration and what can help them respond to their emotions in the future. Reflecting and learning is key to turning a good failure into a success.
Teaching for Grit: A Lesson Plan

*Targeted to middle school students but can be adapted for elementary grades

Grit: The What and Why

Materials
Pictures or slides of famous individuals who have demonstrated grit

Objectives
1. To introduce students to the idea of grit.
2. To identify famous people who have demonstrated grit.
3. To understand the role that grit will play in student success.

Anticipatory Set
1. Ask questions like, "When you finally succeed, does that always come easily and quickly?"
2. "How do you respond when things are challenging?"
3. Note: For younger students, think about defining grit as "working harder when things are hard." Be sure to use the consistent language of grit no matter what age the student is.
4. Have students brainstorm what examples are of a good failure.
5. Mistakes are going to happen as we learn and try new things. What matters is that we learn from them!
Introduction

1. Talk about how succeeding doesn't always come from doing things that we are especially good at. Grit looks like not being discouraged when something is difficult, not giving up and working hard to try and try again.
2. There are a lot of famous people in the world that had to work really hard through struggles to accomplish their goals they achieved today.
3. Think about looking back at quotes from Abraham Lincoln or Michael Jordan. Choose famous people that interest your students or maybe share commonalities with them.

Procedures

1. Have students draw a circle on their sheet to represent their comfort zone. Students should fill in tasks and skills they consider to be in their comfort zone.
2. Have students draw an additional circle outside where they fill in tasks and skills outside of their comfort zone.
3. Consider modeling this for your students with you as the teacher making one of your own on the board.
4. Share examples of how some skills that were once out of your comfort zone are now in your comfort zone because of how you used grit to work on them.
5. Talk to students openly about how struggles are used as learning opportunities and we should learn our mistakes.
6. Share a specific time when you especially displayed grit. This will have a positive effect on your class and might even encourage others to share personal stories as well.
Assessment

After the lesson, ask your students for feedback. Did they feel comfortable with the lesson? Did they feel supported in the lesson? Do they have a better understanding of the importance of grit?

An assessment might look they asking your students these questions:
1. Can you highlight famous people who exhibit grit? How can you tell they exhibit that?
2. Think about times when you have exhibited grit or seen someone who has. Maybe give opportunities where students can showcase other students who are displaying grit.
3. What do you do to persevere when you are frustrated?

For older students, consider asking these questions:
1. How do people react when they continually fail?
2. How does culture impact whether we are willing to exhibit grit or not?
3. Would employers want to hire people who have grit? How can we show grit when applying for a job?
4. How would you teach younger children about grit?

How your students answer these questions can provide you as the teacher insight about your students' understanding of grit.


