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## Harnessing the power of failure in your music classroom: Grit, growth mindset, & greatness

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# HARNESSING THE POWER OF FAILURE IN YOUR MUSIC CLASSROOM

## GRIT, GROWTH MINDSET, & GREATNESS

by Diane Persellin and Virginia Davis

**N**o pain, no gain. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again. These and other similar phrases represent attitudes most teachers hope will inspire their students. Surrounded by walls adorned with such inspirational quotes, we music teachers walk a fine line between identifying students' musical mistakes and encouraging them to keep trying. We may wonder during this process why some students seem to crumble under criticism while others never quit, despite constant difficulty. What can we do to encourage students to learn from their mistakes? What roles do talent and hard work play in the music learning process? And what is the relationship between struggle, failure, and learning that lasts?

Carol Dweck has some ideas that may help answer these questions. A psychologist who pioneered a concept called *Growth Mindset* (2006), Dweck identified ways of thinking about our intelligence and ability to succeed. Fixed mindset, according to Dweck, is a belief that our abilities are set in stone. We may be musically talented or not, for example, or intelligent or unintelligent. If we believe in a fixed ability there may be little point in trying harder, as we do not believe we can improve enough to make any difference. People who believe they simply *can't sing* are unlikely to enroll in voice lessons or join a choir, not wishing to embarrass themselves among *more talented* musicians and preferring to invest their time in an activity in which they feel more talented. By contrast, growth mindset refers to a belief that our abilities are mutable and can be improved with effort. People who hold a growth mindset about intelligence may believe that they can actually become smarter by studying and challenging themselves to learn material they find difficult. A growth mindset, says Dweck, creates a passion for learning unhindered by fear of making mistakes: mistakes are simply another learning opportunity (2006). As Ken Robinson, speaker and educator said, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original." (2006)

Related to this growth mindset is the concept of "grit," described by author Angela Duckworth (2016) as an attitude of perseverance through difficulty to reach a goal. She claims that what matters the most is sticking with things and working daily to get better at them. In her research she has found that talent

is overrated in our society and that *grit* is the best indicator of success. In her popular TED Talk, she defined *grit* as a "passion and perseverance for very long-term goals" (2013). People who have grit tend to have four common qualities: interest, practice, purpose, and hope. And unlike natural talent, Duckworth says grit can be taught. She encourages educators to let students experience some setbacks to learn how to overcome them. Music students may initially struggle with a challenging passage, but perseverance and stick-to-itiveness with some encouragement can go a long way to achievement.

### Growth Mindset and Grit in the Classroom

In the music classroom, we can use the ideas of growth mindset and grit to encourage our students to work toward their musical goals. Many aspects of music learning require this can-do attitude, from producing a good sound with your voice or instrument to playing complex patterns of notes and rhythms and blending with others. Music, according to Dweck (2006), is actually an excellent opportunity for students to develop a growth mindset by witnessing firsthand how practice and rehearsal can lead to satisfying musical results. Students don't always see the big picture of how a series of small successes lead to a big goal, but a teacher can help students become aware of this process. By involving students in musical problem-solving and encouraging students to learn from mistakes instead of giving up, we can give our students the gift of grit. To encourage growth mindset and grit in your classroom, consider the following:

**Watch your language.** When giving feedback to students, encourage the small victories along the way rather than praising the eventual successful result. Students who are frequently told they are "smart," or "talented," may believe these things are innate or intrinsic, rather than being achieved through hard work. Students who believe they are successful in music because of talent (fixed mindset) may worry when they make mistakes or encounter difficulty—what happened to my talent? These students may even start to avoid risk to keep from destroying the illusion of talent they've come to rely on.

Instead, teachers should praise effort. Point out how hard your students worked for the outcome they got on that tricky fingering pattern, syncopated rhythm, or new Orff accompaniment.

Reward successive approximations by showing students how far they've come. When the going gets tough, remind students that they've successfully faced challenges before, and that the feeling of something being difficult means they are growing as musicians. Students have their own unique challenges, whether solo singing a small phrase in a singing game, holding a tempo steady without rushing, or coordinating those hand-signs with their solfège. It's important for them to realize that everyone makes mistakes, everyone struggles, and that even the most famous and successful musicians got there through sheer tenacity and hard work.

**Let them struggle.** Before jumping in to fix things yourself, encourage students to strategize, help each other, and find their own solutions. We learn by working through problems, testing ideas through trial and error. Not only will you help them realize that most musical problems are not as big as they first appeared, but they'll also feel empowered to tackle their problems even outside of your classroom. Suggest that they use their fingering chart to review that recorder note, or let students practice in pairs and take

turns "playing teacher." Rather than waiting until that next rehearsal or lesson to have you fix their problem, students can use strategies you've taught them, such as breaking down difficult passages into smaller segments. By allowing students to become more musically independent, you convey the idea that you believe in them and their ability to succeed, and students learn to trust themselves. Students may surprise you—and themselves—by how quickly and creatively they can find solutions!

**Teach reflective practice.** Reflective practice—the act of pausing, thinking, considering, or brainstorming between attempts at a skill—is essential to making lasting improvements. As you rehearse your groups, instead of just saying "Let's do it again," model reflective practice by making your thought processes audible: "What happened with the intonation there?" or "How can we fix that tricky rhythm pattern?" or "How can we hear the melody on the glockenspiels?" When you ask students to practice independently or in small groups, make sure they are armed with appropriate reflective practice strategies. One way to encourage reflection is

to insert more pauses, or thinking time, into the learning process. Information processing time varies in people, and children need more processing time than adults (Droit-Volet, Meck, & Penne, 2007). According to Rowe (1987) allowing pauses of 3–5 seconds between your question and the student's answer can lead to more correct, more complex answers. Increasing wait time, which allows for learners to fully process the question and formulate appropriate answers, has been shown to be beneficial to teachers as well. Teachers who increased the use of mindful pauses in the learning process were found to use more varied questioning strategies and ask more challenging follow-up questions (Casteel & Stahl, 1973; Rowe, 1972; Stahl, 1994; Tobin, 1987). Speedy recall isn't always necessary, so consider ways to insert "think time" into your questioning process and allow students to consider more creative options. For the student, take time to consider the teacher's question. Audiate that phrase you just played. Evaluate the success of a new strategy you just tried. These techniques can pay off in deeper, more meaningful learning.

**Introduce desirable difficulty.** Requiring

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students to work harder can lead to greater and deeper learning. Although this struggle, dubbed a *desirable difficulty* (Bjork, 1994), may at first be frustrating to learner and teacher alike, ultimately it can improve long-term retention. This happens because, similar to being given longer thinking time, students must mentally search for and retrieve information or make inferences based on previous knowledge. This retrieval process is vital for long-term retention. Our students, of course, are gratified when it seems they are learning new skills and information easily. As teachers, we understandably want learning to come quickly for students and may choose the method that produces immediate results. However, when “instructors facilitate learning by making it easier, it may increase short-term performance, but it may decrease long-term retention” (Bye, 2011).

Instead, teachers can insert challenges into the learning process to give students the opportunity to engage in hypothesis-testing, to develop and evaluate learning strategies, and ultimately to self-regulate their learning (Schwartz, 2016). This is an excellent opportunity to allow students to work in teams on group compositions or to use informal music learning strategies to play popular tunes on classroom instruments. People are more likely to develop grit for activities they find valuable, so lessons that involve students in meaningful music-making are key.

As we move forward in a school year filled with classes, rehearsals, and concerts, consider how the concepts of grit and growth mindset can strengthen your teaching. Students who are taught to trust their abilities, solve their own problems, and keep going when the going gets tough are more likely to grow to be successful, independent musicians. A quote attributed to Winston Churchill reminds us that “success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.” We believe this is right: the ability to accept and learn from difficulty can give students the key to success. ■

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