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EDUCATION UPDATE

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Seeing Beyond the Glass Half-Full

Nurturing optimistic learners isn't just about looking on the bright side; it's also about grounding students in reality.

In Amy Lyon's 5th grade classroom, students watch a video of their classmates showing off their snowboarding skills at a local park. Although beginners, the 10- and 11-year-olds display impressive acumen, scaling the ramps and rails with ease. Then, to show what can happen with progression, Lyon juxtaposes the scene with a clip of professional snowboarder Tim-Kevin Ravnjak, who earned a spot in the 2014 Winter Olympics before his 18th birthday.

As students watch Ravnjak perform aerial acrobatics on a halfpipe, suspended over sky and mountains, one boy shakes his head. "I'll never be able to do that," he mumbles. Lyon observes another student lean over, elbow the first student, and say, "That's pessimistic thinking. If you can snowboard and you want to do that, you can; you just need to work."

It was at that moment Lyon realized the optimism concepts she'd been teaching at Sutton Central School in Sutton Mills, N.H., were sinking in. As part of her dissertation, Lyon developed and researched the efficacy of a yearlong curriculum on optimism, self-control, and perseverance. She and other teachers in her district have used the curriculum successfully to teach 5th graders the social-emotional skills that make up the "missing piece in education." Getting students to think optimistically, Lyon says, is the first piece to completing the puzzle.

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Illustrations by Donald Ely

SEEING BEYOND THE GLASS HALF-FULL

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Power of Positive

Contrary to popular belief, optimism is not simply "seeing the glass half-full," wrote Martin Seligman in *The Optimistic Child*. Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, Seligman has spent decades researching optimism and asserted that "the basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way [we] think about causes."

"Optimism is not about being happy all the time," adds Lyon, whose optimism lessons are based off Seligman's work. "It's about looking at a difficult situation realistically and figuring out which parts you own and which parts you can do something about."

Surveys indicate that many students struggle with taking an optimistic approach to goal setting and problem solving. According to the 2014 Gallup Student Poll, only half of students in grades 5–12 said that they're hopeful about their ability to succeed in school and other areas of life, and only one in three strongly agreed with the statement, "I can find lots of ways around any problem."

The good news is that, despite dismal survey sentiments, optimism can be learned. In 21 studies on the efficacy of the Penn Resiliency Program, which hones in on optimism by teaching students how to work through problems, participants (ages 8–22) experienced increased levels of optimism and well-being as well as fewer depressive symptoms.

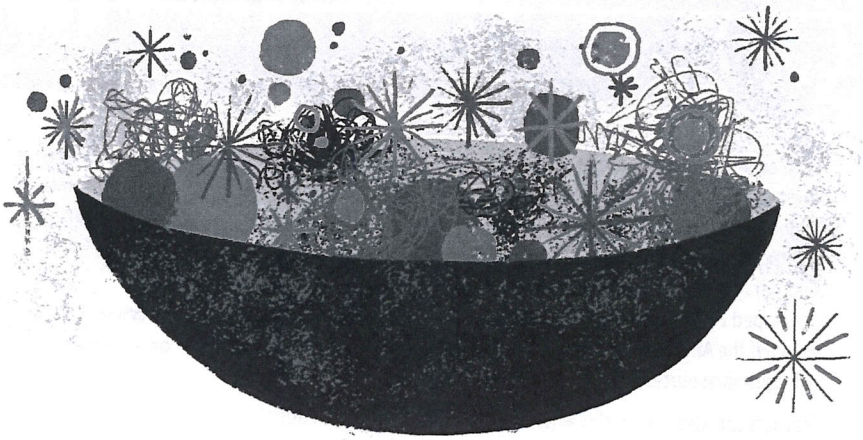
Donna Wilson, author of *Positively Smarter: Science and Strategies for Increasing Happiness, Achievement, and Well-Being*, corroborates those findings: Optimism can be learned through practical strategies that encourage students to consider how their words and thoughts influence their approach to challenges.

"Practical optimists are positive thinkers," Wilson elaborates. "They are aware of the realities (the practical part) of learning—for example, that learning can be hard work—and they're aware of the reality that life can be difficult." Although "practical optimists recognize the negatives and work to fix what can be fixed, they intentionally focus their minds and energy on the positives."

As a result, optimistic students "have hope when they come to school that they're going to be able to succeed and [are more likely] to begin a learning task and complete it," suggests Wilson.

Thought Catching

Once her 5th graders have a firm grasp on what optimism is, Lyon teaches them to detect the difference between optimistic and pessimistic language. She uses scenarios from *The Optimistic Child* to illustrate the nuances. As Seligman explained, pessimistic kids tend to misplace blame by not owning up to mistakes or taking responsibility for their actions. They also tend to view negative events as permanent and pervasive: "My mom is the crabbiest mom in the entire world" is a more permanent view than "My mom is in the crabbiest mood ever." Or, "Teachers are unfair" is a more pervasive view than "Ms. Carmine is unfair."



Lyon challenges her students to look at setbacks as temporary and to "catch their thoughts" so that they don't settle on the first one that pops into their heads. They practice "slowing their thinking down" and avoiding words like "never" or "always" in conversation. Fifth graders are at a stage where they are metacognitively aware, Lyon maintains. They may not fully understand the concept of grit—"of persisting through *very* long-term goals that are years out"—but they can think more deeply about optimism, self-control, and perseverance, which are three skills that work toward grit. Lyon's curriculum is influenced by researcher Angela Duckworth, whom she's partnered with to make grit teachable.

Each 45-minute monthly lesson in Lyon's curriculum includes a connecting assignment, such as writing a blog post that takes two thoughts and analyzes them with the ABC (adversity, belief, and consequence) model. Between lessons, Lyon draws on texts to reinforce what students learned.

For instance, when reading the *Liberation of Gabriel King*, the class "naturally makes the connection" between the characters. In the story, a small boy who is bullied and paralyzed by fear learns from his optimistic best friend that he can shed the role of victim and take control of his situation by making brave choices. Although Lyon's students sometimes catch one another's pessimistic language, she finds it safer to turn the spotlight on characters in a book because "you're not pointing the finger at somebody in class saying, 'listen, you were just very pessimistic.'"

Radical Modeling

As other teachers demonstrate, there are less direct routes to nurturing optimism. Chad Donohue, a 7th grade teacher at Park Place Middle School in Monroe, Wash., sees himself as a "radical optimist" whose job is to help students find the lesson in setbacks. "Radical optimism is choosing always to attack an issue in life

with the belief that you have what it takes to get through it."

When he provides feedback on assignments, Donohue "includes the way to move forward," offering a realistic path for improvement. He also conveys to students that if "you aren't stumbling, you aren't really learning." If a typically straight-A student receives a poor grade on an essay, for example, Donohue will sit down with the student to discuss why the grade presents a powerful opportunity to improve. In doing so, he tries to model the outlook that "I'm not stuck in this place if I don't want to be."

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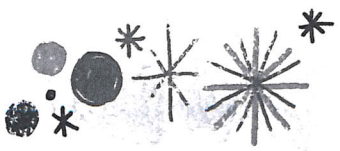
Students can learn optimism from such modeling: Donohue shows excitement for learning, whether it's "the parts of speech, a five-paragraph essay, or the *Call of the Wild*," and he relies on humor (on display at www.youtube.com/virtualteacherman) to reduce students' anxiety. "If I'm really excited and totally optimistic when it comes to students' potential, the subject matter, and how it applies to life," then students tend to imitate that excitement, he explains. "Even the kid who has extreme anxiety can take a nugget from that" and see that there's hope for the future.

Modeling optimism just makes sense, explains Wilson, because modeling fires "mirror neurons—a mental template of someone else's movement—priming the brain to imitate that behavior in response." Students are apt to mimic a teacher's attitude toward learning, whether it's enthusiasm or boredom. As well as modeling an optimistic attitude, Wilson advises teachers to model problem solving (by showing a specific strategy) or to "put in a mistake and joyfully work through it" so that students can see how to reach the end result.

At Sutton Central, Lyon admits that she has to "consciously think about modeling optimism," which mostly happens through self-talk. "If I catch myself using pessimistic language, I'll stop and say [to students], 'Whoa, did you just hear me say that? Who could help me phrase that in a more optimistic way?'"



Four Ways to Turn on the Tap

To keep the optimism flowing, Wilson, who is also an educational and school psychologist, recommends doing the following:

1. **Foster a sense of belonging.** Send a clear message that "we're a group that [supports] different speeds of learning" to promote an optimistic outlook among students.

2. **Praise students for their efforts.** Praise students from a growth mindset perspective that hones in on effort, which is within their control, as much as achievement.

3. **Give students choice.** Whenever possible, let students set their own learning goals and choose the topic that they're going to study. "They are more optimistic about learning tasks when there's interest," Wilson relates.

4. **Share success stories.** Have students read about others who overcame adversity and give them the stage to share their own successes. In the June 2015 *Educational Leadership* article "Sewing Seeds of Hope," Robert Barr and Emily Gibson echoed the importance of "integrat[ing] celebration into the fabric of the school." In addition to schoolwide academic competitions, fairs, and recognition events, "Classrooms can have some form of celebration every week, such as a 'goal party,' at which students who have met goals receive recognition, or an 'author's chair,' where students have the opportunity to share their writing and receive feedback." Every student should have a chance to participate, noted Barr and Gibson, so "include celebrations of physical, academic, and social achievements."

Community of Optimists

In any such effort, remember to bring parents into the fold, advises Lyon. Sutton Central is planning to host quarterly parent nights so that "parents can learn the strategies and language" that the school uses to support the skills at home. "It at least starts the conversation," she says. The staff will discuss, for example, how to help children "tolerate frustration" as part of the learning process, so "when they get upset because they're not comprehending a concept quickly or able to solve a problem right away" while doing homework, parents can help them manage those feelings.

For the first time this year, thanks to staff enthusiasm around Lyon's curriculum, each grade in the K–5 school will focus on a skill that works toward grit: Kindergarteners will learn basic vocabulary associated with grit, reliance, and optimism, while 1st graders will focus on ownership, 2nd graders on self-regulation, 3rd graders on resilience, and 4th graders on developing a growth mindset. With the schoolwide push to build on and scaffold these essential skills, "The students are going to be in great shape when they go to middle school," insists Lyon.

In fact, teachers at the feeder middle school have already said that they can tell which elementary school the students come from based on their outlook on learning. "These students are so well-adjusted," Lyon concludes. "They go with the flow, but they are willing to ask for help and take risks." ■

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