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## Developing Growth Mindset and GRIT in Preservice Teachers

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## Developing Growth Mindset and GRIT in Preservice Teachers

### Abstract

Educator preparation programs are charged with developing preservice teachers ready to meet the many challenges of today's classrooms. Developing a growth mindset and GRIT provides future educators with important dispositions to increase their teaching effectiveness and improve the success of their students. A growth mindset helps learners realize that intellect is not fixed but through time and effort, skills will increase. Developing GRIT (i.e., growth, resilience, integrity, and tenacity) builds the perseverance to continue until goals are reached. Developing GRIT and a growth mindset helps teachers understand that all students, even diverse learners, can be successful if provided the appropriate instruction. This article provides an example of how an educator preparation program incorporated growth mindset and GRIT in the clinical model to support learning for the preservice teachers while promoting growth mindset and GRIT in the classroom.

### Keywords

Growth mindset, GRIT, preservice teachers, retention

### Cover Page Footnote

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### Developing Growth Mindset and GRIT in Preservice Teachers

A key responsibility for all educator preparation programs (EPPs) is developing quality teachers with longevity in the field; however, teacher retention is a continual problem, especially in the area of special education. Special education teachers leave the field at nearly twice the rate of their teaching colleagues resulting in over half of U.S. school districts, including 90% of high poverty districts, struggling to attract and retain quality special educators (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2014). This shortage necessitates EPPs examine all facets of teacher preparation as it relates to retention.

Developing preservice teachers with strong dispositions is an important, yet sometimes underemphasized, component of teacher retention. This paper examines two dispositions integral for teacher retention, growth mindset and GRIT, and serves as an example of how EPPs can develop skills in preservice teachers that support not only their learning but the learning of their students.

Growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) views learning as a continual process; intellect and skills are not predetermined but rather can be developed through effort and proper training. It focuses on the malleability and neuroplasticity of the brain to "rewire" over the course of the lifespan. Similar to muscles, neural connections in the brain grow through use and diminish when not challenged. Explicitly teaching about growth mindset is important because it helps students understand that hard work leads to learning and skills will improve with practice. A growth mindset empowers learners because mastery is based on effort, not innate intellect.

The concept of growth mindset has recently been incorporated into the idea of GRIT. Duckworth (2016) defines GRIT (i.e., growth, resilience, integrity, and tenacity) as the

combination of passion and perseverance. These attributes of GRIT can be developed by (a) developing an "attitude of gratitude," (b) keeping the end in mind, (c) practicing a growth mindset, (d) finding others that share these characteristics, and (e) creating a culture of GRIT within your circle of influence (Duckworth, 2016). Similar to growth mindset, GRIT can be cultivated; growth mindset and GRIT are interconnected dispositions. Growth mindset promotes a positive attitude and willingness to try because through hard work anything is possible. Developing GRIT gives students the ability to stick with it, even in adversity, and persevere until goals are reached.

Both psychologists, Dweck and Duckworth developed the concepts of growth mindset and GRIT through their experiences working with children. Dweck (2006) began by noticing the differences in students' effort when trying to solve puzzles of increasing difficulty and noting the contrast in mindset between those with a growth mindset that embraced the challenge compared to students with a fixed mindset who shut down when the task became difficult. Similarly, Duckworth (2016) found the students making the most gains in the classroom were not the smartest students, but rather the students with the most GRIT. These were the students that persevered with the goal in mind.

Developing growth mindset and GRIT in preservice teachers is an important component in improving teacher retention. It equips preservice teachers with the dispositions and confidence to handle difficult situations and persevere. However, growth mindset and GRIT may be even more important at the preservice level given the struggles many college students face today. A 2017 survey of over 63,000 students from 92 schools found 40% of college students feeling so depressed it was difficult to function with 61% reporting overwhelming anxiety (American

College Health Association, 2017). In addition to teaching pedagogy and skills, EPPs must help preservice teachers develop the dispositions to overcome these challenges and persevere.

### **Growth Mindset in Preservice Teachers**

Preservice teachers in a clinical model were explicitly taught about growth mindset and GRIT during their most difficult semester. This junior cohort spent two days per week in a high need elementary school with a large immigrant population receiving 100% free and reduced lunch. Growth mindset and GRIT were interwoven into the culture of the school to help promote academic success and support students facing challenging situations. The goal of explicitly teaching these dispositions to the preservice teachers was two-fold: (a) to support preservice teachers facing heavy demands in a clinical teaching model, and (b) familiarize them with the culture of the school. As one preservice teacher explained, "Growth mindset and GRIT were introduced to my cohort at a time when everyone was overwhelmed with the workload from school. Seeing some of the obstacles that our elementary students were faced with and how they were able to grow GRIT was the biggest motivation for us to keep going."

Instruction began at the beginning of the semester by the preservice teachers reading *Mindsets in the Classroom: Building a Culture of Success and Student Achievement in Schools* by Mary Cay Ricci (2013), completing a study guide, and sharing ideas from the book with peers. Key points were also developed through faculty led class discussion. As part of the clinical experience, preservice teachers formed small groups of two or three and expanded on ideas from the book to co-teach growth mindset lessons to the elementary students. This included instruction on the neuroplasticity of the brain through demonstrations, short video, student drawings, discussion, etc. along with other related topics (e.g., trying new things, setting goals, measuring performance through a growth mindset lense, the power of *yet*). The classroom

teachers welcomed this support and reinforcement of growth mindset. They were familiar with the concept because the teachers had already read and shared the book as part of their professional development to help create a school culture of growth mindset.

### **GRIT in Preservice Teachers**

Once growth mindset instruction concluded, GRIT became the next topic. This was chosen because although the preservice teachers could explain and teach growth mindset, they often struggled to maintain it in their own lives. Many of the preservice teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed with their combined school- and work-loads, along with the financial, social, or emotional challenges college students often face. GRIT was introduced to encourage the preservice teachers and provide them with life-long skills that help them understand they control their own destiny.

Before instruction began, the preservice teachers were given the GRIT survey (Dweck, 2010). It consists of 10-questions measuring passion and perseverance combined with an overall GRIT score. The preservice teachers used the GRIT scale to determine their level of GRIT. They were not required to share their number; however, many preservice teachers commented on how surprised they were by their low GRIT score. Instruction ensued through class reading and discussion. The preservice teachers then individually made plans to increase their GRIT and also look for ways to cultivate GRIT as a cohort. At the end of the semester the GRIT survey was re-administered and, again, these results were confidential. However, many preservice teachers commented on being satisfied with their improvement.

### **Growth Mindset and GRIT in the Classroom**

Not only were the preservice teachers taught about growth mindset and GRIT, but through the clinical model, they were given the opportunity to teach it and experience it. The

lessons taught and interactions with the students allowed the preservice teachers see firsthand how important these dispositions are to learning. University faculty coached and assessed the preservice teachers using a growth mindset and expected the preservice teachers to do the same with their students. A common theme throughout the semester was the power of *yet*, the idea that although students may not have reached mastery it will come with practice over time (Ricci, 2013). This is especially important to instill in students with disabilities, and those working with these students, because progress may not occur as quickly for these students.

### **Growth Mindset and GRIT in Students**

Probably the most compelling reason to develop growth mindset and GRIT in preservice teachers is that it equips them with the skills to cultivate a culture of growth mindset and GRIT in their classrooms. Quality teachers use growth mindset and GRIT to continually improve their own teaching while working to help their students become successful learners. A teacher with a growth mindset holds every student to a high standard (Ricci, 2013). It is critical today, with classrooms becoming more and more diverse, that teachers uncover the potential in *all* students. Growth mindset help teachers understand that all students have the potential to succeed, regardless of background or current skill level; this is critical in bridging the achievement gap (Dweck, 2010).

Ricci (2013) found the teachers with a growth mindset, who taught the concept to their students, had less behavior problems and stronger student outcomes than teachers with a fixed mindset. Developing and maintaining a classroom culture of growth mindset and GRIT is critical because students begin believing intellect is fixed as they progress through elementary school. In kindergarten, 100% of the students believed in growth mindset but by third grade only 58%

maintained that view with the biggest decline between second and third grade, with 82% of second graders demonstrating a growth mindset (Ricci, 2013, p. 11).

Teaching students how their brains work is a simple way to promote growth mindset and improve student learning. When students understand their brains do not have set limits, but that they can make themselves "smarter," it gives students a sense of control and empowerment. Students with a growth mindset are not afraid to try; they learn hard work results in success. Once students realize they are capable of learning, GRIT helps them persevere to meet their goals. Students need GRIT to push through the difficult times, both within and outside of school. This is important for students of all ages and a great life skill to develop.

### **Conclusion**

Developing growth mindset and GRIT in preservice teachers supports their learning during college and develops more positive teachers working to meet the needs of *all* students. These teachers can then pass on their knowledge of growth mindset and GRIT to their students to improve student outcomes, bolster attitude, improve behavior, and develop an important life skill so they can use their GRIT to persevere until the goal is reached. A preservice teacher explained,

Throughout our program we worked in high need schools and learning about GRIT and growth mindset during this time was so beneficial because we could see how badly these students needed these attributes and how important they are to student success. Each student had a different background but was able to succeed.

Developing a culture that is resilient to tough situations and motivated to keep going is vital in any classroom, whether it is in preschool or at the college level.



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