

K-12 TEACHERS

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

WE CAN DO HARD THINGS: KICK-STARTING PERSEVERANCE

CREATING CLASSROOMS
WHERE CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY,
AND CRITICAL THINKING THRIVE!



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A Case Study

In 2011, a wildlife conservationist in South Africa rescued a honey badger, which he named Stoffel. The lively rodent proved to be a talented escape artist. He dug, climbed, and employed a variety of other clever tactics to repeatedly break free of his enclosure. All of this was [captured on video](#), and Stoffel became an internet sensation. Stoffel's antics taught the world about this crafty species. But for teachers, his story is more. It is a great way to highlight the power of perseverance and why it matters. His experience also shows us how to foster perseverance within our own classrooms.

What is Perseverance?

Stoffel's experience clearly demonstrates four attributes of perseverance:

- **Patience:** This is the heart of perseverance — an unwavering commitment to wait for success.
- **Endurance:** One must withstand the many obstacles that pave the way along the path to achievement.
- **Inherent Nature:** Humans are instilled with perseverance from our earliest days, evident from learning to walk, talk, and tackle more intricate tasks like tying shoelaces or riding bicycles. We are naturally inclined to never give up.
- **Passion:** Perseverance isn't inherently difficult. It can often be misinterpreted as a skill required only during challenging times. However, perseverance springs from passion. It is a drive to learn, grow, and find success in one's own areas of interest.



Why is Perseverance Important?

Perseverance serves as a foundation, cultivating crucial skills such as adaptability, creativity, collaboration, and communication in the pursuit of one's goals. Beyond skill development, perseverance plays a pivotal role in promoting social and emotional well-being. It empowers individuals, particularly students, to effectively regulate their emotions when faced with frustration or disappointment during their endeavors.

As students persist, they not only build resilience but also foster a growth mindset and enhance their ability to navigate through a spectrum of emotions. Moreover, perseverance stands out as a key indicator of success, as demonstrated by notable figures like author J.K. Rowling, who endured 12 rejections before finding a publisher for her first *Harry Potter* novel; Nelson Mandela, who withstood 27 years of imprisonment before becoming South Africa's first president; and Walt Disney, whose iconic Mickey Mouse character faced more than 300 rejections. All eventually found success.

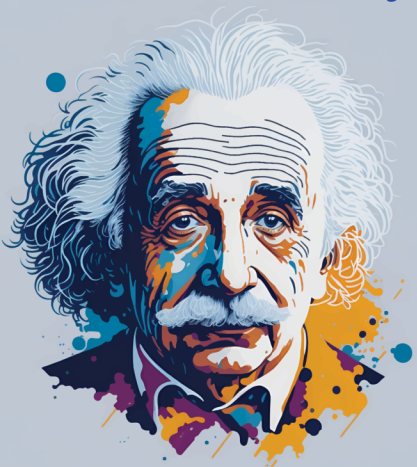
Kick-Starting Perseverance

Creating the Environment

Stoffel's environment played a key role in the development of the honey badger's perseverance. It empowered him to take on each new challenging scenario to escape. Similarly, a classroom in which perseverance can thrive starts with an environment where students are both challenged and feel safe attempting challenges. The following activities and strategies can help develop a classroom where students will excel at, and feel comfortable with, taking risks:

- **Crafting Our Classroom:** A successful classroom starts with the teacher, but it takes an entire class working together to keep that success going. In this activity you will brainstorm what a successful classroom looks like. Then, as a class, you will decide on the top ideas that will make your classroom thrive — your classroom norms. These norms will get turned into a contract that is creatively represented and referred to frequently.

- **Mistake of the Day/Week:** As Albert Einstein stated, “A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.” Some teachers say mistakes are okay. Do one better: use this strategy to teach that mistakes are awesome! Celebrate mistakes as a learning opportunity by having students nominate one mistake that really helped them understand something more clearly. Collect your class’s favorites and display them on a bulletin board or in the hall.
- **Positive Self-Talk:** People can be their own worst critics. Students often say, “This is too hard.” Or, “I don’t know how to do this.” These thoughts can become barriers to developing perseverance. Teach students to think differently. Encourage them to say, “I know I can do this.” Or, “If I get stuck, I can ask a friend or teacher for help.” Model this language when you encounter challenges or present tasks to students. Don’t say, “Let’s start easy.” Instead, consider something like, “This might take us a few tries.” The positive perspective will help keep your students motivated.



A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.

— Albert Einstein

Give Them a Running Start

Stoffel's challenges evolved over time and grew harder. Each iteration of his habitat provided new hurdles he had to overcome in order for his escape to be successful. Likewise, we don't want to present students with the greatest challenges right away. A sense of success motivates us to continue and try increasingly harder challenges. These activities help students tap into their passions and experience failure and success.

- **Tinker Time:** Allow students some time to tinker with materials or ideas just for the fun of it. They can create a variety of objects out of the same materials. They can expand on ideas in a variety of ways and directions. During sharing time, encourage students to share the results of their tinkering with descriptive and precise language. Tinker Time outside of an investigation promotes risk-taking and student curiosity.
- **Curiosity Hour:** Real passion is everlasting. Help students persist in their passions by allowing them to choose a project to work on for one hour a week. The most important part of this strategy is making sure that they follow the project all the way through to completion — teach them that true passion doesn't give up!

Setting Goals

Stoffel had a clear goal: escape! Clearly defining goals creates a sense of purpose and motivates students to stay committed to the work they are doing. As students encounter obstacles and setbacks while pursuing their goals, they are more likely to persist because they have a specific objective in mind. These strategies can help students clearly identify their goals and see the progress they are making toward that goal.

- **W.O.O.P:** The W.O.O.P acronym can help students work toward their goals in a productive way — here's what it means!
 - **Wish:** Identify a wish or goal you want to achieve.
 - **Outcome:** Identify a positive outcome of achieving this goal.
 - **Obstacle:** Identify one obstacle that could potentially stand in the way of reaching your goal.
 - **Plan:** Make a plan for how you can overcome this obstacle.

Encouraging students to reflect on all four components helps them learn how to be intentional in the pursuit of their goals.

- **Stars and Stairs:** This versatile tool empowers students to not only set their goals, but also to chart the path toward achieving them. How does it function? Each star represents a goal, handpicked by the student or guided by the teacher. Each stair signifies the actionable steps required to ascend toward that goal. Allowing students to craft long-term objectives. As a bonus, the cumulative document is a great way to provide students with feedback as they work to achieve their goal.

Looking for even more ideas? Check out [Strategy Explorations: Risk-Taking and Perseverance](#) for additional ways to bring more perseverance into your classroom.

Disaster Detectives Final Project Tracking

Name/Group:

Instructions:

1. Set the settings of the document to "Share so anyone can view"
2. When you complete a goal, Double click the star and fill it in with a color.
3. Underneath "Evidence" Paste a link to the document that provides evidence you completed each target.

Stars and Stairs Example

I can gather and analyze data to identify a problem in mitigation strategies for my hazard.
Evidence: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1zCMzxa-4WZapRCFFSPomXTMmmKNGG186jBBhYs1_ekj/edit#slide=id.godf95e939fd_0_0

I can utilize the engineering design process to design and test a prototype that will protect the region/communities from natural hazards.
Evidence: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TWfCYUJH8C9VhHfA9xps_pz21Yob8doXr-2G9jo4_mE/edit

I can present my solution and share my test results with an audience.
Evidence: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ChyP9ny2DyFCS82UOUJc7H7NulTaypl8pI8qooxJac/edit#slide=id.gd310909a00_1_38

Stars and Stairs Example

Stoffel's story is a compelling example of how perseverance prevails. As educators, reflect on your own 'honey badgers' and ponder how you can reshape their learning environments to nurture a sense of comfort in embracing risks. Where can we inject more opportunities for them to follow their passions, surmount challenges, and find clarity in their goals and purpose?

By fostering perseverance in our students, we unlock the doors to progress and provide them with the keys to a brighter future.



VAI Education Can Help!

This may be the one topic that will have the most impact on how you teach — and how your students learn! As a nonprofit, we rely on teachers like you to share our mission with other educators. And, if possible, please share with your peers and your administrator. In return, we'd like to offer you and your school a **20% discount on select products and services*** from VAI Education to access this discount and details, go to www.vaei.org/thankyou2024 or contact your educational specialist via phone at 616.234.5528 or e-mail information@vaei.org.

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