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## **"Yet" ~ A Brief School-Based Program for Fourth Graders**

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**Abstract:** "Yet" is a school-based youth development program intended to introduce elementary grade students to concepts of growth mindset, self-leadership, resilience and self-talk to promote healthy coping strategies to persist in tasks toward more positive educational outcomes. Drawing from psychology, education, and management literature focusing on self-leadership, the "Yet" program encourages interaction and internalization of concepts such as "growing the brain," and "stinkin' thinking," while modeling how to reframe set-backs to things students have not mastered... "yet," and practicing adaptive self-talk to promote coping and persistence. This unique program holds promise because it is approximately 30 minutes long, occurs within the context of a regular school day, and can be implemented with a high measure of fidelity because it is script-based. The success of the program may be augmented by principal and teacher support along with online videos.

## Introduction

Youth development programs can come in a host of shapes and sizes and address a variety of needs. Successful programs have ranged from developing peer leadership skills in middle and high school students (Apsler, Puerini Del Sesto, Formica, & Mulligan, 2011), to programs directed at the needs of immigrant and refugee children (Hall, Porch, Grossman, & Smashnaya, 2015), to growing gardens (Sagers, Greenhalgh, Christensen, & Sherwood, 2011), to school-based programs, such as a "HERstory which promotes pro-social peer engagement and develops social skills in girls (MacFarlane, Chauveron, & Thompkins, 2013). These diverse programs all promote youth development as they are strength-based, universal, and help youth thrive (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004) while increasing confidence, developing character, increasing competence, fostering a sense of connection, and helping youth develop a sense they can make a positive contribution (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, & Ferber, 2003). Additionally, such programs tap into "personal and social assets" including physical health, cognitive/intellectual development, psychological and emotional development, and social development, which foster well-being and successful transitions toward future endeavors. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002).

In this article we present a one-time program we believe is particularly compelling given its interdisciplinary grounding, accessibility to students of highly varied cognitive and socioeconomic levels, and overall ease of implementation -- a school-based program developed for elementary grade students called "Yet."

## Theoretical Underpinnings

The "Yet" program is inherently interdisciplinary drawing research from education, psychology, and management literature focusing on self-leadership. Each of these literatures is briefly discussed below.

The term "mindset" has recently been popularized in the education literature by Carol S. Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006). In an oversimplification, Dweck (2006) posits that individuals can increase their success by adopting a "growth mindset" whereby they increase their cognitive abilities and skills through persistence in effort. The mindset construct is founded on decades of motivation research on entity (fixed mindset) and incremental (growth mindset) theories centered on beliefs about cognitive abilities and learning (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Dweck & Legget, 1988; Dweck & Molden, 2005), and improvement related to sense of control, persistence, and ability to improve through effort (Bandura, 1986; Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Bempechat, 1983; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006).

From psychology, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1991) purports that our thoughts (i.e. self-talk) play a role in our behaviors (such as the amount of effort we choose to expend), which in turn influences outcomes. Research on self-talk has shown that positive, motivational and instructional self-talk may lead to positive and desired outcomes (Gottman & McFall, 1972; Hardy, Oliver, & Tod, 2009), while negative self-talk results in less productive outcomes (Rogelberg, Justice, Braddy, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggstad, Shanock,...Fleener, 2013). Modifying self-talk messages by adding phrases is an effective coping strategy that was shown a reduction in self-defeating thoughts and negative emotions (Sutton, Mudrey, Camino, & Knight, 2009).

Finally, the Management literature discusses the notion of self-leadership. Self-leadership is the "process through which individuals control their own behavior, influencing, and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies" (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p. 279). Exercising some control over what we think (i.e. "self-talk") is one effective strategy in self-leadership (Manz, 1986), and has some powerful influence on outcome beliefs (Rogelberg et al., 2013).

The "Yet" program draws on these theories and research findings toward the following aims packaged in an extremely concise, but impactful intervention:

- To build and capitalize on the cognitive/intellectual, and psychological and emotional assets of students
- To introduce the idea of growth mindset (i.e. growing the brain) and persistence
- To introduce the concept of "yet" as a way of modifying self-talk and promote healthy coping strategies to assist with persistence and better educational outcomes.

### **Program Preparation**

"Yet" was conceptualized and developed by a small interdisciplinary group of graduate students and professor interested in improving academic successes for school children. Some of the group members had conducted research in the business community related to the power of self-talk, which was germane to the idea of teaching children to combat academic struggles by changing their internal messages. Taking an evidence-based approach, group members identified concepts and messages important to increasing motivation levels in students and developed a program intervention script. This was the first step toward program implementation.

We identified third to fifth grade students as the target audience based on their developmental abilities. Specifically, children of this age range (8-11 year olds) are able to see other's points

of views, empathize, understand cause and effect, are able to predict consequences, and are becoming more skilled at working with abstract concepts (Morin, 2014). Interestingly and seemingly a contradiction, children of this age seek independence, yet also desire being part of a group, and while peer competition is starting to emerge, they are typically not self-confident (Mayers, 2016). We were also seeking an age range who would be receptive to the messages in the context of fun, so the higher energy level combined with the cognitive abilities of this age group seemed fitting.

The second step, to help create an environment conducive to "Yet", required a brief in-service program with the principal and teachers in a school. The lead professor contacted a title one school in the community to inquire whether such a program might be of interest. The principal and faculty participated in a workshop that introduced the "Yet" workshop, but also participated in an actual workshop applying the content to them as educators. This way they could experience the content in a very personal way. Overall, the support and buy-in from the administrators and teachers created great synergy and enthusiasm for the program, which facilitated its implementation.

### **Description of "The Power of Yet" program**

"Yet" is a one-time 30-minute interactive presentation with 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, co-led by two facilitators. The program occurs in the classroom and is scheduled during a time that fits the scheduling needs of the class in the context of a regular school day.

The program is heavily scripted to allow the various facilitators to replicate the program with fidelity, while also incorporating great input and engagement with students. A journal is provided as a gift to each of the students at the on-set of the program and is used by the students to complete the tasks guided by the facilitators.

After a brief introduction, students are instructed to write their names on the first page of their journals. They are then instructed to write their names again, but this time with their non-dominant hand. The leaders solicit student comments about students' experiences. This task represents a challenge that virtually no student is good at, and many find physically awkward, cognitively challenging, and frustrating. After two additional trials, the team-leaders facilitate a brief discussion about how cognitive challenges and practice help "grow the brain." Students are able to relate this to improvements seen in the legibility of their handwriting and improved confidence in their abilities - a central tenet of mindset, "growing the brain."

The conversation segues to discussing the idea of not being good at something..."yet." Additionally, it allows for the introduction of internal thoughts that can sabotage student efforts to persist at a difficult activity, which we refer to as "stinkin' thinking." The facilitators then do a skit to illustrate what stinkin' thinking looks like (replete with examples), but also how to combat negative thoughts by reframing the message to be, "I'm not good at something..."yet." Following the skit, students provide examples of situations and their own "stinkin' thinking."

The concept of persistence is another tenet of mind set. "Yet" captures the idea that with effort and stick-to-itiveness, improvement is possible. Students (and teachers) generate scenarios where they have performed poorly (e.g. on a test, in a sport), have experienced set-backs, or

felt disappointed, discouraged, or frustrated. These examples provide opportunities for the facilitators to help students practice reframing set-backs to not being good at something...“yet.”

Use of adaptive self-talk to cope with challenging situations is the final concept introduced to students. Facilitators instruct students to use their journals to generate some alternative, positive and self-motivating statements to say to themselves when they perform poorly, feel stuck, discouraged, or frustrated to help them persist with the challenge, make progress, and grow their brains. Students are encouraged to share their journal entries, which are strongly reinforced.

In wrapping up, facilitators request volunteers to share what they have learned from the program and then instruct students to write in their journals the names of two people with whom they will share what they have learned today. While writing down the names may seem unnecessary, it underscores that these concepts are worthy of sharing and adds a component of accountability. Also, by sharing what they learned with others, it helps increase the likelihood of internalization of the messages.

Each student is given a memento at the conclusion of the program – a small bag containing a pencil, button, and two stickers with the word “Yet” as a reminder that they hold the power to persist with their efforts in the face of challenges, the possibility to “grow their brains,” and the ability overcome self-defeating self-talk through more adaptive and helpful messages they can generate themselves. Students are reminded that, while there will be many challenges ahead and set-backs are inevitable –these are just opportunities to grow and learn. In other words, they are just not where they want to be ...yet!

### **Unique Features of “Yet”**

Unlike after-school or community-based programs typically aimed at teens, “Yet” targets elementary-grade students. Additionally, it is a one-time, 30-minute program that occurs in the classroom in the context of a school day. “Yet” not only provides the opportunity for children to internalize the concepts related to mindset, but it is inexpensive (mementoes are nice, but not required), and convenient as it occurs at school day. Furthermore, facilitators can be drawn from a large pool of adults and the program can be executed with a high level of fidelity if the script is followed and there is sufficient processing of concepts during the program. The script is available by contacting the lead author.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Academic mind-set interventions have been found to be successful in raising GPA in college students (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002), in retaining adolescents at risk of high school drop out (Paunesku, Walton, Romeso, Smith, Yeager, & Dweck, 2015), and increasing math scores of eight graders (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), but there is a paucity of literature indicating similar interventions targeted toward elementary school-aged children. Empirical studies aimed at this population seems the logical next step to advancing more adaptive thinking, coping, and achievement and academic outcomes for younger students.

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