

Developing a Growth Mindset in Teachers and Staff

by Keith Heggart , High School Teacher from Sydney, Australia, March 22, 2015

An idea that is beginning to gain a lot of favour in educational circles at the moment is the notion of fixed versus growth mindsets, and how they might relate to students and learning. Based on the work of Stanford University psychologist, Carol Dweck, the idea of mindset is related to our understanding of where ability comes from. It has recently been seized upon by educators as a tool to explore our knowledge of student achievement, and ways that such achievement might be improved.

However, in my work, I have found that the notion of developing a growth mindset is as equally applicable to staff and teacher performance as it is to students. This article begins with a brief discussion about the difference between the two mindsets, what that means for education, and concludes with some ideas for how school leaders might seek to develop a growth mindset amongst their staff.

The New Psychology of Success (2000), Dweck developed a continuum upon which people can be placed, based upon their understandings about where ability comes from. For some people (at one end of said continuum), success (and failure) is based on innate ability (or the lack of it). Dweck describes this as a fixed theory of intelligence, and argues that this gives rise to a 'fixed mindset'. At the other end of the continuum are those people who believe success is based on a growth mindset. These individuals argue that success is based on learning, persistence and hard work.

According to Dweck,

In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it (Morehead 2012).

The crucial point for individuals is that these mindsets have a large impact upon our understanding of success and failure. Fixed mindset people dread failure, feeling that it reflects badly upon themselves as individuals, while growth mindset people instead embrace failure as an opportunity to learn and improve their abilities.

Needless to say, this idea of mindsets has significant implications for education. One of the most important aspects relates to feedback. According to Dweck, when we give praise to students (which we, as teachers often do, in order to build self-esteem and encourage students) for how clever they are, we might actually be encouraging them to develop a fixed mindset - which might limit their learning potential. On the other hand, if we praise students for the hard work and the process that they've engaged in, then that helps to develop a growth potential.

We have to really send the right messages, that taking on a challenging task is what I admire. Sticking to something and trying many strategies, that's what I admire. That struggling means you're committed to something and are willing to work hard. Parents around the dinner table and teachers in the classroom should ask, 'Who had a fabulous struggle today?' (Morehead 2012)

This praise can have significant effects upon students: citing longitudinal studies with Year 7 math students, Dweck has shown how students with a growth mindset are far more likely to take on more challenging work and succeed at it than students with a fixed mindset - even if all other factors remain the same.

Dweck (and others) put this down to the development of self that takes place as different mindsets develop. With a fixed mindset, there are feelings of powerlessness and learned helplessness. This can lead to the development of a self-defeating identity, accompanied by toxic personal statements like 'I can't do this' or 'I'm not clever enough.'

On the other hand, a growth mindset amongst students is likely to encourage them to develop feelings of empowerment - students begin to see how they might take action to positively influence their community and their own learning.

Mindsets predict motivation and achievement amongst students according to some research, too:

Students with a growth mindset were more motivated to learn and exert effort, and outperformed those with a fixed mindset in math—a gap that continued to increase over the two-year period. Those with the two mindsets had entered 7th grade with similar past achievement, but because of their mindsets their math grades pulled apart during this challenging time. (Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck, 2007).

Crucially, Dweck's research is applicable to all people, not just students. Therefore, school leaders could ask themselves what effect might developing a growth mindset amongst staff have upon learning in a school? Fortunately, a number of educators and teachers have already begun to explore what this might look like for teachers:

Modelling

According to Jackie Gerstein, teachers, like the students they teach, can learn to develop a growth mindset, but this requires careful planning by school management. The most obvious way of applying a growth mindset to teacher professional development is through modelling. Gerstein has run a number of professional development courses that seek to instruct teachers in how to model a growth mindset amongst students and one of her key principles is encouraging teachers to see themselves as learners, and, just like students are all capable of learning and improving, so too are teachers (Gerstein 2014).

Create space for new ideas

A second principle requires that schools provide opportunities for teachers to try new things and make mistakes. This can seem daunting for teachers, but it is essential for developing a growth mindset - after all, one of the key principles of such a mindset is the willingness to try new approaches. As part of creating this space, it is important to begin with the learning in mind; that is, what will teachers and the school learn as part of the process, rather than whether the new idea is going to be a success or a failure.

Build time for self-reflection

While creating space for new ideas is important, it is only part of the process of developing a growth mindset. Linked to it, and equally vital, is providing a chance for teachers to reflect upon their new ideas and consider what they learned from the process. Ideally, this reflection should focus less on whether the idea was a success or a failure, but rather on what the teacher learnt from the process.

Formative Feedback

Teacher performance management processes can often be quite awkward and distressing experiences; however, by viewing the process as part of a growth mindset - that is, making it formative, rather than summative, and inviting participation of the teacher in the process, the feedback can be more meaningful and applicable to the teacher's daily practice.

Developing a Growth Mindset amongst students is not an immediate process; rather, it will take a concerted effort on behalf of teachers and the rest of the schooling community. Equally, encouraging teachers to see themselves in the same way will equally take a lengthy period of time; however, there are significant benefits to be had from leveraging these ideas.

References

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