

What Teaching the “Growth” Mindset Looks Like in Schools

“It’s one thing to say all students can learn, but making them believe it – and do it – can require a 180-degree shift in students’ and teachers’ sense of themselves and of one another,” writes Sarah Sparks in this front-page *Education Week* article. But can beliefs about intelligence be changed – including the “soft bigotry of low expectations”? Students’ and teachers’ frustration with challenging Common Core standards and accountability systems brings this question to the fore.

The key, say those who are implementing the research of Stanford professor Carol Dweck, is getting students to buy into the “growth” mindset about intelligence and talent. “When we understand that we can build our intelligence, rather than it being fixed, we take risks,” says Eduardo Briceno, co-founder of Mindset Works, a company that has developed the Brainology curriculum based on Dweck’s work. “We are interested in learning from mistakes rather than focusing on how people see us and wanting to do things perfectly and quickly.”

“How you set it up for kids matters,” says David Dockterman (Scholastic and the Harvard Graduate School of Education). For example, a teacher shouldn’t introduce a problem in a new unit by saying, “Let’s start with an easy one.” If students don’t get it right, this sets them up for discouragement and failure. Instead, the teacher should say, “This might take a few tries.” Another example: a high-school chemistry teacher sees that some students who answered incorrectly are scowling and unhappy and says, “We’re going to see in this class really great scientists who were wrong again and again.”

Some teachers who’ve heard about “fixed” and “growth” mindsets have a superficial understanding of how to get students to shift their thinking – they believe it’s enough to exhort students to put in more effort. “You can’t just tell a child to try hard without giving them strategies and supporting their efforts,” says Dweck. Teachers should avoid generalities (“Good job!”) when praising improvement; instead, they should draw attention to a student’s focus, effective strategies, effort, and persistence. This “takes the spotlight off fixed ability and puts it on the process of learning,” says Dweck. It’s also important to give shout-outs for improvement, mentioning specific details on how a student was successful, while addressing students’ learning problems privately.

The biggest mistake is to praise intelligence (“You’re so smart at this”) versus effort and strategy. SciAcademy in New Orleans has gone so far as to ban the word “smart” among staff members. “That sounds like it has a weird 1984 connotation but it’s really important,” says Spencer Sherman, a dean and science teacher at the school. “You get in the habit of saying ‘smart,’ and you find yourself saying it to kids, and you give kids the expectation that [intelligence] is fixed. We’ll call each other out on it, because adult culture very quickly becomes scholar culture.”

SciAcademy learned the hard way not to assign students to Advanced Placement classes based only on grades. Teachers found that students who thought they were in AP because they were smart got frustrated and shut down when they encountered very challenging work. Now the school opens AP courses to all students and tells them, “This will be the hardest class, with the most homework, but you’ll learn more” and requires an entry essay test based on very difficult text. “It is a task you’re designed to fail,” says Sherman, “because we want students to figure out how to respond to that... Now the students in AP don’t think they got there by being smarter than everyone else, but because they worked really hard for it.”

“‘Growth Mindset’ Gaining Traction as Ed. Strategy” by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Sept. 11, 2013 (Vol. 33, #3, p. 1, 21), www.edweek.org

Getting Students to Take On Seemingly Impossible Challenges

(Originally titled “I Can Climb the Mountain”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, former New York City educator Maddie Witter describes how a 17-year-old incarcerated youth exploded when his teacher asked him to read in class. He had dropped out of school after numerous expulsions and had spent most of the last two years on the streets.

The teacher then asked students if they thought she could bench-press 200 pounds. Of course not, they laughed – she’d be lucky if she could lift five pounds. Okay, she said, but could she increase from five to ten pounds? They thought so, and saw the logic of incrementally increasing the weight over time.

Holding up a 300-page book, the teacher asked, “Do you think you could read this book?” Of course not, they replied. “How about five pages?” Yeah, we could do that, they said. She explained that today they would read for five minutes, move up to six minutes tomorrow, and slowly build up to being able to read a fat book. “We will develop your academic fitness,” she said, “and with your hard work, finishing a book like this will be doable. You can read books like this.”

Three weeks after refusing to read, the 17-year-old had proudly finished the entire *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series.

“I Can Climb the Mountain” by Maddie Witter in *Educational Leadership*, September 2013 (Vol. 71, #1, p. 61-64), www.ascd.org; Witter is at madeleine.tippens@gmail.com.