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TEACHERS' MINDSETS: "EVERY STUDENT HAS SOMETHING TO TEACH ME"

FEELING OVERWHELMED? WHERE DID YOUR NATURAL TEACHING TALENT GO? TRY PAIRING A GROWTH MINDSET WITH REASONABLE GOALS, PATIENCE, AND REFLECTION INSTEAD. IT'S TIME TO GET GRITTY AND BE A BETTER TEACHER.

Educational organizations tell me that many of their most promising young teachers drop out — quickly. Many of them believed they were born to be teachers, and yet within a year or two they're gone. It seems puzzling until you think about teachers' mindsets.

WHAT ARE MINDSETS?

Mindsets are people's beliefs about human attributes, including abilities. In a fixed mindset, people believe that basic talents and abilities are fixed traits. Some people are well-endowed and some aren't, and you can't do much to change that. However, in a growth mindset, people believe that basic abilities can be developed through hard work, good strategies, and good mentoring. People can have different mindsets in different areas, believing that some abilities are fixed but others can be developed. Within any given area, our research has shown that people's mindsets play a significant role in their achievement.

Most of our research has been on students' mindsets about their intelligence and abilities. In this research, we have found that students in a fixed mindset are overly focused on their ability. They are invested in looking smart and never looking foolish; they avoid effort because it makes them feel dumb; and they are derailed by setbacks, believing that setbacks mean they lack ability.

In contrast, students in a growth mindset focus more on learning. Their main goal in school is to learn, they put in the effort and strategies needed to acquire knowledge, and they stick to difficult tasks, learning from their mistakes and setbacks. They have more grit.

Research shows over and over that students in a growth mindset are more motivated and earn higher grades and achievement test scores, especially in difficult courses or across difficult school transitions. Research also shows that teaching students a growth mindset changes their motivation and achievement. Students who learn that they can

grow their brains (make new, stronger neural connections when they stretch themselves to learn hard things) then show greater motivation to learn and earn higher grades and higher achievement test scores. And we have found that praising for “process” (challenge-seeking, hard work, good strategies, focus, and persistence) instead of ability or intelligence creates a growth mindset and enhanced achievement in students.

There has also been work on the impact of teachers’ mindsets about students’ abilities. This research shows that teachers with more fixed mindsets engage in more ability grouping and create more self-fulfilling prophecies when it comes to student achievement. Students whom they consider to be low in intelligence remain low achievers in their classroom. In contrast, low-achieving students often blossom in the care of teachers with a growth mindset. For example, chronically underachieving minority students in New York City or on a Native American reservation have gone to the top of their districts after a year of immersion in growth-mindset classrooms, classrooms where teachers believe in their students’ universal potential to become smarter.

But what about teachers’ mindsets about themselves — about their own teaching ability? New research by Greg Gero at Claremont Graduate University shows the critical importance of teachers believing that they can grow their teaching abilities.

TEACHERS’ MINDSETS

Gero began by measuring teachers’ mindsets about their teaching ability. Did they believe that teaching was simply a deep-seated natural ability or did they believe that teaching ability could be substantially improved over time? He assessed teachers’ mindsets by asking them to agree or disagree with statements like these:

- The kind of teacher someone is, is something very basic about them and can’t be changed very much (fixed).
- Teachers can change the way they teach in the classroom, but they can’t really change their true teaching ability (fixed).
- Some teachers will be ineffective no matter how hard they try to improve (fixed).
- No matter how much natural ability you may have, you can always find important ways to improve (growth).
- Every teacher, no matter who they are, can significantly improve their teaching ability (growth).

Then he looked at how teachers’ mindsets related to their values and practices. What did he find?

First and foremost, he found that those who endorsed more of a growth mindset valued learning over looking good or risk-free teaching. Like students who hold more of a growth mindset, they cared more about learning than about their reputation as a good teacher or their perfection as a teacher. For example, they agreed more that “The value of trying new teaching methods outweighs the risk of making a mistake” and “For me, the development of my teaching ability is important enough to take risks.” They did not believe that a mistake-free lesson on their part or a lesson that went exactly as planned defined them as a good teacher.

I naively thought that since I was young, energetic, educated, and driven, I would be a rock star.

This point is especially important for new teachers. They can’t expect to be perfect right away (or ever!) or have everything go smoothly immediately. Instead, they need to give themselves the time and the leeway to experiment and find out what works best for them. So, how did those with a growth mindset put their value on learning into practice? Here’s how.

- They engaged in more professional development, such as reading professional literature to pick up teaching techniques and ideas.
- They also observed other teachers and even agreed that they would sign up to have a respected teacher teach their class to see how he approached and worked with the students.
- More importantly, they specifically asked for feedback on their teaching from a respected colleague or supervisor. It might take courage for new teachers to expose themselves to such scrutiny from veteran teachers, but it is essential. Not only do they get crucial feedback, but they also gain a mentor. Someone who gives you periodic feedback (that you take to heart) is on your side from then on.

Many people who have more of a fixed mindset might be reluctant to put themselves under the microscope like this, fearing negative judgments from important colleagues. But they may also assume that it's their job to go it alone, that teaching is more of a lone enterprise and that your talent, if you have it, should carry you forth. Perhaps for this reason, those with the fixed mindset also engaged in less collaborative activity.

Finally, the teachers with more of a growth mindset specifically confronted problems in their teaching head on. In our research with students, we consistently find that those with a fixed mindset want to hide from their deficiencies or mistakes lest they be measured by them, whereas those with a growth mindset try to address their deficiencies and mistakes and learn from them. In the same way, in Gero's study, teachers with a growth mindset were more likely to agree that "I discuss problems in my classroom teaching with others in order to learn from them."

To someone with a fixed mindset, airing problems in this manner might seem humiliating or dangerous. Maybe others will think you're a bad teacher. However, it is likely that many other teachers are or have been exactly where you are. They have faced similar problems and would be more than happy to share their accumulated wisdom. It may even be the case that new ideas and solutions will emerge from your discussions, ones that are useful for all parties involved.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE TEACHERS?

Let's return to the new teachers we portrayed at the outset, the ones who were dropping like flies. Maybe now we're in a position to understand them better and to see why they failed to persist even though they appeared to have such promise. These were probably young teachers who felt they were naturals; they were born teachers, they had "it." Then they got into the classroom. Often these were classrooms of students with different backgrounds from theirs. Often these were students who were not necessarily eager to learn. The natural talent didn't work; it wasn't enough.

What to do? Remember that in a fixed mindset, struggle means you don't have it after all. So, instead of rolling up their sleeves, using every resource at their disposal, and assuring themselves that they could only get better, they probably concluded that they didn't really have the talent in the first place or that the kids were intractable — and fled. Meanwhile, the young teachers with a growth mindset, maybe not as extravagantly "talented" to begin with, had the grit. They persevered and learned.

Two days ago, I received an email from a former student who graduated from Stanford five years ago and became a teacher in New York City. She taught first in Harlem and was now teaching in the South Bronx, both areas with underserved, underachieving minority students. She confronted her students with her growth mindset as a teacher, honing her teaching skills as she went.

Here's what she wrote about her 4th-grade class this year: "[In one year], they went from believing they were 'bad at math' to being the #1 4th-grade class in the state. 100% of them passed the state math test, with 90% of them earning the top score of a '4.' In the Bronx as a whole, only 28% of 4th graders passed the state math test." In a matter of a few years, my student went from a novice to someone who could guide her students to accomplish more than they ever imagined: "In their end-of-year reflections, many of them expressed astonishment with themselves. They had no idea that they were capable of such ... achievements."

You might be thinking it was easy for her, that she was in fact one of those naturals. But when I wrote back and asked her about her early days, here's what she told me: "Being a new teacher is terribly difficult, and the learning curve is outrageously steep. Like all new teachers, I struggled miserably. I naively thought that since I was young, energetic, educated, and driven, I would be a rock star. My first few months of teaching proved that I was no exception. I worked maniacally long hours only to feel like a hamster on a wheel."

She went on to say, "I was determined to keep a growth mindset about my abilities, but it was extremely hard to maintain this mindset when I kept perceiving my hard work as fruitless and myself as a failure. At this time, I was teaching kindergarten in Harlem, and I had hoped to bring about glittering transformational change. I was obviously disappointed when after several months, some students still couldn't recognize letters, some were still struggling to hold a pencil, more than a few were still throwing daily tantrums, and every day I felt like quitting."

This is exactly when many young teachers do decide to quit, but here's when my determined student had a key insight.

"I think what new teachers don't realize is that we need to quantify 'growth' in reasonable, measurable increments. Instead of a goal of 'an amazing classroom with remarkable academic gains,' I had to set goals like, 'this week, everyone will line up safely for the bathroom' or 'today, the green group will identify a triangle.' The class excelled at accomplishing these little goals, and slowly, our big goal of 'an amazing classroom with remarkable academic gains' started to materialize. (This group of kindergarteners scored in the 95th percentile nationwide on their Terra Nova exam.)"

Here's her message to you: "My advice to new teachers would be that a growth mindset about your teaching abilities has to be accompanied by reasonable goals, patience, and frequent reflection. I used to videotape myself nearly every day (I still videotape a few times a week) so that I could see what my kids were seeing. The clips were pretty painful to watch, but I had some major 'aha moments' (i.e. 'No wonder no one is following my directions, they were so unclear!' or 'I didn't smile once during that lesson. No wonder everyone has tuned me out.'). From this video reflection, my goals became so concrete that it was almost impossible not to accomplish them (i.e. 'Write out directions on chart paper and have kids repeat them.' or 'Stop, breathe, and smile after every few sentences.')."

She concludes: "Bottom line, with the right mindset – teaching is an amazing profession and an absolute privilege ... [But] if we don't believe in our ability to grow as teachers, what reason do our students have to believe that they can succeed?"

A growth mindset about teaching set the stage for this teacher's grit and, as a result, her students' grit, too.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Someone once asked me what the essence of a growth-mindset teacher was. I said it was the belief that "Every student has something to teach me." When you are in a fixed mindset, the child who has trouble learning something is a threat, a threat to your self-concept as a good teacher. In some cases, teachers just blame the child. Similarly, when you are in a fixed mindset, an unmotivated student or a disruptive student is a threat. But in a growth mindset, those students are challenges; they're opportunities to hone your skills, increase your understanding, and become a better teacher.

In fact, some teachers tell their students, "Every time you make a mistake, become confused, or struggle, you make me a better teacher." These students go home and boast to their parents, "I really helped my teacher today!"

As you get to know your classes this year, please remember that this is the beginning of a long and rewarding journey. You have many things to learn and many people to learn from. You're only going to get better and better. Above all, keep reminding yourself that every single student has something valuable to teach you.

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