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What Is Your Mindset?

by Dr. Brandie Oliver, Butler University School Counseling Program

When I first learned about Carol Dweck's work on mindset, I remember thinking how powerful a growth mindset is on how we learn and perceive our ability. Working with students, I have often heard statements like "I am not good at math," or another very common one is "I am a horrible test taker." These statements demonstrate a student that is operating from a fixed mindset. Taking these statements and reframing them using a growth mindset perspective, allows the student to see potential. For example, stating, "I don't understand this math concept yet," shows potential and demonstrates the need for continued effort to master a concept. Just by adding the simple word "yet" to a statement triggers our thinking that we do have the ability to accomplish the task. Based on the work of Stanford University psychologist, Carol Dweck, the idea of mindset is related to our understanding of where ability comes from. Individuals with a *fixed mindset* believe that their intelligence is simply an inborn trait (fixed)—they have a certain amount, and that's it. In contrast, individuals with a *growth mindset* believe that they can develop their intelligence over time (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1999, 2007).

These two mindsets deeply affect students' school behaviors. For one thing, when students view intelligence as fixed, they tend to value looking smart above all else. They may sacrifice important opportunities to learn—even those that are important to their future academic success—if those opportunities require them to risk performing poorly or acknowledging gaps in achievement. On the other hand, students with a growth mindset view challenging work as an opportunity to learn and grow. These students have a thirst and excitement to learning and tackling the challenge presented. Instead of thinking they were failing (as the students with a fixed mindset did), they might say something like, "I love a challenge," "Mistakes are our friends," and "I was *hoping* this would be a new task!"

Students operating from a fixed mindset do not like effort and believe that if you have ability, everything should come easy. They tell us that when they have to work hard, they feel dumb. Students with a growth mindset, in contrast, value effort; they realize that even geniuses have to work hard to develop their abilities and make their contributions. Finally, students with a fixed mindset tend not to handle setbacks well. Because they believe that setbacks call their intelligence into question, they become discouraged or defensive when they don't succeed right away. They may quickly withdraw their effort, blame others, lie about their scores, or consider cheating. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to respond to initial obstacles by remaining involved, trying new strategies, and using all the resources at their disposal for learning. Students CAN learn to operate from a growth mindset at any age. In a recent study conducted by Lisa Blackwell and Carol Dweck, middle school students struggling with math were divided into two groups. One version of the workshop included lessons about how the brain learns and grows smarter with effort, along with study strategies. The control group's workshop focused on general information about the brain and the same study strategy information. Results revealed the students who received the growth mindset message improved their grades and were rated by their teachers as showing more positive motivation to learn, while their peers who did not learn that message continued to show declining grades and low motivation (Blackwell et al., 2007). Students need to learn study strategies and growth mindset brain basics, AND they need to believe that exercising those skills will pay off.

Here are a few additional ideas to help foster a growth mindset in your students.

1. Create a safe classroom culture that encourages students to take risks.
2. Celebrate mistakes and use them as a learning opportunity. The focus is on the effort not just the outcome.
3. Use growth mindset, positive language. As stated above, just adding "yet" to your response tells the student s/ he is capable of learning this task.
4. Be a role model for your students. Acknowledge and emphasize you're a lifelong learner.
5. Praise effort and give feedback in a way that promotes learning and future success.

"This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts." ~ Carol Dweck

For more information about growth mindset and Carol Dweck, please visit: <http://mindsetonline.com>
https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve?language=en

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