CHANGING OUR MINDSETS: HOW TEACHERS’ ATTITUDES CAN SUPPORT—OR UNDERMINE—CHILDREN’S ACHIEVEMENT

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Carol Dweck has pulled together findings in neuropsychology, developmental psychology, and education that have big implications for people interested in supporting gifted development. In her book Mindset, she reviews three decades of research showing an important difference between fixed and growth mindsets:

FIXED MINDSET: Intelligence is fixed and stable. The fixed mindset is associated with lower achievement and self-esteem.

GROWTH MINDSET: Intelligence is seen as developing over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. The growth mindset is associated with greater confidence, risk-taking, and higher academic and career success over time.

Dweck’s conclusions highlight some of the widely-held myths and misconceptions about giftedness:

1. **Some People are Born Smart vs. Intelligence Develops Over Time**
   "The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning." (p. 188)
   From a fixed mindset perspective, some people are inherently smart, and some aren’t, and there are ways to measure this (e.g., IQ). From the growth mindset perspective, intelligence develops over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn.

2. **Praising Children’s Intelligence is Good vs. Praising Children’s Intelligence is Bad**
   “Praising children’s intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance.” (p. 170)
   Rather than praising children for personality or innate fixed attributes like being smart, praise them for what they accomplish through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. Ask them about their work in ways that appreciate their effort, and encourage them to think about their options and choices.

3. **Smart Kids Learn Quickly and Easily vs. Working Hard Makes You Smart**
   “You aren’t a failure until you start to blame.” (p. 37)
   From a fixed mindset perspective, if you have to work hard at something, or you learn it slowly, you aren’t good at it, and are not very smart. From a growth perspective, however, high achievement comes from hard work over time, and thoughtfulness (which can be slow) is a good thing.
4. **Failure – Lack of Ability vs. Failure Can Be Seen as an Opportunity for Learning**

   “People in a growth mindset don’t just seek challenge, they thrive on it.” (p. 21)

People with a fixed mindset feel judged and evaluated all the time. If they spill something, they feel like klutzes; if they don’t do well on a test, they conclude they aren’t smart. From a growth mindset, failures are learning opportunities, a chance to see what we don’t know or need to work on. The growth mindset is associated with much higher academic and career achievement levels.

5. **Some Children are Destined for Success vs. Potential Cannot Be Measured**

   “An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone’s ability, let alone their potential to succeed in future.” (p. 29)

From the growth perspective, potential is invisible and unmeasurable because there is too much open to development over time and to variables like motivation and effort.

Some Additional Implications of the Research on Fixed and Growth Mindsets

1. **Risk-taking and fear of failure**

   “People in a growth mindset don’t just seek challenge, they thrive on it.” (Dweck, p. 21)

   Somewhat predictably, the fixed mindset leads to a fear of failure, and the growth mindset encourages risk-taking, and is associated with much higher academic and career achievement levels over time.

2. **Domain-specificity**

   As with intelligence, people’s mindsets vary across domains. For example, some of us have an academic growth mindset, but an athletic or creativity or relationship fixed mindset.

3. **Malleability of mindsets**

   Mindsets are learned, and can be unlearned. Teachers can undermine students’ achievement, self-confidence, and sense of well-being by modeling and/or inculcating a fixed mindset. Alternatively, they can have an enormously beneficial impact on their students when they model and foster the growth mindset.

4. **Labeling**

   “Telling children they’re smart, in the end, made them feel dumber and act dumber, but claim they were smarter. I don’t think this is what we’re aiming for when we put positive labels—‘gifted,’ ‘talented,’ ‘brilliant’—on people.” (Dweck, p. 75)

   When we label a child “Gifted”, we foster the fixed mindset in the child, as well as in teachers and parents. The label communicates, “You ARE gifted, you HAVE a Special Gift”. It is more conducive to the growth mindset when we avoid labeling children, and instead label educational programming descriptively by level of difficulty, perhaps by grade level or challenge level. Moving the field in this direction requires a change of parents’ and educators’ mindsets...
Mystery, mastery, and mindsets

Dweck’s mindsets overlap closely with the mystery and mastery models of giftedness. From the vantage point of a fixed mindset, as with a mystery model, ability is seen as innate and permanent: some people are intelligent and some are less so. From a growth mindset, as with the mastery model, ability is seen as growing incrementally over time with appropriate opportunities to learn: intelligence develops. The differences in outcomes of these two mindsets are strikingly large and persistent across age, sex, culture, ability level, and socioeconomic status. Results in repeated studies in a number of lines of research show that those who hold the growth mindset are happier, healthier, more fulfilled, and more successful in every area of their lives, including school, work, sports, business, love, friendships, and family relationships.

• Dweck’s concept of growth versus fixed mindsets may come to represent the tipping point in the shift from mystery to mastery. Implications for gifted education begin with our conceptualisations of what intelligence and giftedness are. These shift dramatically when we move from a fixed mindset — where some students are categorized as inherently smart and some are not—, to a growth mindset, where intelligence is seen as dynamic, as developing over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. Looked at from this perspective, teachers who encourage their students’ continued engagement in the learning process are fostering gifted development, quite independently of where their students may score on ability or intelligence tests.

• From a fixed mindset, as with a mystery model of giftedness, some people are inherently smart, and some are not, and there are ways to accurately and reliably measure intelligence. From a growth mindset (or mastery model), on the other hand, intelligence develops over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. There are many fewer limits on who might or might not be gifted, and many opportunities along the developmental trajectory to “become” gifted; intelligence is therefore a moving target that cannot be measured with much expectation of reliability over time. This is consistent with current findings on neural plasticity and gifted development. It is also an important perspective for those who are concerned about minority under-representation and giftedness (see Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009 for more on all these findings and approaches).

• Referring to Ellen Winner’s work with child prodigies (Winner, 1996), Dweck addresses the topic of extreme giftedness. She concludes that there is a prevalent misconception that such exceptionality is innate, and that the emphasis ought to shift from what might be genetically endowed to the essential temperamental and motivation dimensions that are connected to mindsets: “Most often people believe that the ‘gift’ is the ability itself. Yet what feeds it is that constant, endless curiosity and challenge seeking” (Dweck, 2006, p. 63).

• When asked if there any recognizable signs of giftedness, many people identify speed of thinking or learning: “Gifted kids are fast thinkers,” or “They learn really quickly.” According to Dweck’s research, this is fixed mindset thinking: from a fixed mindset, if you learn very quickly, you are gifted, but if you have to work hard at something, or learn it
slowly, you are not. By contrast, from a growth mindset, as with a mastery model of giftedness, skills and achievement come through persistence and effort. Instead of being markers of giftedness, speed and perfection is the enemy of difficult learning. **High achievement comes from hard work over time, and thoughtfulness (which can be slow) is a good thing.**

- People operating from a fixed mindset have a lot to lose by failing. When given a choice, they take easier academic courses they know they can do well on, and avoid competitions they are not sure they can win. The **best way to address and prevent underachievement may be to help students learn how to approach things from a growth perspective**, where failures are perceived as learning opportunities, chances to see what we don’t know yet or need to work on. Indeed, the growth mindset is associated with higher academic and career achievement levels over time.

- **Mindsets are learned, and can be unlearned.** Parents, educators, and others can have a long-lasting beneficial impact on children and adolescents when they model and foster the growth mindset. Dweck provides strong evidence for mindsets’ susceptibility to change, as well as practical suggestions for changing mindsets.

For more information about the important role of mindsets in gifted development and education:


