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What Messages do Students Receive During a School Day?

I started this article with a plan, as I was asked to write about what it is like to be a kid for a day. I was going to shadow a student and record the Growth and Fixed Mindset messages students give and receive during a typical day. I did do exactly what I wanted to do: followed a student and recorded the interactions that could be considered either Growth or Fixed Mindset messages. I found that it was not as simple as I thought. A message like, “good job,” is considered a Fixed Mindset message, but what if it is followed up with, “But tell me why you think ‘successor’ means that.” That simple little follow up statement changed a Fixed Mindset response, to a Growth Mindset response, and communicated to the student that the learning was more about the process than the result.

What does this have to do with *being a kid for a day*? I shadowed a student, trying to get a sense of the messages students heard throughout the day. What are we, the teachers, communicating, as we offer feedback? I tracked those messages. I listened, typed, and coded all day long. At the end of seventh period, our last class of the day, I still was not sure what conclusions I could draw about the Fixed and Growth Mindset messages our students were hearing. I was not really sure what I could take away from the day, as a student.

Then I had the opportunity to be a substitute principal at an elementary school for a week. As a substitute principal, discipline is one major job I get to handle. I actually love that part of the job. I enjoy talking with kids, learning about them, and working with them to create plans so that whatever went wrong, and landed them some time in the hot seat, will not happen again; so they will know how to respond the next time. It is amazing how a little listening and some sincere respect causes a child to open up and share more details than I really need to hear. But it does. And they do.

One child, a fifth grader, was sent to the office for having a meltdown after his paper airplane, during a science investigation, did not achieve the longest flight in the class. He was just barely beat out by another student, and he had worked hard, for days, trying to design and fold the perfect paper airplane (That’s a Growth Mindset!). There is nothing wrong with a little competition, and the teachers had certainly set up the competition in a fun and engaging way, that had focused on the process (design, precision, principles of physics), and culminated in a competition. And man was this kid upset when he did not place! He threw his paper airplane, as hard as he could, across the room. So, to the office he went, to spend recess reflecting about the problems caused by his actions.

I sat down with the student, and we had a fantastic conversation about how frustrated this child felt. He enjoyed the entire process of the paper airplane challenge, and he was confident about winning. Unfortunately, he had recently learned something about his family that shook him. With all the turmoil at home, and he was struggling to leave it behind when he was at school... thus, overreacting to the loss of the competition. After our talk, though, he was feeling better. He had some ideas for continuing his exploration of paper airplanes at home, and he acknowledged that other students had also worked hard on the challenge. His loss was not their fault. He was ready to go back to class, apologize, and have a great day.

Feeling like I'd had a principal win, I attended to some other substitute principal responsibilities. Soon there was a call on the walkie talkie that a food fight had broken out in the cafeteria. I rushed to the lunchroom, to find the same student, and several other boys, engaged in some popcorn launching and exploding milk carton fun. The cafeteria monitors did not think it was quite as fun. Since the boys had taken from their community, they had to give something back: washing tables and cleaning up the mess that had been left on the floor. Though they were not happy about it, all the kids slipped on some gloves and in minutes, turned the room into a sparkling lunchtime paradise. After the clean-up, the boy I had talked with earlier walked over to the trashcan to throw away his glove. Plop. It landed in the compost instead. Out of frustration, one of the lunch monitors shouted, "What are you doing! What's wrong with you!" The boy first became defensive, then turned around, and burst into tears. He crumbled.

I do believe our students respond to Growth Mindset messages- but those messages are part of a process, and cannot be tracked or assessed in just one day. These messages must be internalized, and that takes time. When everything is going wrong in the life of a child, they have no control. What we say and how we respond to their needs communicates whether we value the process or the product. Yelling at a child for making a mistake, does not teach the child how to fix the mistake. It takes more effort on our part, but rather than assuming there is something wrong with children who do not act or respond how we expect them too, we have to continue to teach and communicate the process. Give children a chance to fix mistakes, both in academics, and with behavior, and recognize the effort it took to make a change. We may not be able to fix a Fixed system, but we can be cognizant of how we respond to children, and allow mistakes, while we encourage Growth over time. That is a Growth Mindset.

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