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How Do We Create a Classroom Culture That Fosters a Growth Mindset?

Touted as a recipe for success in a number of arenas, including business, education and sports, a growth mindset, compels people to *“believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.”* This is in direct contrast to a fixed mindset, which leads people to *“believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort”* (Dweck, 2010).

Recently I set off on a journey to learn more about growth mindset, hoping to provide richer learning experiences for my students, so I googled Dweck’s work, coming across what I shared above. And though I eventually read on, this was as far as I had gotten before I made a discovery about the implications of this theory in education, a discovery that struck me straight on. *I don’t think growth mindset will work in education. Truly.* I don’t think it is just something teachers can pick off the shelf and decide to do, *unless...unless*, they first are willing to create a classroom culture that can breathe life into and sustain the growth-mindset approach. If they are not willing, not committed to doing this, then it is probably best left on the shelf, for it will not succeed. So how do we create a model that fosters a growth mindset among our students? Let’s take a look at the current model first.

The Old Model

There’s a reason why so many of our students have a fixed mindset. We gave it to them. In many respects, as they crossed the threshold into education, we handed them a mindset that was then fed by the “learn-it-and-leave-it” approach to learning, which consequently resulted in their developing fixed beliefs about their abilities, stuck there from our passing judgement as we moved them through crazily crammed curricula. *Year after year after year.* We teach. They learn. We test. They succeed. They fail. They begin to believe what they can and can’t do. After all, *we* told them. And before long they have set ideas on their abilities. It is no wonder that by the time kids reach high school they are rigidly set in their perceptions. *I am not good at math. I suck at writing. I hate science.* In sum, they hate learning. We have to change that. Kids aren’t naturally predisposed to shun learning. They have learned it. But *can* we change that? I believe we can.

The New Model

To begin, we have to quit thinking of learning as a line. We, instead, have to think of learning as a circle. The old model suggests that we move kids along—*ready or not.* In the old model, learning is predicated on success or failure, generally determined in a final test at the end of a unit of study, a final judgment before moving on to the next unit of study, a long linear approach that moves through content but never really allows kids to discover the effect that dedication and hard work can have not only on accomplishment but also perception. But what if we did it differently? What if instead of

“learning it and leaving it,” we gave kids consistent chances to be dedicated and work hard to improve both their abilities and perceptions, continuously circling back to and around the key concepts and skills that we are focusing on? If we did, then we’d need a new model. It might look something like this.

Steps to Creating a Classroom Culture That Fosters a Growth Mindset

1. Slow down. Learning takes time.
2. Focus. Condense content into meaningful, manageable sets of focus standards. Give kids a smaller number of skills and concepts to *really* focus on and to *really* learn.
3. Adopt a path-to-proficiency approach: practice, feedback, performance. *Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.* Really, this is the most important step. This is the circle.
4. Implement and embrace an assessment-*for*-learning instead of an assessment-*of*-learning approach to evaluating student performance. If we can get kids to believe that assessments are crucial measures, milestones for growth rather than ability alone, then we are moving in the right direction.
5. Let go of the “one-and-done” approach to learning. Let kids redo, re-submit, and retake *everything*.
6. Make reflection a central, consistent component of the learning process. Learners reflect.
7. Provide independent learning opportunities. Consider project-based learning.
8. Adopt and model your own genuine growth mindset. You have to walk the walk, too. Engage in independent learning opportunities with your kids. Be a learner.

Above are the steps that I am following as I make my own way. And now that I have taken those initial steps, I cannot imagine going back to my own fixed mindset about my ability to change students’ perceptions about their learning, about themselves. I found freedom. I found a growth mindset. Let’s help students regain their own freedom. Let’s help them find their own growth mindsets. In the end, it could be the most important thing we do for them.

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