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COMMENTARY

Creating the Context for Growth Mindsets in the Classroom

By Elizabeth Stein

What do teachers do to create memorable connections? I think it boils down to one common theme: making students feel the learning process. Great teachers guide us to connect emotionally with our learning journeys. Most importantly, these teachers foster a growth mindset within the classroom.

The growth mindset, as detailed in Carol Dweck's work, emphasizes that intelligence can grow over time—meaning that learners can always improve. Research has shown that when students are encouraged for their efforts (“Wow, you really worked hard for that!”), they tend to put forth the effort it takes to rise to a challenge. In contrast, when students are praised for their intelligence (“You are so smart!”), they often believe their intelligence is something they cannot nurture—and that they either have what it takes or they don't.

When teachers nurture a growth mindset, students focus on the effort they put into a task rather than falling back on preconceived beliefs about their intelligence or skills. Learning happens when students push through their comfort zones (the cognitive research proves it!). Classrooms should become learning environments where students naturally apply effort and persistence to achieve.

Putting the Growth Mindset Into Action

This past summer, I had the privilege of working in a pilot program in my district called Summer Resiliency Program, C.A.M.P. This program was created through the collaboration of visionary administrators and educators who wanted to solve the problem of middle school students who were continuing to fail core subjects. Our Assistant Superintendent, Jen Bradshaw, was moved by a friend's public school experience that left his “potential untapped and social emotional needs unaddressed.”

Our mission to cultivate a growth mindset quickly sprung to life. We pooled our resources and began to raise awareness of the concept while helping students access the rigor of our common core-aligned curriculum through a Universal Design for Learning approach. Our social-emotional learning expert, Josh Hendrickson, shared the value of considering social and emotional needs in the learning process. He also guided teachers and students to participate in breathing exercises that offered the opportunity to peacefully connect with their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Through these exercises, students learned how to self-regulate their thinking and keep emotions in check in order to maximize their learning process in the classroom.

Within the first week, students realized that the learning process went much deeper than studying math and English. Some students were indifferent to the social-emotional aspects of the program, commenting, “The breathing exercises are weird.” Others shared that they never realized how paying attention to their breathing could help them focus. Overall, most students quickly adapted to the inquiry-based learning process. One student remarked, “You can't just sit in class—you have to participate a lot. At first that was hard because most of the time I'm just tired—but I learned how to ask questions and be a part of things.” Another student noted, “I never thought about my breathing before, but I like how I can use it to calm things down in my head.” Overall, students learned to use the process of thinking about their academic potential to strengthen their relationship with learning.

Five Ways to Promote a Growth Mindset in Your School

Our program was a success—and we definitely plan to keep the spark going. We have plans in the works to empirically track students' progress throughout the year. In addition, we will be extending our reach to parents through workshops and hosting a book club discussion group with Carol Dweck's

book, *Mindset*. Here are five ways schools can take on their own growth mindset challenge:

1. Embrace your personal-mindset Journey: Teachers should get in touch with their own personal-mindset stories. What experiences connect you to who you are today? What experiences formed a basis for your thinking patterns and your belief systems for how people learn? Embrace these experiences and work through them to adjust your lessons and empower your students.

2. Collaborate personally and professionally: Make time to check in with yourself on a daily basis. Keep a journal of your thoughts and jot down some key ideas to express your feelings each day. This personal check-in time will help you keep your thoughts and emotions in check and serve as solid ground when you communicate your ideas with others.

3. Know your students: Teachers must connect with students beyond content. Understand your students from a behind-the-scenes view. What are their lives like outside of school? How are you connecting with parents to help bridge the gap between home and school experiences? Connect with students' stories so you may guide them to construct meaning around their learning experiences in your classroom.

4. Create a community of learners: First, on a pedagogical level, get involved in professional learning communities—both online and face-to-face. Create and participate in professional development opportunities by attending conferences and collaborating with colleagues. Join Twitter chats to connect with educators around the globe who will welcome you into an ongoing cycle of meaningful learning. Next, on a classroom level: foster a learning environment where your students are in tune with first hearing their own voices and then sharing their ideas out loud. Encourage collaboration, strategic thinking, and problem solving, and above all, valuing the varied perspectives of all thinkers in the room.

5. Keep academic content accessible to all learners: Find your balance between

what you have to teach and how you will teach it. Keep a focus on creating life-long learners. Focusing on content only creates moment-to-moment kinds of learners. Instill a focus on the process of learning and you will be sure to create groups of learners who know "how" to learn. This knowledge will stay with them to guide their successful learning wherever they go. A Universal Design for Learning approach is a sure way to guide expert learners who know how to learn in any setting.

There are many resources available to guide educators in knocking down barriers to learning for students. We have what it takes to meet the needs of the whole child right at our fingertips! Our students all deserve teachers who create powerful connections to learning—and who let them know that we will not give up on any of them. Together, we can make ourselves better teachers.

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