

Expanding The Mind: The Growth Mindset Way



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Like many, I was pushed to work hard from a young age to make sure I passed those exams. Looking back, I realise instead of being praised for the effort I put in, my success was entirely measured by the grades I achieved. My experience of rewarding achievement is typical, both as a student and as an educator. This stems from a system where many schools are driven by results-orientated approaches to measuring success. In turn, this is instilled in parents further perpetuating the problem of setting limits on achievement.

My own experiences are increasingly echoed by research findings on teacher expectations, which reveal that schools are placing too much emphasis on target grades, baseline assessments and IQ tests (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 2003). These parameters determine a fixed ideology of a student's intellectual capability and leads to self-fulfilling prophecies. It's an approach that is placing a limit on what can be achieved instead of encouraging skills that develop potential. It can be extremely damaging and holds students back. Although it may seem contradictory in today's culture of constant measured outcomes, **the most successful schools are not the ones that prioritise grades but instead those that focus on the importance of learning and how teachers can best stretch, challenge and develop students' learning and resilience.**

The volume of research now available on how learning can help grow your brain and how intelligence can be developed is encouraging. For example, Dr Carol Dweck, a leading growth mindset practitioner, stresses how praising children for intelligence, using terms such as 'you're so smart' can actually have the effect of restricting their confidence when approaching unfamiliar and challenging tasks. While children praised for effort are more likely to persevere, even when the going gets tough, the 'smart' kids see the prospect of failure as something to fear — where working harder is taken as a sign of weakness, not of adaptability and resilience (Dweck, 2010 & 2012).

If we are to nurture and develop true learners we must move students away from a fixed mindset. By emphasising the value of effort, we are giving our children a variable they can control. In contrast, **praising intelligence may be as arbitrary as praising height or hair colour:** it appears to be an absolute and doesn't offer any strategies for responding to and learning from failure. If we actually teach children that intelligence is something that can be developed — a quality that can be improved through effort rather than an innate gift — we can help them to pursue effective study habits and move on from failure with renewed energy.

A particularly striking part in Dweck's (2012) writing was her description of a young girl's view of intelligence and the process she undertakes to 'getting smarter'. The young girl recognises that taking a reactive, rather than proactive, approach in the classroom does nothing to help her progress. Only by asking questions and exploring options can she take the crucial steps needed to build upon her abilities and intelligence, which is precisely the opposite to a fixed mindset approach. My experience has demonstrated to me that the majority of students tend to do the opposite to this young girl for **fear of embarrassment and 'looking dumb'** in front of the teacher and classmates. So my question is: how do we create a culture that encourages students like this young girl to approach learning in this way and how do we create schools that adopt a growth mindset attitude?

Developing growth mindset classrooms

The first steps are to engender a culture where learners accept challenges and acknowledge that this might mean taking risks. Learning is not meant to be easy and accepting that it is a process that requires determination and hard work instils the notion of resilience that requires continuous practice, even if things do not work out first time. Growth-minded teachers encourage students to accept that mastering new skills is a journey and that making mistakes along the way is both necessary and a natural way of learning and making you smarter. As Dweck (2012) points out, when we hear a student using fixed mindset language such as 'I cannot do this' or 'I'm just not good at algebra', a simple reply from the teacher would be '...cannot do this — yet'. The 'yet' instantly sends a positive message of motivation that reinforces the notion of applying effort to achieve a desired result. **It's important to acknowledge that even experts need to practise and work hard to succeed.** Growth-minded questions and statements influence a learner's attitude towards embracing challenges, thus helping them believe they can and will succeed. For example: 'How did you prepare and plan for this?', 'Is there anything you could do differently next time?', 'You will see the benefits of your perseverance and hard work' and 'This is only the first draft; you will have further opportunities to improve upon it'.

Another area to consider when developing growth mindset classrooms is **how the curriculum and the tasks you set your learners develop a growth mindset attitude.** Are you providing students with opportunities to search for their own possibilities, for them to see accurately for themselves the progress they have made? For example, is the homework you set, or even the extracurricular activities you offer your students, designed to stretch and put into practice their new skills? Growth-minded schools and classrooms encourage students to act as detectives, applying an inquisitive approach to solving learning mysteries. They provide students with the means to keep finding solutions and enable all learners to see how far they have come by identifying what they can do and what they need to do to move their learning forward.

If students in your classrooms are working quickly, completing work and giving you answers without careful thought, what do you do to challenge this? A growth mindset teacher will help students realise that **there are no short cuts to learning and that easy tasks are**

less useful to the learning brain than complex ones.

Faster learning is not always the best type of learning and sometimes means information is processed at a superficial level — this is often experienced when 'cramming' information to revise for exams. Learners who take time to process information and constantly practise absorb it at a much deeper level (Dweck, 2010).

Everything we do in our schools must be to improve the learning experiences of the students. We should not just improve teaching and learning because of looming Ofsted inspections, observations from line managers and other senior team leaders. Instead we must work on improving classroom practice because this is our duty as teachers and as passionate and dedicated educationalists. So next time you're considering your own classroom practice, ask yourself whether the tasks you are setting within your curriculum or lesson plan incorporate a growth mindset or whether they are setting limits on students' future potential.

A growth mindset enables students to suspend and ultimately overcome their fear of mistakes — a powerful tool for school learning but also an invaluable life lesson.

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References:

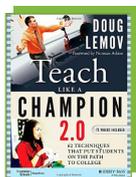
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Food For Thought



Additional Reading:



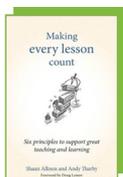
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Doug Lemov



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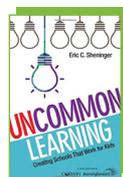
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Growing Teachers
Who Grow Kids
Carol Ann Tomlinson
& Michael Murphy



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David Didau



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- reflect on what you have learnt, evaluate what has been achieved and embed as best practice.
- maximise the gains from any in-house CPD offered in school with clear measurable outcomes.

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