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### EDUCATION TRENDS

# Recognizing and Overcoming False Growth Mindset

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By Carol Dweck, Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, Stanford University



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All educators care deeply about their students' motivation. They want them to love learning, and to be resourceful and persistent in the face of learning challenges. They don't want their students to lose heart when they get stuck, make mistakes, or receive disappointing grades. In this context, the growth mindset entered the scene.

A growth mindset is the belief that you can develop your talents and abilities through hard work, good strategies, and help from others. It stands in opposition to a fixed mindset, which is the belief that talents and abilities are unalterable traits, ones that can never be improved. Research has shown (and continues to show) that a growth mindset can have a profound effect on students' motivation, enabling them to focus on learning, persist more, learn more, and do better in school. Significantly, when students are *taught* a growth mindset, they begin to show more of these qualities.

We typically teach students a growth mindset through online programs that demonstrate how the brain changes with learning (how the neurons grow stronger connections when students work on hard things and stick with them) and how to apply this to their schoolwork. These programs also contain testimonials from other students about how they've used a growth mindset to approach their schoolwork and to work toward meaningful goals in their lives.

In the wake of the many exciting research results, educators became increasingly interested in promoting a

growth mindset among their students. This was extremely gratifying. To see some of the great successes was even more gratifying. However, I slowly became aware that not all educators understood the concept fully.

## Identifying a False Growth Mindset

It all started when my Australian colleague Susan Mackie informed me that she was seeing more and more **false growth mindset**. This is when educators think and do all sorts of things that they simply call growth mindset. And then I started noticing it, too. Here's what I saw.

### *Praising Effort Alone*

In many quarters, growth mindset was boiled down to praising effort. Yes, our work had shown that praising students' **process** (their hard work, strategies, focus, and persistence) and tying it to their performance, learning, or progress could promote a growth mindset. But in many teachers' practice, it had become divorced from any learning or progress. "Great effort" became the consolation prize for children who weren't learning. So the very students who most needed to learn about developing their abilities were instead receiving praise for their ineffective effort.

Teachers need to tell the truth. They can acknowledge laudable effort, but they also need to acknowledge when students are not learning effectively, and then work with them to find new learning strategies. (By the way, exhorting students to try hard is another ineffective practice that does not teach a growth mindset.)

### *Telling Students "You Can Do Anything"*

In the name of a growth mindset, students were also being assured that they were capable of *anything*. While this may be true, simply asserting it does not make it so, particularly when students don't yet have the knowledge, skills, strategies, or resources to bring this about. Skilled educators set high standards for students but then help them understand how to embark on the path to meeting those standards. It's not a hollow promise.

### *Blaming the Student's Mindset*

Perhaps the most discouraging thing that I've heard is how some educators are blaming children's mindsets for their failure to learn. A parent recently wrote me a heartrending letter. Her daughter had been in a wonderful school that, using growth mindset principles, made her feel like an effective learner, even when learning came slowly and with difficulty. She then went to a different school, where children were scolded and shamed -- in the name of a growth mindset -- for not persevering and learning effectively.

It is the educator's task to create a growth mindset classroom. In the safety of these classrooms, students can begin to leave behind their fixed mindset and try out the idea that they can develop their abilities. We see this happening when teachers give students:

- Meaningful work
- Honest and helpful feedback
- Advice on future learning strategies
- Opportunities to revise their work and show their learning

## Overcoming Perceived Threats

But something else was happening, too. Educators were declaring themselves to have a growth mindset without

actually taking that long journey -- perhaps a lifetime journey.

We have come to realize that every one of us is a mixture of both mindsets: sometimes we're in a growth mindset, and sometimes we're triggered into a fixed mindset by what we perceive as threats. These can be challenges, mistakes, failures, or criticisms that threaten our sense of our abilities -- for example, venturing into unknown territory with a new teaching method, confronting a student who is not learning, or comparing ourselves to a more accomplished educator. Are we inspired to try new things, or are we anxious or defensive?

In order to work toward more of a growth mindset, we need to observe ourselves and find our triggers. Just spend several weeks noticing when you enter a more threatened, defensive state. Don't judge yourself. Don't fight it. Just observe. Then, as Susan Mackie advises, give your fixed mindset persona a name. Talk to it, calling it by name, when it shows up. Over time, try to recruit it to collaborate on your challenging goals instead of letting it undermine you with doubts and fears.

In closing, research has revealed a tool that can enhance students' motivation. It is one of the few tools that has been repeatedly validated by rigorous research, but for this tool to be effective, it has to be understood and used properly. Our research is now devoted to finding out how educators can instill a growth mindset more effectively, because this is our highest priority.

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/recognizing-overcoming-false-growth-mindset-carol-dweck](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/recognizing-overcoming-false-growth-mindset-carol-dweck)

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