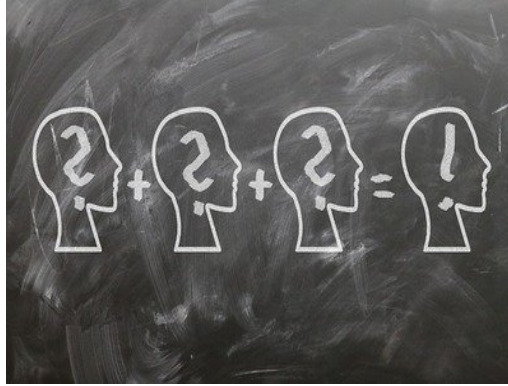


The Problem With Having a 'Growth Mindset'

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on December 6, 2015 7:40 AM



In September, Carol Dweck published a very informative commentary for Education Week, which dug deeper into her meaning behind having a growth mindset. In her revisit, which you can read in its [entirety here](#), Dweck explains the meaning behind the heavily researched philosophy when she writes,

"We found that students' mindsets--how they perceive their abilities--played a key role in their motivation and achievement, and we found that if we changed students' mindsets, we could boost their achievement. More precisely, students who believed their intelligence could be developed (a growth mindset) outperformed those who believed their intelligence was fixed (a fixed mindset)."

Over the last few years, thousands of schools around the world have jumped on board with the growth mindset. It seemed to become the low-hanging fruit for schools to easily grab. Going from school to school, posters about effort that focus on "trying harder" and books about the mindset for teachers and students are all around. Some school principals like to start conversations by stating that their schools are "Growth Mindset" schools.

But are they really?

Based on the research of John Hattie, someone I work with as a Visible Learning trainer, the growth mindset only has an effect size of .19, which is well below the hinge point of .40. The hinge point means that the influence on learning being used is providing a year's worth of growth for a year's input (in the future, Hattie will further explore and explain the meta-analysis that he used to find the effect size).

Using Hattie's research, I wrote [Why A Growth Mindset Won't Work](#) (July, 2015). It seemed to go viral and strike a nerve with readers, so much so that I was finishing a publication for the [Post Primary Teacher's Association](#) (PPTA) in New Zealand, and the editor said the blog was hitting all of their teacher sites. That speaks to the power of Dweck's work.

Unfortunately, as important as Dweck's research is, it is at risk of following in a long line of other important research, like Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence, which you can read about [here](#) (Gardner) and [here](#) (DeWitt), that seems to be misused by schools. As you can read in the growth mindset and learning styles blogs that I wrote, you will see I was guilty of some of these issues.

Growth Mindset & Effort

Dweck explains that one of the issues is how schools approach the idea of effort. Dweck writes,

"A growth mindset isn't just about effort. Perhaps the most common misconception is simply equating the growth mindset with effort. Certainly, effort is key for students' achievement, but it's not the only thing. Students need to try new strategies and seek input from others when they're stuck. They need this repertoire of approaches--not just sheer effort--to learn and improve."

But do we allow the "repertoire of approaches"? In [Students Can Learn From Their Mistakes if We Let Them](#), I wrote that Hattie suggests that "40% to 50% of the time that our students make errors, we correct them. They're never given the opportunity to struggle because we give them the answer before it gets too hard."

Dweck goes on to write,

"It's good that the students tried, but it's not good that they're not learning. The growth-mindset approach helps children feel good in the short and long terms, by helping them thrive on challenges and setbacks on their way to learning. When they're stuck, teachers can appreciate their work so far, but add: 'Let's talk about what you've tried, and what you can try next.'"

This idea of "let's talk about what you've tried" is where we break down because of challenges like "time," "pacing," and "curriculum to get through." We often talk about using new strategies more than we teach them, and then the students who struggle are recommended for outside services.

In an effort to reach these struggling learners, they are sent out of the classroom and placed in resource classrooms like Academic Intervention Services (AIS). Resource teachers acquire large caseloads of students, but as new students enter in, other students are not let out. This is not to say that those programs won't help students, because they do, but the caseloads may not have to be as large as they are.

Further compounded in the inability to get out of the program is that it is often blamed on the student's lack of effort or the parents' failure to support the child at home. Students are told to have the growth mindset and they will succeed. In the recently released **Know Thy Impact: Visible Learning in Theory and Practice** ([download for free here](#)), Hattie writes,

"Many years ago, Alessi (1988) reviewed more than 5,000 children referred to school psychologists because they were failing at school. Not one located the problem as due to a poor instructional program, poor school practices, a poor teacher, or something to do with school. The problems were claimed, by the teachers, to be related to the home and located within the student."

Dweck supports this by writing, *"I also fear that the mindset work is sometimes used to justify why some students aren't learning: 'Oh, he has a fixed mindset.' We used to blame the child's environment or ability."*

In the End

If we truly want to teach the growth mindset it means that we have to dig a little deeper into the practices that we already have in school. The growth mindset is not just about the student "trying harder" but it's also about our teaching practices, and whether we change them to meet the needs of the students, or expect students to change in order to meet the needs of the teacher.

Having a growth mindset isn't about grabbing the low-hanging fruit and saying we are doing it, when we still refer an enormous number of students to special services when they may not need them. It's about teaching students how to use meta-cognitive strategies which [Hattie has shown to have an effect size](#) of .69, and providing feedback, which has an effect size of .73. This is hard to do because of so many pressures facing the teacher and school principal.

The problem with the growth mindset, and why it's sometimes a low-hanging fruit, is that school leaders and teachers do a book study on it, but their practices really don't change as much as their monologue does. Talking about a growth mindset is easy, but having one is harder than we may think. We are all guilty of having a fixed mindset at the same time we are touting that we should have a growth one.

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