

A HABITS OF MIND CULTURE PROMOTES TEACHER GROWTH AND CHANGE

By Elliott Seif, Arthur L. Costa, Bena Kallick | Aug 4, 2025 | Current Issue, Feature Article



TO HELP NEW AND VETERAN TEACHERS GROW, BRING THEM INTO A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY THAT VALUES DEEP THINKING, LEARNING, AND PROBLEM SOLVING.

► At a Glance

“Knowledge of methods alone will not suffice; there must be the desire, the will to employ them. This desire is an affair of personal disposition.” — John Dewey, 1933, p. 30

Are teachers born with their teaching talents, or can they learn to become more effective? Research into the development of “greatness” in many fields strongly supports the idea that inborn talent does not determine high levels of performance (Colvin, 2008; Gladwell, 2008; Shenk, 2010). In instance after instance, these authors show that excellence in music (Mozart); art (Cezanne); sports (Ted Williams); science and technology (Bill Gates); and many other endeavors develops from countless hours of persistent, continuous effort over time. Longitudinal research also indicates that those who seem to have a “natural” talent in a field do not necessarily demonstrate excellence over the long haul (e.g., Terman & Odin, 1959).

These studies suggest that teacher success, improvement, and effectiveness are not determined by genetics, but by whether a teacher has developed some key “habits of mind” that enable them to put in the required effort to improve over time. These habits are the dispositions for effective thinking and problem solving

that enable teachers to engage in countless hours of rethinking and refining their practices. We believe schools can encourage greater teaching proficiency by intentionally building these habits of mind into their operational vision and culture.

A comprehensive habits of mind school culture will improve opportunities for new teacher growth and improvement, lead to more effective teaching and learning over time, and ultimately create greater excellence in education and schooling.

DEVELOPING A HABITS OF MIND SCHOOL CULTURE

New teachers need to feel invited into professional conversations with other teachers. Such conversations encourage all teachers to rethink and adapt their teaching to help students succeed in today's complex and challenging world. Both new and experienced teachers develop a sense of belonging when their school culture supports deep thinking, inquiry into new forms of teaching, ongoing collaboration among staff, and support for all learners to be successful.

These ways of thinking are more likely to be part of a school culture that prioritizes specific habits of mind. Based on their research, Art Costa and Bena Kallick (2000) originally postulated [16 habits of mind](#) for effective thinking. We believe that seven of these habits (see the sidebar below) are crucial to creating cultural norms that support continuous growth and development.

▼ Habits of mind for continuous growth and development

- Remaining open to continuous learning
 - Admitting you don't know something or how to do something
 - Believing that "I have so much more to learn."
- Thinking about thinking
 - Being aware of your own strengths and weaknesses
 - Regularly planning, monitoring, and reflecting upon actions and tasks
- Figuring things out
 - Clarifying problems
 - Gathering data through all senses
- Communicating
 - Communicating effectively with adults as well as with students
 - Listening with understanding and empathy
 - Communicating with clarity and precision

- Thinking interdependently
 - Creating, imagining, and innovating
 - Generating new solutions and strategies
 - Being original
 - Finding and inventing new ideas and alternatives
 - Taking responsible risks
 - Trying new and different ways to do something, even if there is a chance for failure
 - Persisting
 - Persevering in a task until it's complete
 - Looking for a way to reach your goal when stuck
 - Not giving up
-

Learning, practicing, and using these seven habits as an integral part of a school's culture will lead to significant growth and greater teacher effectiveness over time.

SUPPORTING AND SUSTAINING THE HABITS OF MIND

These seven habits of mind do not automatically exist as part of the culture in every school — they must be developed, nurtured, supported, and practiced regularly. As we've observed in and interacted with schools over many years, we have seen that the following four school practices significantly improve and strengthen these seven habits of mind:

- The school staff explicitly teaches and uses habits of mind language and behaviors.
- School leaders provide positive reinforcements and incentives for teachers' growth and development.
- School leaders create opportunities for persistent, deliberate practice.
- School faculty co-create a coherent system of professional development options.

EXPLICITLY TEACH AND USE HABITS OF MIND LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIORS

Although many teachers come into the teaching profession with some positive habits of mind, they usually do not consciously realize the importance of all of them in their daily lives and in their growth as teachers. Teachers do not automatically come equipped with the language and understanding of continuous improvement, which includes the ability to continuously learn, to analyze their own strengths and needs, to figure out and try out new ways of teaching, or to listen with an empathetic ear. Explicitly introducing teachers to the habits makes them aware of the need to strengthen and practice the habits themselves and

with their students and colleagues. They recognize the value of using the habits for their own and their students' success.

New teachers need to feel invited into professional conversations with other teachers.

Schools that wish to build a system of professional growth and development around habits of mind need to explicitly teach and reinforce them. Everyone in the school needs to know and understand the habits of mind and how to apply them. Explicit discussions, book and article study sessions, the development and discussion of wall postings, and other activities can make the entire school aware that these dispositions and behaviors are central to professional learning and improvement over time.

PROVIDE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENTS AND INCENTIVES FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Schools with strong habits of mind cultures develop explicit strategies that help teachers think often about their strengths and needs and their ability to solve teaching problems independently and interdependently. For example, schools developing habits of mind cultures provide time for teachers to have conversations in which they reflect on their teaching and learning and plan for implementing new ideas. Faculty meetings devote less time to administrative talk and more time to discussions of instructional issues and instructional improvement. Collaborative planning time both during the year and over the summer enables teachers to pose teaching problems, listen to each other with understanding and empathy, find ways to strengthen the curriculum, and suggest new ways of teaching. The entire school staff uses schoolwide professional development days to discuss problems that arise in classrooms and to create and share new teaching ideas.

School leaders encourage teachers to take risks and try new teaching strategies in their classrooms, knowing that these might not always lead to better teaching and learning. Some schools establish mentoring and peer-coaching systems that enable new and veteran teachers to search for and try out instructional approaches with collegial support and feedback. Others have instituted a collaborative lesson design model that enables new and veteran teachers to work together and make incremental improvements to teaching methods over time. A school or district with a strong habits of mind culture may make use of master teachers with specialized instructional expertise — who demonstrate new ways of teaching, encourage discussion and feedback, and work with other teachers over time to improve teaching and learning.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSISTENT, DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Research suggests that practicing over and over is not enough to improve one's skills. Practice that makes a difference is "deliberate practice" (Colvin, 2008; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Roemer, 1993). Geoff Colvin (2008) explains how deliberate practice goes beyond simple repetition:

Deliberate practice requires that one identify certain sharply defined elements of performance that need to be improved, and then work intently on them. Examples are everywhere. The great soprano Joan Sutherland devoted countless hours to practicing her trill — and not just the basic trill, but the many different types (whole tone, semitone, baroque). Tiger Woods has been seen to drop golf balls

into a sand trap and step on them, then practice shots from that impossible lie. The great performers isolate remarkably specific aspects of what they do and focus on just those things until they are improved; then it's on to the next aspect. (p. 68).

Teachers who are continuously open to new learning analyze their own strengths and weaknesses and work on ways to improve specific teaching skills.

Schools that encourage and support deliberate practice move away from “one shot” professional development programs and introduce innovative programs designed to solve specific instructional problems. Mentors and experts, including teachers who have mastered new teaching strategies, conduct follow-up sessions and classroom visits to support teachers and provide analysis and feedback as they implement a new strategy or approach.

DEVELOP A COHERENT SYSTEM OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

Schools also need to institute a clear and comprehensive system of professional development options that meet the needs of both new and veteran teachers. Professional development should help teachers assess their strengths and problems, support them as they learn new approaches, and help them as they engage in deliberate practice. As teachers improve, they should have opportunities to share new techniques with other teachers and to implement strategies that improve achievement.

Based on our work with teachers and schools, we have identified some of the key areas that we think schools should concentrate on when educating all teachers and improving teaching. Schools can use these suggestions to create a comprehensive set of strategies that all teachers can work on over time:

- Set and maintain challenging, high-achievement expectations.
- Build positive relationships and set and maintain high behavior expectations.
- Create a strong classroom learning culture that promotes student interest, curiosity, and growth.
- Build character and trust in students.
- Build on prior student learning.
- Develop a curriculum focused on student understanding.
- Develop and practice key skills such as thinking critically, communicating effectively, and reading comprehension skills.
- Use effective and engaging learning strategies.
- Promote student growth and success through such strategies as meaningful, specific feedback to students to improve learning, and the sharing of models of success with students.
- Use feedback strategies to check for understanding.
- Enable students to apply learning to new, novel, and authentic situations (transfer).

- Use a “balanced” set of assessments (e.g., traditional and performance assessments) to evaluate performance and achievement.

Through the lens of a habits of mind culture, a school can organize professional development options with small, smart steps based on teacher analyses of strengths and areas for improvement in these areas. Teachers then create their own differentiated instructional improvement plans, just as they would differentiate learning for students.

MAKING IMPROVEMENT A HABIT

If we are to improve teaching and learning, and ultimately develop a strong cadre of effective, excellent teachers, we must place greater emphasis on building a school culture that encourages and supports teacher improvement over time. School leaders need to consider the habits of mind teachers bring to their profession when they are hired and then ensure the seven habits of mind for growth and development are explicitly discussed, taught, studied, and learned. Incentives for teacher growth and change should be built into a school culture.

Schools that encourage and support deliberate practice move away from “one shot” professional development programs and introduce innovative programs designed to solve specific instructional problems.

To create such a culture, schools need to give teachers opportunities to try out new ideas and learn new skills through deliberate practice. They need to put in place a coherent professional development system to help teachers identify strengths and weaknesses and work on continuously improving curricular and instructional practices.

All of this requires a rethinking of the use of time to promote continuous development and growth — at faculty meetings, during scheduled collaborative planning times, over summers, and on professional development days. Encouraging teachers to develop individual growth plans and engage in peer observations and mentoring will enable teachers to continue growing throughout their career.

A comprehensive habits of mind school culture will improve opportunities for new teacher growth and improvement, lead to more effective teaching and learning over time, and ultimately create greater excellence in education and schooling.

REFERENCES

Colvin, G. (2008). *Talent is overrated: What really separates world-class performers from everybody else*. Penguin.

Costa, A. & Kallick, B. (2000) *Discovering and exploring habits of mind*. ASCD.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. D.C. Heath and Co.

Ericsson, K.A., Krampe, R.T., & Tesch-Roemer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, 100, 363-406.

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. Little, Brown, and Co.

Shenk, D. (2010). *The genius in all of us*. Doubleday Books.

Terman, L.M. & Oden, M.H. (1959). *The gifted group at mid-life. Vol 5: Genetic studies of genius*. Stanford University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



ELLIOTT SEIF

Elliott Seif is an educational consultant and author. His latest book is *Teaching for Lifelong Learning: How to Prepare Students for a Changing World* (Solution Tree Press, 2021).



ARTHUR L. COSTA

Arthur L. Costa is professor emeritus of education at California State University, Sacramento, and a co-director of the Institute for Habits of Mind. Visit their website at: www.habitsofmindinstitute.org



BENA KALLICK

Bena Kallick is a consultant providing services to school districts, state departments of education, professional organizations, and public agencies, and is a co-director of the Institute for Habits of Mind.

