

Teaching a growth mindset

why praise can be a bad thing

The Young Minds Conference held in Sydney in June, organised by the Buddhist Vajrayana Institute, asked the question, 'how do we grow a good person?'

Among those answering the question were the Dalai Lama, who said inner peace was key to growing a good person. Keynote speaker Carol Dweck took a different approach, arguing that too much praise damages a person. *IE* Journalist Sue Osborne reports.

When Stanford University Psychology Professor Carol Dweck was in Year Six at school her teacher seated the class in order of IQ intelligence, and only those students who maintained or improved their IQ score were allowed to clean the blackboard or carry the flag.

Professor Dweck said that experience has resulted in her lifelong mission to change that kind of thinking in education.

She has written several books on her theory of a 'growth mindset'. Professor Dweck believes people either have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset.

Fixed mindset people believe that intelligence is static and cannot be altered. You are born with a certain IQ level and will retain that level for your entire life, no matter how hard you work.

Growth mindset people believe they can increase their ability through hard work.

Professor Dweck believes the modern emphasis on testing and scores, and pressure to achieve, creates more fixed mindset students.

She quotes a favourite Indian proverb: "When we want the elephant to grow, we feed the elephant, we don't weigh the elephant."

"We've created a generation that can't get through the day without a reward or ranking," Professor Dweck said.

Fixed mindset students who were praised for achieving good scores became so focused on that achievement they became afraid of failure or 'looking dumb'.

Fixed mindset students were more likely to cheat or give up if they encountered work that was difficult, for fear of losing their status of high achiever or 'gifted'. They believed geniuses never have to work hard.

Growth mindset students care more about learning than grades.

In 2007 the journal *Child Development* published a paper co-authored by Professor Dweck entitled '*Implicit Theories*

of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention'.

The research showed how at one New York City junior high school students' fixed and growth theories about intelligence affected their maths grades. Over two years students with a fixed mindset experienced a downward academic trend while the others moved ahead.

The psychologists then designed an eight-week intervention program that taught some students study skills and how they could learn to be smart – describing the brain as a muscle that became stronger the more it was used. A control group also learned study skills but were not taught Dweck's expandable theory of intelligence. In just two months, she said, the students from the first group, compared to the control group, showed marked improvement in grades and study habits.

"What was important was the motivation," Dweck said. "The students were energised by the idea that they could have an impact on their mind." Dweck recalled a young boy who was a ringleader of the troublemakers. "When we started teaching this idea about the mind being malleable, he looked up with tears in his eyes, and he said, 'You mean, I don't have to be dumb?'" she said. "A fire was lit under him."

Students with a growth mindset who do badly in a test are more likely to do everything they can to improve, form study groups, speak to the teacher or study more, whereas a fixed mindset student might be crushed and give up.

Homer Simpson epitomises a fixed mindset. One of his famous quotes is: "Trying is the first step towards failure".

What creates a fixed mindset? Too much praise – that is praise that is badly targeted. Professor Dweck said the 'self esteem' movement of the '90s which encouraged teachers and parents to praise everything children did, had done a lot of harm.

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'Person praise' such as 'you are so smart' or 'you did that really quickly, you are good at this' or 'you always do so well, you are brainy' is harmful and creates a fixed mindset, according to Professor Dweck.

Rather, teachers should be praising effort not outcome. She calls this 'process praise'. For example, 'you tried really hard to find the answer to that' or 'you used some good strategies to work that out'.

"Struggling should be a badge of honour, not something to be ashamed off," Professor Dweck said.

"Easy is boring and a waste of time. Teachers should go around the classroom asking who is having a 'fantastic struggle'. Struggle needs to be seen as heroic. That's what builds a growth mindset and it builds resilience for students throughout their life, not just in academic work but in relationships and everything else."

Professor Dweck said her favourite word is 'yet'. She said some schools were giving students the grade 'not yet' when they did not achieve high marks.

The growth mindset could be taught in any cultural setting, as long as it was adapted.

In another study by Stephanie Fryberg low achieving native American students were taught the growth mindset. This did not achieve results until they were told they

could help their communities and families. The students "caught fire" after this, Professor Dweck said.

For the growth mindset to be taught successfully to students, teachers must believe that students are capable of learning and growth and be excited by the prospect and ready to act as a mentor.

"Teachers need to believe in young minds to allow them to fulfill their potential."

Professor Dweck has developed a website www.mindsetworks.com which offer schools the 'brainology' program to teach growth mindsets to students.

References

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