It can be challenging to work with students who seem unmotivated or who are not interested in their learning. Students who are not engaged can cause disruptions to lessons, to themselves and to their peers. Spending time setting up your classroom for success by focusing on a culture of positive mindset is essential. Carol Dweck (2006) has stated that teachers need to motivate students to not only want to achieve, but to also have a positive mindset towards obstacles, as well as to develop a love of learning.

There has been much on offer from Dweck (2006) on the area of mindset. I have been following her work for a number of years and making connections from this to my own teaching practice. What is clear is that having a positive, growth mindset about learning impacts what you can learn and how successful you will be. I have found that this applies not only for my students, but for myself also. I need to think positively in order to teach my students how to think positively.

As Dweck (2006) has stated, the greatest gift we can give students is ‘not only the desire to achieve, but also the love of learning, the love of challenge and the ability to thrive on obstacles.’ We need to teach our students how to approach challenges and how to work through obstacles in order to develop their mindset about learning. If they understand that challenges, mistakes and obstacles are part of the learning process they can learn to become positive about approaching them.

**Background**

I have found an increasing need to focus explicitly on my students’ mindsets as more and more students are arriving in my classroom with low self-esteem and a lack of self-belief. As Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs suggests, some of our most basic needs include those related to esteem (McLeod, 2018). If those needs are not fulfilled it is difficult for learning to follow. I have found that when students don’t think they are good at reading or writing or maths – or anything – they allow this to dictate how they approach learning. I surveyed a grade four class at the start of the year and found almost half the class (46%) believed that there were things they were not good at and that they were never going to be good at. That same year, 62% of my class honestly stated that they avoided tasks that were challenging. It can
take a large part of the year to work with students on changing these sorts of attitudes, but it is so worthwhile and can change all aspects of a student’s learning.

A focus on relationships first and foremost

Building strong relationships has to be at the heart of influencing a positive approach to learning. As inspirational educator, Rita Pearson, once said, ‘no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship’ (TED Talks, 2013). In order to support students to feel positive and to be positive about learning we need to know them, know what interests them and know what challenges them. We need to understand where they are coming from and what has influenced their current way of thinking. This takes time and requires active listening and genuine care.

Changing mindsets using High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS)

The High Impact Teaching Strategies (Department of Education and Training, 2018) highlight many of the ways the teaching and learning of mindset can be approached. In the same way that we teach reading or writing, the strategies of Structuring Lessons, Goal Setting, Explicit Teaching, and Multiple Exposures are essential to developing positive, growth mindsets for learning. Metacognitive Strategies should be woven through the implementation of these HITS.

Structuring lessons

I set up lessons so that I always run a content agenda alongside a learning agenda. For example, I always think about the content I am wanting to teach such as the reading or the writing focus, and I also think about the social, emotional and cognitive skills I want to see as part of this. This might include, for example, students learning to work in groups, students making decisions as part of the task, or students thinking positively. I use a learning intention and success criteria which explicitly state that we are learning not only the content, but it also states one or two additional focus areas. As an example, I may have a success criterion such as, ‘You will be successful today if you were thinking positively about your learning’. We can refer to this throughout the lesson and it helps to set everyone up for success.

As part of structuring lessons, I have invested time in observing my students during a specific lesson to gain a sense of who has a positive mindset and who is motivated with their learning. I tell my students I am observing, and I note down or video what I see, which I then share back with them at the end of the class. We analyse the observations so that students can ‘see’ what is happening in our class. This allows students to suggest ways we can move forward and enables them to question and to provide feedback. I have also involved my students in analysing survey results which allow me to gain a better sense of their perceptions of learning. When the students are part of the learning process, they are more engaged. I have shared with my students that it is a goal for me to support them to think positively, and they respond well to knowing that it will be a focus in our class. I structure my mindset lessons so they are
run in a sequence of sessions that are targeted to the specific needs of the class based on what I know about them and what I am observing. Every year, in every class, it is different.

**Goal setting**

I work with my students so they can set goals based on learning behaviours and attitudes. They use what they know about themselves, the survey results, the observations and discussions with me to think about ways to improve as learners. Mary (not her real name) from grade four, once set herself a goal of ‘using different strategies in learning like thinking positively and knowing that wobbling is ok’. Together, we monitor these goals and we regularly reflect. It is part of our daily language for learning. At the end of the year Mary wrote on her report reflection page, ‘I have got confident at having a go at not listening to the liar inside my head that says I can’t do things. I can do them!’ Much of the change in her mindset came from explicit teaching, multiple exposures, thinking about her own thinking and daily encouragement.

**Explicit teaching**

I set aside time to explicitly work on mindset with my students. I have found Circle Time sessions to be effective for this and I make time for these each week. I have unpacked issues with my classes around ideas such as motivation, resilience, failure, and making mistakes. We have explicit, direct discussions and practice based on mindset. I have found it effective to combine Dweck’s work on growth and fixed mindset with colours. In my class you are a green thinker if you are thinking positively and a red thinker if you are demonstrating a fixed mindset. Once this is explicitly taught, sometimes all it has taken is to say to a child as they enter the classroom each morning, ‘Josh, are you thinking green today?’ to change their entire body language from a slouch and an attempt to enter the classroom unnoticed, to them standing tall, making eye contact and responding positively because someone has noticed and acknowledged them. Circle Time allows the implementation of the idea and it is how I continue to build on this each day that is important.

**Multiple exposures**

Addressing mindset must be ongoing. We can’t teach it once and expect it to stick. We need to teach it many times and, in many ways, so that our students can find a way to connect. We need to teach it so that our students have time to think about it and practise it, and then think and practise some more. We need to have it running alongside our content agenda across everything we teach.

Looking to the work of James Nottingham (2010) and his notion of ‘The Pit’ has been effective in allowing my students to see that ‘wobbling’ (feeling unsure, confused and challenged) is part of the learning process. I teach this explicitly and then we constantly refer to this language in our daily tasks. We celebrate when we are in the pit because we know we are learning. As we know from the work of
Hattie (2009), ‘a teacher’s job is not to make work easy. It is to make it difficult. If you are not challenged, you do not make mistakes.’ Knowing that making mistakes leads to learning, we need to support our students to understand that a challenge is a good thing and that we want to get down into the ‘pit’. Constantly referring to this has been helpful for my students.

Discussions on motivation and what it means to be extrinsically or intrinsically motivated is helpful as it is important to develop learners who want to learn to be the best they can be, rather than learners who work only for external rewards. Linking this to famous people who have experienced failure or who have had to overcome adversity can be effective in engaging even those most disengaged learners. Students need great role models and they need to be exposed to these over and over. This might be people in their own lives that they know, or this could be famous people. They can connect with basketball hero Michael Jordan and the amount of shots he has missed across his career, or Kerryn McCann and her famous marathon run where she did not give up, or through incursions and meeting an athlete such as para-equestrian Emma Booth, whose journey highlights the power of thinking positively and bouncing back. Such people have overcome failure or adversity to become inspirational not only to others but also to themselves. To get to where they are today, they had to have a positive mindset.

**Challenges**

Working on mindset and supporting students to be strong, independent and motivated learners is a journey. It won’t happen overnight. We need to continually build a shared language and shared actions around what it takes to develop a positive mindset, as well as what the benefits are for learning – and for life.

Making the time to fit explicit sessions into your week around mindset can prove difficult. But as we note from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2018), if we don’t attend to the social and emotional needs of our students it becomes difficult for any significant learning to occur. We therefore must make time for this.

Discussing a topic such as this with your mentor teacher can support you further. This may even be a topic to take to a graduate group or to your teaching team. You will most likely find the challenges you are facing are being faced by others too. Asking ‘what are you doing to engage disengaged learners in your class?’ or ‘how are you motivating your students to think positively about their learning?’ could be great discussion openers.

**A key takeaway**

Allocate time to explicitly teach students what mindset is and what it means to them as learners. It will never be time wasted. Teaching this leads to improvements in academic areas because having a positive mindset increases self-esteem and self-belief. Approach teaching of this concept in different ways to engage learners and to motivate them.
Discussion with your mentor

• Don’t feel alone in this. Having a positive mindset for learning as the teacher is essential to developing this in our students. Be active in discussing this with your mentor, a member of leadership or your teaching team.

• Discuss ways that you can make sure you get to know your students, not only how they learn but also how they think. Consider how you can be their champion, as Rita Pearson (TED Talks, 2013) puts it, and believe in them.

• Discuss how you can expose students to the language associated with having a positive mindset from the moment they walk through the classroom door.

• Consider strategies that you can implement in your own classroom that facilitate a positive, growth mindset.

Further Reading

Professional Practice Note #14: Using Metacognitive Strategies to support student self-regulation and empowerment

Amplify - Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership

Shifting the Maths Mindset in Victorian Schools

References


