

How to develop a class culture that encourages growth mindsets

Researcher Carol Dweck has studied the attitudes people hold about their learning ability and has come up with a continuum, with a 'fixed mindset' at one end and a 'growth mindset' on the other. People with a **fixed mindset** believe that their intelligence and ability are innate and fixed, and there's not much they can do to change that. In contrast people with a **growth mindset** believe their abilities and intelligence can be developed and improved through perseverance, good strategies and support from others. They do not deny differences in capability between people, but they believe people can increase their intelligence through the right learning strategies and effort. Growth mindsets are positively linked to the use of cognitive strategies, help-seeking behaviour and a belief in self-efficacy.

Below are some suggestions for how you can develop a class culture that encourages growth mindsets.

- **Embrace challenge.** Whenever a student faces a challenge or gets stuck, frame it as an opportunity for learning or for growing the brains of everyone, you included. Be excited and positive, and relish the moment as a lucky opportunity to practise problem-solving skills and develop new learning strategies. "This one is hard, so it should be fun!"
- **Ensure an appropriate level of difficulty** because making learning too easy leads to a false sense of mastery, without deeper processing. Also mix up the conditions or contexts in which strategies are practised or applied, and give students opportunities to actively test themselves rather than just study material.
- **Invite confusion when introducing new ideas and strategies.** Be confident that everyone can master new ideas and strategies with effort and support. Celebrate confusion as a means to greater understanding. Invite students to seek intellectual problems and reveal their confusions as rich opportunities for learning.
- **Value mistakes.** Normalise mistakes as a part of learning and emphasise that everyone makes them. Make your own mistakes visible. Be intrigued by mistakes, and view mistakes as an opportunity to learn to do something differently. "Well, that didn't work. How interesting! What does that tell us? What should we try next?"
- **Let students struggle!** Avoid jumping in to fix every problem. Rather let students work through problems, figure out answers and invent strategies for themselves. Praise the struggle, perhaps by saying "Your brain is learning right now, can you feel it?" Jumping in to help conveys the message that their frustration should be minimised and prevents students from developing resilience and problem-solving skills. When teachers don't jump in to solve problems or provide answers, they give students the message that they believe they can do it.
- **Expect and value effort.** Avoid praising fast and easy work or answers, as this kind of endorsement discourages children from sticking with a challenge and working hard. Students might come to think that doing things quickly and easily is valued as a reflection of their ability. When students perform tasks quickly or easily, this means they were not challenged and very little learning occurred. So apologise to them for wasting their time with a task they didn't benefit from. Praise them when they persevere, work hard, try different strategies and challenge themselves. Value practice, not perfection.
- **Value effort that leads to learning** Don't praise effort when students aren't actually learning anything. Although it is good that they tried, it's not good that they are not learning. Teachers can appreciate the effort that students have put in so far, but then say: "Let's talk about what you've tried, and what you can try next." Be honest about students' mistakes and failures, but then be confident that you can work together to do something about it, empowering the student. Present yourself as a mentor and a resource for learning, rather than a judge of student performance and ability.

- **Encourage students to diversify their strategies when they get stuck.** Coach students on the need to change strategies or ask for advice from others to improve strategies for learning when existing strategies have not been successful. Effort in itself is not enough to ensure learning if that hard work is wasted on ineffective learning strategies. Students need to try new strategies and seek help from others when they get stuck. Explain the formula for success in learning is “effort + strategies + help from others”. Teach them to identify the problem, and brainstorm three ways to overcome it, before selecting one to try. Make evaluating their progress part of the process.
- **Emphasise reflection** as a key part of the process of learning from mistakes. Help students to identify and focus on areas for improvement, for example, engaging in problem-solving, and deliberate practice (isolating one component of a task to master before moving on) or brainstorming other potential solutions or resources for problems to try next time. After practising a strategy or producing a piece of work, you might ask students to identify what worked well, how it could be improved, or to suggest three ideas to make it better.
- **Praise processes**, such as challenge-seeking, focus, strategy use, hard work and persistence, rather than outcomes. And don’t praise, or attribute outcomes to, intelligence, which encourages a fixed mindset and leads students to continue to seek tasks in which they can demonstrate existing intelligence. This means changing words like “smart” and “clever” to words like “hard-working” and “determined”. Rather than focus on the grade or mark, focus on the process: “What did you do to get there?” When giving feedback, indicate where students might need to adjust their strategies. Growth mindset feedback informs students on where they are in their learning and what they need to do to improve.
- **Ensure that students understand that tests and marks do not measure intelligence**, but just their performance at a particular moment of time, and offer opportunities for students to plan strategies to improve. Analyse the most common errors on a test with the whole class – students may place less significance on future errors when they realise they are not alone with their errors.
- **Value ‘having-a-go’.** Make opportunities for students to try new things in fun, low-stress ways, and highlight the incremental progress made through effort and practice. Choosing activities in which there is no single right answer can encourage students to take on new challenges.