

Challenging the myths of mindset: theory and practice

Theory and research often don't offer simple answers, which can be frustrating for practitioners, and it is easy to oversimplify the original research. In the case of growth mindset, this has been intensified by media attention, where it is presented as either a fad or a fix-all. It is neither. It is a rational theory with some promising research findings see, for example, (Dweck and Grant, 2003), (Blackwell et al., 2007) and (Mangels et al., 2006), but there is much work still to be done. Since 2012, our team has worked with over 400 schools, providing training and conducting research to test the effectiveness of an intervention based on Carol Dweck's 'growth mindset' theory, and we have learned a great deal about translating this theory and research into practice and challenging the myths surrounding it.

Myth 1: 'Just practise more'

One common misinterpretation of growth mindset is the idea that it means 'you just need to practise more/put in more effort'. Yes, practice and effort are necessary, but not sufficient. There are four elements that are problematic in this message:

1. Telling a child to practise more will be unlikely to have an impact. In contrast, interventions for changing mindsets are about increasing children's motivation by developing a different belief system about the nature of intelligence. This includes unravelling myths about the nature of abilities as something fixed that cannot develop.
2. A growth mindset can make the difference between someone who avoids challenge and failure, and someone who embraces it for the sake of learning. Therefore, having a growth mindset will not influence learning if that learner is not being given the chance to challenge themselves. This is why we often see our mindset intervention influencing pupils that were already challenged, but not those pupils that were doing fine already.
3. If you provide challenges for children, they will make mistakes, and this needs to be supported. A learning environment that values mistakes as learning opportunities needs to be built. Mistakes that are hidden are a missed learning opportunity for all.
4. Persistence and effort after challenge and failure need to be meaningful, not just trying the same approach repeatedly (unless that approach is working). Rather, a learner needs to be taught different strategies to explore and to be encouraged to experiment with them. Teachers do this all the time. With a growth mindset, children become motivated to try, rather than avoiding a task that they have previously failed.

Myth 2: ‘You can’t provide positive praise’

A clear message that comes from Dweck’s work is that you need to praise effort and achievement, rather than the person or attribute. However, this often gets interpreted as you can’t praise at all, or you can only praise for effort, not for achievement. The problem with giving person- or attribute-focused praise to a pupil – e.g. ‘you are gifted at maths’ – is that it carries the implication that their performance is beyond their control, they will always perform that way and perhaps they have to perform well. And what does that mean when they don’t understand the next maths problem they encounter? That they are no longer that gifted mathematician? Then self-esteem takes a hit, or they may avoid the situation in future, so they aren’t revealed as an imposter.

In contrast, if we say ‘you got them all right because you persevered’ or ‘some of these are wrong – looking at the mistakes and having another go will help’, and so on, then self-esteem is maintained in the face of challenge and failure. Your praise has provided the sense of control and the clues as to how to overcome challenge – effort, practice and exploring strategies.

Myth 3: ‘Mindsets will affect all pupils the same way’

Developing a growth mindset may have more of an impact on academic outcomes for particular children, such as those with a poor learner identity (e.g. those receiving free school meals or from a low socio-economic status background). Why is this? The answer lies in what we briefly mentioned above regarding challenge being necessary for a growth mindset to positively impact learning. For the lower-attaining pupil, it may help them break free from the stereotype of being a non-learner. In contrast, for the high-attaining pupil, it might prevent them from crumbling at the first sign of a challenge.

Mindset work needs to take these differences into account. We recommend working with pupils openly on growth mindset interventions, giving space to explore each individual’s perspective on it, not simply imposing one-size-fits-all interventions that are ‘done to’ pupils.

References

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