

Published March 14, 2016, in *Education Week's Rules for Engagement Blog*

Nurturing Growth Mindsets: Six Tips From Carol Dweck

By Evie Blad

WASHINGTON

Stanford researcher Carol Dweck clearly tapped into a powerful and compelling idea when she linked the concept of growth mindsets to academic success.

As fans of Dweck's research can quickly explain, people with fixed mindsets see strengths and skills as innate traits, like eye color. You're either born with them, or you're not. But people with growth mindsets recognize that the brain can grow and change through effort, and they embrace failures as opportunities for developing new strategies and approaches to learning content and concepts they find challenging.

Enthusiasm for Dweck's work has spread rapidly, and her name is a buzzword in many schools as teachers buy into the idea that helping students shift their mindsets can lead to academic gains.

But, in recent years, Dweck has worked to balance that enthusiasm by busting some misconceptions about her research and its applications in schools. That includes a wildly popular *Education Week* commentary and a keynote address at EdWeek's Leaders to Learn From event in Washington.

"I fear that my work, which grew up to counter the failed self-esteem movement, will be used for the same purpose, trying to make kids feel good but not actually changing the process of learning," Dweck said, explaining her concerns.

As people have embraced the growth mindset idea, they haven't always fully understood every dimension of the research. Among the biggest misconceptions? That boosting students' mindsets is simply a matter of praising effort rather than results or helping students develop new strategies for approaching content they struggle with, Dweck said.

"Sheer effort is highly important, but it is not the ultimate value; learning

and improvement are," Dweck said. "Effort is one route to learning and improvement."

Here are six tips pulled from Dweck's talk:

1. Acknowledge the nuance in the research.

Growth mindsets are not a magic trick that will solve every challenge in the classroom, Dweck said. The enthusiasm for the research sometimes leads to an expectation of unrealistic results, researchers have said. And that same enthusiasm can lead skeptics to dismiss them all together. Fellow mindset researcher David Yeager has even published a paper called "Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic," which he just calls "The Magic Paper."

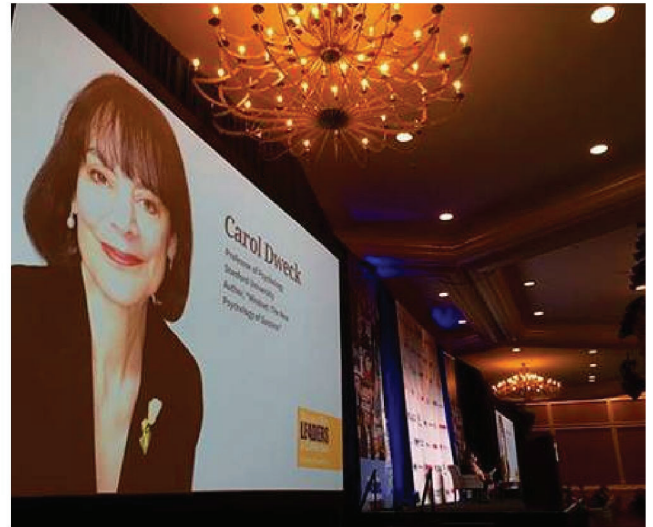
"A growth mindset is not a panacea, but it does empower [students] and help them learn," she said.

2. Everyone has a fixed mindset sometimes.

There's a misconception that every student and teacher can be put into one of two categories: those with growth mindsets and those with fixed mindsets, Dweck said, but in reality, everyone "has a little bit of both." The either/or mentality causes some people to ignore chances they have to address the fixed mindsets they do have about some areas.

"Let's legitimize that fixed mindset, because we all have it somewhere; we are all a mixture," Dweck said. "And watch for those fixed-mindset triggers."

What sparks students' fixed mindsets? It's whatever makes them retreat to that place where avoiding "looking



dumb" is more important than being vulnerable and learning a new idea, she said. Those triggers are different for different people. They could be struggles, setbacks, criticism from mothers, or even meeting someone who is smarter or more talented, Dweck said.

"Do you hate them just a little bit? Or do you say, 'wow how did they develop those skills?' Maybe I can learn from them."

3. Name your fixed mindset.

Dweck told of a consultant in Australia who encouraged business executives to name their "fixed-mindset persona" so they could have a fun, comfortable way of discussing it with peers.

In schools, the name gives a quick identifier to the triggers students and teachers identify, and it helps them recognize their responses that might not be productive, she said.

"Name it, claim it, and talk about it," she said. "And over time, recruit it to work with you on your growth mindset goals."

For students, that might mean calling their mindset by their middle name or a goofy nickname.

“When we’re in a crunch, when we’re on deadline and I’m not sure we’re gonna make it, Duane shows up,” one Australian man told his coworkers, according to Dweck. His organization’s morale and productivity shot up as they adopted those strategies, she said.

4. Move beyond effort.

If teachers and parents want to nurture growth mindset in children, they should move beyond just pushing them toward effort. They should also help them identify new strategies and approaches so that effort can be productive, Dweck said. I discuss that a bit in this story about how math teachers can strengthen growth mindsets by changing their approach to the content.

Children can then move beyond just

asking for answers when they don’t understand and instead ask “What can I do to help myself?” she said.

5. Put mindsets into a greater school-culture context.

The larger culture of a school can influence their mindset formation, Dweck said. Students are less likely to avoid “looking dumb” and more likely to try new approaches if they believe that their school is interested in their success, she said. Similarly, in workplaces, employees are more likely to display growth mindsets when they believe that the organization believes in developing abilities.

Social-emotional learning efforts and school climate initiatives that encourage students to build supportive relation-

ships may help build this attitude in a school, Dweck said.

“What is the larger culture that allows teachers and students to feel safe? That we’re out for your development? We’re not here to sort you into who can succeed and who can’t.”

6. Don’t use mindsets to label students (or yourself).

Dweck said she’s been disappointed to hear that some teachers have used a student’s mindset as an excuse, saying things like “that child can’t learn; he has a fixed mindset.”

“We used to say kids don’t have the ability. Now we’re saying they don’t have the mindset? I think it’s protective. It’s our way of saying ‘It’s not my fault that child isn’t learning.’” ■