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How Praise Became a Consolation Prize

Helping children confront challenges requires a more nuanced understanding of the "growth mindset."



Dinuka Liyanawatte / Reuters

CHRISTINE GROSS-LOH | DEC 16, 2016 | EDUCATION

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As a young researcher, Carol Dweck was fascinated by how some children faced challenges and failures with aplomb while others shrunk back. Dweck, now a psychologist at Stanford University, eventually identified two core

mindsets, or beliefs, about one's own traits that shape how people approach challenges: fixed mindset, the belief that one's abilities were carved in stone and predetermined at birth, and growth mindset, the belief that one's skills and qualities could be cultivated through effort and perseverance. Her findings brought the concepts of "fixed" and "growth" mindset to the fore for educators and parents, inspiring the implementation of her ideas among [teachers](#)—and even [companies](#)—across the country.

But Dweck recently noticed a trend: a widespread embrace of what she refers to as "false growth mindset"—a misunderstanding of the idea's core message. Growth mindset's popularity was leading some educators to believe that it was simpler than it was, that it was only about putting forth effort or that a teacher could foster growth mindset merely by telling kids to try hard. A teacher might applaud a child for making an effort on a science test even if he'd failed it, for instance, believing that doing so would promote growth mindset in that student regardless of the outcome. But such empty praise can exacerbate some of the very problems that growth mindset is intended to counter. A new edition of Dweck's book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, updated to address false growth mindset, comes out at the end of this month. I recently spoke with Dweck about how she wants her ideas to be applied. The interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

Christine Gross-Loh: Could you tell me about the development of the idea of growth mindset? What was it intended to correct? What were you seeing that you felt growth mindset would help improve?

Carol Dweck: I've always been interested, since graduate school, in why some children wilt and shrink back from challenges and give up in the face of obstacles, while others avidly seek challenges and become even more

invested in the face of obstacles. So this has been my primary question for over 40 years. At some point, my graduate students and I realized that a student's mindset was at the foundation of whether [he or she] loved challenges and persisted in the face of failure.

When students had more of a fixed mindset—the idea that abilities are carved in stone, that you have a certain amount and that's that—they saw challenges as risky. They could fail, and their basic abilities would be called into question. When they hit obstacles, setbacks, or criticism, this was just more proof that they didn't have the abilities that they cherished.

In contrast, when students had more of a growth mindset, they held the view that talents and abilities could be developed and that challenges were the way to do it. Learning something new, something hard, sticking to things—that's how you get smarter. Setbacks and feedback weren't about your abilities, they were information you could use to help yourself learn. With a growth mindset, kids don't necessarily think that there's no such thing as talent or that everyone is the same, but they believe everyone can develop their abilities through hard work, strategies, and lots of help and mentoring from others.

Gross-Loh: When I first interviewed you about growth mindset a few years ago, I remember that it was a relatively unknown idea. But growth mindset is now so popular that I'll hear people who aren't steeped in educational theory say, "Praise the effort, not the child (or the outcome)." Why do you think this idea struck such a chord, and how did you find out there were people misunderstanding it?

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everything all the time.”

Dweck: Many educators were dissatisfied with drilling for high-stakes tests. They understood that student motivation had been a neglected area, especially of late. So many educators, as well as many parents, were excited to implement something that might re-energize kids to focus on learning again, not just memorization and test taking, but on deeper, more joyful learning.

But a colleague of mine, Susan Mackie, was doing workshops with educators in Australia and observed that many of them were saying they got growth mindset and were running with it, but did not understand it deeply. She told me, “I’m seeing a lot of false growth mindset.” I just did not get it initially—growth mindset is a very straightforward concept, and besides, why would people settle for a false growth mindset if they could have a real one? But I started keeping a list of all the ways people were misunderstanding growth mindset. When the list got long enough, I started speaking and writing about it.

Gross-Loh: Could you elaborate on false growth mindset?

Dweck: False growth mindset is saying you have growth mindset when you don't really have it or you don't really understand [what it is]. It's also false in the sense that nobody has a growth mindset in everything all the time. Everyone is a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets. You could have a predominant growth mindset in an area but there can still be things that trigger you into a fixed mindset trait. Something really challenging and outside your comfort zone can trigger it, or, if you encounter someone who is much better than you at something you pride yourself on, you can think “Oh, that person has ability, not me.” So I think we all, students and adults, have

to look for our fixed-mindset triggers and understand when we are falling into that mindset.

I think a lot of what happened [with false growth mindset among educators] is that instead of taking this long and difficult journey, where you work on understanding your triggers, working with them, and over time being able to stay in a growth mindset more and more, many educators just said, “Oh yeah, I have a growth mindset” because either they know it’s the right mindset to have or they understood it in a way that made it seem easy.

Gross-Loh: Why do you think these misunderstandings occurred?

Dweck: Many people understood growth mindset deeply and implemented it in a very sophisticated and effective way. However, there were many others who understood it in a way that wasn’t quite accurate, or distilled it down to something that wasn’t quite effective, or assimilated it into something they already knew.

Often when we see kids who aren’t learning well, we might feel frustrated or defensive, thinking it reflects on us as educators. It’s often tempting to not feel it is our fault. So we might say the child has a fixed mindset, without understanding instead that, as educators, it is our responsibility to create a context in which a growth mindset can flourish.

Gross-Loh: So it seems that the danger is that some teachers think they have growth mindset and believe it will transfer to their students, even though they themselves don’t really understand it. How about this: Are there educators who do understand the idea that abilities can be developed, but don’t understand how to pass it on to students? Are there certain children who are more vulnerable to this sort of misunderstanding of growth mindset?

Dweck: Yes, another misunderstanding [of growth mindset] that might

apply to lower-achieving children is the oversimplification of growth mindset into just [being about] effort. Teachers were just praising effort that was not effective, saying “Wow, you tried really hard!” But students know that if they didn’t make progress and you’re praising them, it’s a consolation prize. They also know you think they can’t do any better. So this kind of growth-mindset idea was misappropriated to try to make kids feel good when they were not achieving.

The mindset ideas were developed as a counter to the self-esteem movement of blanketing everyone with praise, whether deserved or not. To find out that teachers were using it in the same way was of great concern to me. The whole idea of growth-mindset praise is to focus on the learning process. When you focus on effort, [you have to] show how effort created learning progress or success.

Gross-Loh: What should people do to avoid falling into this trap?

Dweck: A lot of parents or teachers say praise the effort, not the outcome. I say [that’s] wrong: Praise the effort that led to the outcome or learning progress; tie the praise to it. It’s not just effort, but strategy ... so support the student in finding another strategy. Effective teachers who actually have classrooms full of children with a growth mindset are always supporting children’s learning strategies and showing how strategies created that success.

Students need to know that if they’re stuck, they don’t need just effort. You don’t want them redoubling their efforts with the same ineffective strategies. You want them to know when to ask for help and when to use resources that are available.

All of this is part of the process that needs to be taught and tied to learning.

“Focus on the learning process and show how hard work, good strategies, and good use of resources lead to better learning.”

Gross-Loh: Is there a right way to praise kids and encourage them to do well?

Dweck: Many parents and teachers who themselves have growth mindset aren't passing it on because they are trying to protect the child's confidence, focus on the child's ability, and kind of boost the child's view or protect the child from a failure. They're conveying anxiety about ability.

But we have a new line of research (with my former graduate student, Kyla Haimovitz) showing that the way a parent reacts to a child's failure conveys a mindset to a child regardless of the parent's mindset. If parents react to their child's failures as though there is something negative, if they rush in, are anxious, reassure the child, “Oh not everyone can be good at math, don't worry, you're good at other things,” the child gets it that no, this is important, and it's fixed. That child is developing a fixed mindset, even if the parent has a growth mindset.

But if the parent reacts to a child's failure as though it's something that enhances learning, asking, “Okay, what is this teaching us? Where should we go next? Should we talk to the teacher about how we can learn this better?” that child comes to understand that abilities can be developed.

So, with praise, focus on “process praise”—focus on the learning process and show how hard work, good strategies, and good use of resources lead to

better learning. Be matter-of-fact, with not too strong or too passive a reaction.

You can see evidence of fixed mindset as young as 3.5 or 4 years old; that's when mindsets can start becoming evident, where some kids are very upset when they make a mistake or get criticized and fall into a helpless place. That's when children become able to evaluate themselves. We collaborated ... with researchers from the University of Chicago who had a longitudinal project with videotape of mother-child interactions. What we found was the more praise was process-oriented—not a ton, just where the greater proportion of the praise was process praise [versus outcome praise]—the more those children had a growth mindset and a high desire for challenge five years later, when they were in second grade.

Gross-Loh: That's very helpful to know for parents of young children. But what about older kids who might feel discouraged and worn-down after years of feeling that they weren't smart enough or a fear that they would never be able to be successful? Is it ever too late to foster a growth mindset in students?

Dweck: No—we've developed a number of online workshops addressed at adolescents and shown that when we teach [those] students a growth mindset, many of them regain their motivation to learn and achieve higher grades, especially students who have been struggling or students who have been laboring under a negative stereotype about [their own] abilities.

Research conducted last year by my former graduate student, David Yeager [now a professor at the University of Texas], on 18,000 students entering ninth grade, shows us that students who took growth-mindset workshops are seeking more challenges.

You can't tell adolescents, "We're adults, we have the answer, and we're

going to tell you what it is.” So we said, “We’re scientists from Stanford University and the University of Texas, and we need your help. We’re experts on the brain and how students learn, but you’re the experts on being a freshman in high school and we’d like your input for a program we’re developing for future freshmen.”

We then taught them about how the teenage brain is especially open to learning. We talked about how it’s a time of great plasticity, a time they need to take advantage of, and that they can grow their brains through taking on hard tasks in school and sticking to them. We had the students write a letter to a struggling freshman, counseling that person in terms of the growth-mindset principle, which is often very persuasive. We had testimonials from some public figures, talking about how a growth mindset got them to where they were.

Finally we talked about why someone would want a growth mindset. We realized that some kids would be overjoyed to hear you can develop your intellectual abilities, but others might not think it was the most exciting thing. So we then had a whole section on why you might want to develop your mind. Teenagers are really excited about the idea that they can do something to make the world a better place. So we asked them what they want to make their contribution to in the future—family, community, or societal problems—and then talked about how having a strong mind could help them make their future contribution.

We’re excited about this because we know the world of the future is going to be about taking on ill-defined, hard jobs that keep changing. It’s going to favor people who relish those challenges and know how to fix them. We are committed to creating a nation of learners.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINE GROSS-LOH is the author of *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life*.
