

Book Review: Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, by Dweck, C. S. (2006)

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, Dona (2007) "Book Review: Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, by Dweck, C. S. (2006)," *Gifted Children*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/giftedchildren/vol1/iss2/7>

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Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.

By Dweck, C. S. (2006). New York: Random House.

Review by Dona Matthews, Hunter College, The City University of New York

My friends, family, colleagues, and students know all about my enthusiasm for Carol Dweck's new book on mindsets, where she synthesizes her research findings on motivation and achievement spanning the past 35 years and involving multiple triangulating studies and collaborations. I can't stop talking about it or writing about it because I think it has huge and important consequences for much of what we do as educators, psychologists, and parents, and because of its validation of the importance of moving intentionally toward the mastery model perspective on giftedness that I've been writing about recently (Matthews & Foster, 2005, 2006). For those of us involved in gifted education, I think that *Mindset* may come to represent the tipping point in a paradigm shift in the field. At the very least, it stands to change the way we do business.

In *Mindset*, Dweck distinguishes between a fixed mindset on the one hand (what she has previously called the entity theory of intelligence) and a growth mindset on the other hand (the incremental theory, to those who have been following work in this area for some time). From a fixed mindset, ability is seen as innate and permanent: some people are intelligent and some are less so. From a growth mindset, ability develops incrementally over time with appropriate opportunities to learn: intelligence develops. Mindsets are domain-specific—you might have a fixed mindset about your mathematical ability, for example, and see yourself as terrible (or great) at math; but have a growth mindset about sports, and realize that you can't just pick up a tennis racket and expect to be good at tennis.

As reviewed in this book, the outcome differences for these two mindsets are strikingly large and persistent across age, sex, culture, ability level, and socioeconomic status. According to study after study in a number of lines of research conducted by Dweck and her associates, and published in the major journals in education and psychology, there is a big advantage for those holding the growth mindset: they are happier, healthier, more fulfilled, and more successful in school, work, sports, business, love, friendships, and life. Happily for those whose mindsets are fixed in one or more domains, mindsets can be changed.

Dweck addresses the topic of extreme giftedness, referring to Ellen Winner's work with child prodigies. She concludes that people tend to focus too much on what they see as the innate component of exceptionality, and ignore the temperamental and motivation dimensions that are connected to mindsets: "Most often people believe that the 'gift' is the ability itself. Yet what feeds it is that constant, endless curiosity and challenge seeking." (p. 63).

Although giftedness per se is discussed only briefly, the book is full of important concepts for the field. Implications for gifted education begin with conceptual foundations: our conception of what giftedness is and how it develops shifts dramatically when we move from a fixed mindset, where some students are categorized as inherently smart and some are not—to a growth mindset—where intelligence is conceptualized as dynamic, as developing over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. Looked at from this perspective, teachers who encourage their students' continued engagement in the learning process are fostering gifted development, quite independently of where their students may start in ability or intelligence test scores: "The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning" (p. 188).

I will discuss the details of the fixed/growth mindset distinction using as a framework the major implications I see for gifted education:

1. The Nature of Intelligence. From a fixed mindset, some people are inherently smart, and some are not, and there are ways to measure this (e.g., IQ tests). From the growth mindset, intelligence develops over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn (think Bloom's *Taxonomy*, Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development*, and recent findings on neural development and plasticity). From the growth mindset, there are many fewer limits on who might or might not be gifted, and many opportunities along the developmental trajectory to "become" gifted. This is consistent with emerging findings about gifted development (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, in press). It is also an important perspective for those who are concerned about minority under-representation and giftedness (Graham, in press; Worrell, in press).
2. Praise. Rather than praising children for their personality or innate and permanent attributes, we should instead praise students for their growth-oriented processes, what they accomplish through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. It is even better to ask them about their work in ways that appreciate their effort and choices. "*Praising children's intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance*" (p. 170).
3. Effort. When I ask parents or teachers who are new to the field if there are any recognizable signs of giftedness, almost invariably I get a response concerning speed of

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thought or learning: "Gifted kids are fast thinkers," or "They learn really quickly." This is fixed mindset thinking: from a fixed mindset, if you learn very quickly, you are gifted, but if you have to work hard at something, or learn it slowly, you are not. By contrast, from the growth perspective, skills and achievement come through persistence and effort, and speed and perfection are the enemies of difficult learning. High achievement comes from hard work over time, and thoughtfulness (which can be slow) is a good thing.

4. **Risk-taking and fear of failure.** This is a core dynamic in the fixed/growth mindset distinction. People with a fixed mindset feel judged and evaluated all the time. If they don't do well on a test, they conclude they aren't good in the domain or area at hand. When they have a setback at work, they worry that they can't cut it. This has obvious repercussions on risk-taking – people operating from a fixed mindset have something to lose by trying and failing. We can help underachievers become achievers by facilitating their discovery of how to approach things from a growth perspective. From a growth mindset, failures are perceived as learning opportunities, chances to see what we don't know yet or need to work on. Somewhat predictably, the fixed mindset leads to a fear of failure, and the growth mindset encourages risk-taking. This is obviously an important reason that the growth mindset is associated with higher academic and career achievement levels over time: "People in a growth mindset don't just seek challenge, they thrive on it" (p. 21).
5. **Potential.** From a fixed mindset, we measure a person's potential every time we give them a test. From the growth perspective, it is better to avoid thinking in terms of potential. Potential is invisible; it is unmeasurable because there is too much open to development over time and to variables like motivation and effort: "An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone's ability, let alone their potential to succeed in future" (p. 29).
6. **Malleability of mindsets.** Mindsets are learned, and can be unlearned. Teachers can undermine students'

achievement, self-confidence, and sense of well-being by modeling and/or inculcating a fixed mindset. Alternatively, they can have an enormously beneficial impact on their students when they model and foster the growth mindset. Dweck's chapter on this topic is called "Changing Mindsets: A Workshop." She describes workshops that she and others have designed and delivered, and provides workshops that the reader can complete on his or her own or with others, identifying areas of fixed mindset, and moving that, through awareness and attention, to a healthier growth perspective. Some people have a harder time than others doing this, and we all have some domains where our fixed attitudes are more deeply engrained, and where this is harder to accomplish.

7. **Labeling.** "Telling children they're smart, in the end, made them feel dumber and act dumber, but claim they were smarter. I don't think this is what we're aiming for when we put positive labels – "gifted," "talented," "brilliant" – on people." (p. 75) When we label a child "Gifted," we foster the fixed mindset in the child, as well as in teachers and parents. The label communicates, "You ARE gifted, you HAVE A Gift," appearing to describe innate and permanent qualities of the person, which Dweck's work demonstrates to carry with it corrosive repercussions over time. It is more conducive to the growth mindset when we avoid labeling children as gifted (or not gifted), and instead label educational programming descriptively by level of difficulty, perhaps by grade level or challenge level.

Although Dweck and her colleagues at Columbia and Stanford Universities are serious academics, *Mindset* is highly accessible. I found it a coherent and compelling book, full of anecdotes and stories from her own life and those of others, loaded with illustrations of concepts that can make a difference in how we perceive and approach our work in the helping professions. For those interested in high-level ability and how it develops, this is very important work indeed. ♦

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