

The “Mindset” Mindset

SALON

August 16, 2015

The “Mindset” Mindset

What We Miss By Focusing on Kids’ Attitudes

The emphasis on effort in Dweck’s “growth mindset” is most notable for the larger questions it discourages us from asking.

By Alfie Kohn

One of the most popular ideas in education these days can be summarized in a single sentence – a fact that may help to account for its popularity. Here’s the sentence: Kids tend to fare better when they regard intelligence and other abilities not as fixed traits that they either have or lack, but as attributes that can be improved through effort.

In a series of monographs over many years and in a book published in 2000, psychologist Carol Dweck used the label “incremental theory” to describe the self-fulfilling belief that one can become smarter. Rebranding it more catchily as “growth mindset” allowed her to recycle the idea a few years later in a best-selling book for general readers and an on-line “step by step” instructional program called Brainology® that is said to “raise student achievement by helping them develop a growth mindset” (\$6,000 for the all-inclusive kit).

By now, in fact, the phrase “growth mindset” has approached the status

of a cultural meme and is repeated with uncritical enthusiasm by educators and a growing number of parents, managers, and journalists – to the point that one half expects supporters to start referring to their smartphones as “effortphones.” But, like the buzz over the related concept known as “grit” (a form of self-discipline involving long-term persistence), there’s something disconcerting about how the idea has been used – and about the broader assumption that what students most need is a “mindset” adjustment.

Unlike grit, which, as I’ve argued elsewhere, is driven more by conservative ideology than by solid research, Dweck’s basic thesis is supported by decades’ worth of good data. It’s not just the habit of attributing your failure to being stupid that holds you back but also the habit of attributing your success to being smart. Regardless of their track record, kids tend to do better in the future if they believe that how well they did in the past was primarily a result of effort.

But “how well they did” at what?

The problem with sweeping, generic claims about the power of attitudes or beliefs isn’t just a risk of overstating the benefits but a tendency to divert attention from the nature of the tasks themselves: How valuable are they, and who gets to decide whether they must be done? Dweck is a research psychologist, not an educator, so her inattention to the particulars of classroom assignments is understandable. Unfortunately, even some people who *are* educators would rather convince students they need to adopt a more positive attitude than address the quality of the curriculum (what the students are being taught) or the pedagogy (how they’re being taught).

An awful lot of schooling still consists of making kids cram forgettable facts into short-term memory. And the kids themselves are seldom consulted about what they’re doing, even though genuine excitement about (and proficiency at) learning rises when they’re brought into the process, invited to search for answers to their own questions and engage in extended projects. Outstanding classrooms and schools – with a rich documentary record of their successes – show

that the quality of education itself can be improved. But books, articles, TED talks, and teacher-training sessions devoted to the wonders of adopting a growth mindset rarely bother to ask whether the curriculum is meaningful, whether the pedagogy is thoughtful, or whether the assessment of students' learning is authentic (as opposed to defining success merely as higher scores on dreadful standardized tests).

Small wonder that this idea goes down so easily. All we have to do is get kids to adopt the right attitude, to think optimistically about their ability to handle *whatever* they've been given to do. Even if, quite frankly, it's not worth doing.

*

The most common bit of concrete advice offered by Dweck and others enamored of the growth mindset is to praise kids for their effort ("You tried really hard") rather than for their ability ("You're really smart") in order to get them to persevere. (Google the words "praise" and "effort" together: more than 70 million hits.) But the first problem with this seductively simple script change is that praising children for their effort carries problems of its own, as several studies have confirmed: It can communicate that they're really not very capable and therefore unlikely to succeed at future tasks. ("If you're complimenting me just for trying hard, I must really be a loser.") [[Addendum 2018: I had cited several studies in my book *Punished by Rewards* that pointed to problems with praise for effort; a new review of the research provides additional evidence.]]

The more serious concern, however, is that what's really problematic is praise, *per se*. It's a verbal reward, an extrinsic inducement, and, like other rewards, is often construed by the recipient as manipulation. A substantial research literature has shown that kids typically end up less interested in whatever they were rewarded or praised for doing, because now their goal is just to get the reward or praise. As I've explained in books and articles, the most salient feature of a positive judgment is not that it's positive but that it's a judgment; it's more about controlling than encouraging. Moreover,

praise communicates that our acceptance of a child comes with strings attached: Our approval is conditional on the child's continuing to impress us or do what we say. What kids actually need from us, along with nonjudgmental feedback and guidance, is *unconditional* support – the antithesis of a patronizing pat on the head for having jumped through our hoops.

The solution, therefore, goes well beyond a focus on *what's* being praised – that is, merely switching from commending ability to commending effort. Praise for the latter is likely to be experienced as every bit as controlling and conditional as praise for the former. Tellingly, the series of Dweck's studies on which she still relies to support the idea of praising effort, which she conducted with Claudia Mueller in the 1990s, included no condition in which students received nonevaluative feedback. Other researchers have found that just such a response – information about how they've done without a judgment attached – is preferable to any sort of praise.

Thus, the challenge for a teacher, parent, or manager is to consider a moratorium on verbal doggie biscuits, period. We need to attend to deeper differences: between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and between “doing to” and “working with” strategies. Unfortunately, we're discouraged from thinking about these more meaningful distinctions – and from questioning the whole carrot-and-stick model (of which praise is an example) – when we're assured that it's sufficient just to offer a different kind of carrot.

*

Here's another part of the bigger picture that's eclipsed when we get too caught up in the “growth vs. fixed” (or “incremental vs. entity”) dichotomy: If students are preoccupied with how well they're doing in school, then their interest in *what* they're doing may suffer. A 2010 study found that when students whose self-worth hinges on their performance face the prospect of failure, it doesn't help for them to adopt a growth mindset. In fact, those who did so were even more likely to give themselves an excuse for screwing up, a strategy known as “self-handicapping,” as compared to those with the dreaded fixed

mindset.

Even when a growth mindset doesn't make things worse, it can help only so much if students have been led – by things like grades, tests, and, worst of all, competition – to become more focused on achievement than on the learning itself. Training them to think about effort more than ability does nothing to address the fact, confirmed by several educational psychologists, that too much emphasis on performance undermines intellectual engagement. Just as with praise, betting everything on a shift from ability to effort may miss what matters most.

And this brings us to the biggest blind spot of all – the whole idea of focusing on the mindsets of individuals. Dweck's work nestles comfortably in a long self-help tradition, the American can-do, just-adopt-a-positive-attitude spirit ("I think I can, I think I can..."). The message of that tradition has always been to adjust yourself to conditions as you find them because those conditions are immutable; all you can do is decide on the spirit in which to approach them. Ironically, the more we occupy ourselves with getting kids to attribute outcomes to their own effort, the more we communicate that the conditions they face are, well, fixed.

Social psychologists use the term "fundamental attribution error" to mean paying so much attention to personality and attitudes that we overlook how profoundly the social environment affects what we do and who we are. Their point is that it's simply inaccurate to make too much of a fuss about things like mindsets, but there are also political implications to doing so.

Why, for example, do relatively few young women choose to study or work in the fields of math and science? Is it because of entrenched sexism and "the way the science career structure works"? Well, to someone sold on Dweck's formula, the answer is no: it's "all a matter of mindset." We need only "shift widespread perceptions over to the 'growth mindset'" – that is, to the perceptions of girls and women who are just trapped by their own faulty thinking. This is similar to the perspective that encourages us to blame a "culture of poverty" in the

inner city rather than examine economic and political barriers – a very appealing explanation to those who benefit from those barriers and would rather fault their victims for failing to pull themselves up by their mindset.

*

Having spent a few decades watching one idea after another light up the night sky and then flame out – in the field of education and in the culture at large – I realize this pattern often has less to do with the original (promising) idea than with the way it has been oversimplified and poorly implemented. Thus, I initially thought it was unfair to blame Dweck for wince-worthy attempts to sell her growth mindset as a panacea and to give it a conservative spin. Perhaps her message had been distorted by the sort of people who love to complain about grade inflation, trophies for showing up, and the inflated self-esteem of “these kids today.” In the late 1990s, for example, right-wing media personality John Stossel snapped up a paper of Dweck’s about praise, portraying it as an overdue endorsement of the value of old-fashioned toil – just what was needed in an era of “protecting kids from failure.” Their scores stink but they feel good about themselves anyway – and here’s a study that proves “excellence comes from effort”!

This sort of attack on spoiled kids and permissive (or excessive) parenting is nothing new – and most of its claims dissolve on close inspection. Alas, Dweck not only has failed to speak out against, or distance herself from, this tendentious use of her ideas but has put a similar spin on them herself. She has allied herself with gritmeister Angela Duckworth and made Stossel-like pronouncements about the underappreciated value of hard work and the perils of making things too easy for kids, pronouncements that wouldn’t be out of place at the Republican national convention or in a small-town Sunday sermon. Indeed, Dweck has endorsed a larger conservative narrative, claiming that “the self-esteem movement led parents to think they could hand their children self-esteem on a silver platter by telling them how smart and talented they are.” (Ironically, most purveyors of that conservative narrative would be just as contemptuous of Dweck’s advice

to praise kids for how hard they'd tried.)

Moreover, as far as I can tell, she has never criticized a fix-the-kid, ignore-the-structure mentality or raised concerns about the "bunch o' facts" traditionalism in schools. Along with many other education critics, I would argue that the appropriate student response to much of what's assigned isn't "By golly, with enough effort, I can do this!" but "Why the hell should anyone have to do this?" Dweck, like Duckworth, is conspicuously absent from the ranks of those critics.

It isn't entirely coincidental that someone who is basically telling us that attitudes matter more than structures, or that persistence is a good in itself, has also bought into a conservative social critique. But why have so many educators who *don't* share that sensibility endorsed a focus on mindset (or grit) whose premises and implications they'd likely find troubling on reflection?

I'm not suggesting we go back to promoting an innate, fixed, "entity" theory of intelligence and talent, which, as Dweck points out, can leave people feeling helpless and inclined to give up. But the real alternative to that isn't a different attitude about oneself; it's a willingness to go beyond individual attitudes, to realize that no mindset is a magic elixir that can dissolve the toxicity of structural arrangements. Until those arrangements have been changed, mindset will get you only so far. And too much focus on mindset discourages us from making such changes.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up.