EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

- Read Abstract

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Feedback for Learning

Going for the Growth

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It's crucial that English language learners believe their effort makes a difference in how much they learn. Here's how to foster a growth mind-set.

Although memorizing the 1s and 2s on the multiplication table didn't call for much effort from Cristian, memorizing the 5s was a different story. Our state curriculum requires all 3rd graders to learn their multiplication facts. But on weekly tests of the 5s tables, Cristian showed little progress. Some weeks he knew fewer facts than the week before.

The problem was Cristian's attitude about effort. In previous years, teachers and his parents had frequently told him he was "smart." So he believed the math facts should just come to him. He didn't feel the urgency or positive sense of challenge that many students showed during our timed multiplication tests. Cristian had not yet embraced a growth mind-set.

How Big Is Your Glass?

Carol Dweck's (2006, 2007) research into how students tend to view intelligence—as either fixed or malleable—has profoundly affected my classroom practices and the feedback I give my students. The importance of encouraging learners to think of their intelligence as malleable became clear to me when I taught summer school to 5th grade students, many of whom hadn't been proficient in either math or reading during the previous school year.

I asked these students if they thought their brains were like a glass that's only capable of holding so much intelligence (what Dweck calls a fixed mind-set), or like grass, with the ability to grow (a growth mind-set).[1] The majority believed their brains were like tiny glasses. Smarter kids, they reasoned, have larger glasses. Why make an effort, many of them thought, when it won't change anything?

I now begin each school year by asking students this question and discussing why the "small glass" perception is wrong. I share with them exciting new research about the brain's neuroplasticity that supports the growth mind-set (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Developing such a mind-set is crucial for academic success, especially for English language learners (ELLs), who currently represent one in nine students overall in U.S. public schools (Flores, Batalova, & Fix, 2012). As ELLs develop growth mind-sets, they'll be able to successfully complete English as a second language programs faster in order to take advantage of other school opportunities.

We are fortunate to have diversity within our school population, but for some of my students, it encourages a fixed mind-set. In our Title I school, McDougle Elementary, 38 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Yet overall, our county has the highest per capita income in the state. My mostly low-income students notice the large, expensive homes they pass on their bus route to our school. They also notice that the wealthier students often do

well in school, and they seem to equate academic achievement with financial advantages. My students often lack confidence, hesitate to tackle new work after making mistakes, compare themselves unfavorably with other students, and engage in negative self-talk. They notice when other students are successful, but they often don't notice the effort these students make.

When I share Dweck's research with my students, they become empowered. The idea that as they practice emerging skills, their neurons will form new connections and their brains will "grow" intrigues them. They connect to the idea that their brain is like a muscle and can become stronger. This knowledge serves as a great equalizer: It isn't the size of their apartment, the amount of money their family has, or what their family looks like that made the difference in achievement. It is personal effort.

We also compare these brain connections to a crossing between two mountains.[2] The first time one makes the crossing is extremely difficult. Then it becomes easier, until a wide path has been worn and the crossing is effortless. I knew students had applied this concept to their learning journeys when, after finally saying a sight word correctly, Celeste exclaimed, "I made a new connection in my brain. Next time I won't have to work so hard!"

Feedback That Feeds a Growth Mind-Set

What message do we send?

Toward "I Can"

(*) Effective feedback contributes to students' sense of themselves as capable learners who can boost their achievement by staying positive and putting forth effort. I call this *growth mind-set feedback.*

My goal for my students is to change their "I can't" thinking into "I can." As a class, we brainstorm positive self-talk phrases (such as "I can do it if I keep working on it" or "I've solved problems as tough as this before"). We write these phrases inside an outline of a head on poster board. When students engage in negative self-talk, I ask them to look at our "class head" and select something else to say to themselves or their work. When a learner praises himself or herself ("I'm proud of myself"), I add this positive statement to our poster. My students' self-talk slowly starts to change.

Two Powerful Words

yet already

Dweck's work has introduced two new words into my feedback. The first word—yet—provides hope. Instead of telling a learner, "You haven't solved this equation," I now say, "You haven't solved this equation yet." And students are more likely to say "I don't understand this problem yet." This word has made a profound difference in the way my students view learning. They know that with more support, they will understand the problem. It's their job to let me know they don't understand something and my job to help them understand it.

Centering

When students ask me for help, I ask, "What do you already know about the problem?" By saying *already,* I recognize that they have some understanding of the problem in place—which is important. success already which pushes them forward

Jenifer, a 2nd grader, added 47 plus 4 and got 41. Looking over her work, she couldn't find her mistake.

"What do you already know?" I asked.

"Well, I know 7 plus 4 is 11 and I put the 1 down," she replied.

"I can see you've put effort into learning your addition facts," I told Jenifer. "What does the number 11 represent?"

"One 10 and one—" before she finished her sentence, Jenifer realized how to fix her mistake. She recognized her prior knowledge and she persisted in working on the problem, both of which supported her growth mind-set. She corrected that problem, excited to take on the challenge of the next one.

A Focus on Process

One way to make a connection between effort and achievement daily is to focus my feedback on the student's process, including his or her effort. My comments have become carefully worded and precise. I praise students for using effective strategies, focusing, and persisting.

My students practice self-regulated learning as they set attainable goals and track their own progress. We make some goals, such as learning math facts, highly visible so that students and their families can easily see their status. I give students some rewards for their hard work (like a chance to use the class iPad), but I tell them that many of the rewards for the effort they put forth today will come later in life.

We discuss mistakes straightforwardly. I model that everyone makes mistakes, fixes them, learns from them, and moves on. When I was working on a problem with several students, I made an obvious mistake. Without missing a beat, Erick said, "Hey, you can learn from that."

Partners in Success

Instead of partners in crime, our class has partners in success. I match each student with a classroom peer, and students serve as success partners for each other. Students' success partners provide support, encouragement, and

extra practice. The feedback, including high fives and thumbs up signals, that students receive from their partners provides a positive support network within our class. We also read stories of well-known and local people who became successful because of their hard work.

Students react to growth mind-set feedback in different ways. For instance, Cristian took some time to appreciate the fact that his effort—or lack of it—affected his success in learning math facts. Because his plan to learn his math facts wasn't working, I had him devise another plan and take it home (after I'd conferenced with his mother). Cristian brought it back with his parents' signatures. His new plan called for him to work on all homework, including learning math facts, for two hours each night, with his family's support.

On our next test of the 5s facts, Cristian finished early and sat back with a priceless grin. He'd mastered that fact family and he knew it. On subsequent math fact tests, he got perfect scores on his first attempts. He now understood that learning this material would take work on his part, and he embraced the challenge. He was well on his way to developing a growth mind-set that would ensure his academic success in the years ahead.

References

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Endnotes

[1] This question was suggested in a post by Alice Mercer that was featured on the blog Larry Ferlazzo's Websites of the Day

[2] I show a video titled "How We Learn: Synapses and Neural Pathways" to dramatize this fact about neuronal connections

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