

Adopting a Growth Mindset

by Amelia Dress

"I love learning new things, and in teaching there's always something new to learn. There's always room for improvement."

"When an activity doesn't go the way I planned, I try not to get too frustrated. Instead, I think about what I can do better next time."

"There are always new challenges. That's what I love about teaching. Some days are harder than others, but it would be boring otherwise."

When I talk to long-time teachers about their work, this is often what they say. They take genuine pleasure in meeting the day-to-day challenges of teaching. Their passion shines through when they interact with the children:

"Watch this!" One of these teachers told me as the children began to arrive, "Tommy used to come in and go from one area to another, just making a mess. We tried everything to get him to settle



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down. Then we discovered that he loves boats. We've added a captain's hat to the dramatic play area and now that's the first place he goes every morning." The teacher said this with all the pride and enthusiasm of a first-time parent watching a child learn to walk. Her willingness to experiment with different solutions meant that she eagerly looked for ways to meet the unique needs of each child, a quality that clearly made a difference for the children in her care.

Of course, not all teachers are as excited about meeting the challenges that arise. These teachers:

- rarely attend training unless required.
- take courses only when they need the continuing education credits.
- are quick to look for a way to fix the child or critique the parents when a child is struggling, but rarely change their own methods.
- fear failure so they meet new ideas with resistance.

In my experience, many of these teachers burn out quickly, determined that they weren't 'good' teachers to start with.

These two approaches can be summed up in what researchers call 'growth' and 'fixed' mindsets. People with a growth perspective see challenges as opportunities to learn, are eager to add to their

skills and, as a result, are passionate about their work. People with a fixed perspective:

- see the world through the lens of talents. They believe they have a certain set of abilities that are largely fixed.
- know their strengths and weaknesses, but do not believe that they have much control over either.
- become frustrated easily when faced with challenges.
- may try a solution or two, but when the problem resists a quick solution, they give up.
- lack persistence because they don't believe they have the capacity to fix the problem.
- learn to fear challenging situations and avoid new ideas.

Researchers now say that persistence, not intelligence, is the key to success (Dweck, 2015). This research highlights a simple but profound fact: human beings can learn new things throughout life. This may sound obvious, but consider how often we fail to put this simple fact into practice. We say things like, "I'm not good at math" or "I can't draw." I've been guilty of saying things like this myself. I'll never forget the college professor who unlocked the world of numbers for me, demonstrating that

while math doesn't come as easily as other subjects, I can learn it. Now, rather than avoiding situations that require math, I allow myself the extra time I need to figure something out — how to put together a puppet stand, or figure out how much paint we will need to cover a classroom wall.

What this means for teachers is that we can shape a child's success by helping him develop a growth mindset. Teaching a child that she can learn new things is more important to a child's long-term success than teaching her a particular subject. However, we need not stop there. We can also apply this research to teachers. Using the same principles for developing a growth mindset in children, directors can encourage a growth mindset among staff members. Such a perspective would allow them to meet challenges with a sense of confidence rather than fear.

Develop a Growth Vocabulary

In his book *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives*, Peter Johnson (2012) describes the importance of language in shaping student engagement. He points to the power of simple word choices that set up an attitude for a growth mindset in elementary school-aged children.

Before reading a book with new vocabulary, a teacher might say, "Let's see which of these words you know already." This is a vastly different statement from "Let's see which of these words you know." The small addition of the word *already* implies that knowledge will change (Johnson, 2012). Some children may know all the words already, while others may not know many. However, the expectation is set; by the end of the book, children will know more words than they used to.

Simple changes in language also affect adults. A few years ago, after reading Johnson's book, I began implementing growth language at home and at work. My motivation was purely pedagogical: I wanted to teach these words to the children in my life. I was surprised when I realized this language was shaping me as well. I would think, "I can't do that *yet*," then begin thinking of ways to approach the problem rather than brushing it off as something that was outside my skill set or natural talents.

Good teachers want to become great. However, this aspiration can backfire if teachers feel pressure to have all the answers, all the time. Instead of embracing challenges as learning opportunities, teachers might see difficult situations as a threat to their status as experts. With children, Johnson recommends asking the question, "What problems did you encounter on that project?" This sets up the expectation that there will be problems when we are learning new skills. Asking "Did you have any problems?" can send the opposite message: that problems are unusual because everything should come quickly and easily (Johnson, 2004).



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Similar questions might be asked of teachers. At one staff meeting I attended, the director made a point of asking each teacher to share a joy and a challenge they experienced in their work that month. When experienced teachers admitted to struggling with a problem, a culture of learning developed. This also gave the director an opportunity to follow up with the staff member later, asking questions like, "What do you need to solve that problem?" and "Another teacher had a similar situation; it might be interesting to talk together to see what worked for her," and "Is there something I can do to help?"

In an article, "The Gift of Good Questions," Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach* and founder of The Center for Courage and Renewal, recommends these power questions, "When have you encountered a problem like this before? What resources do you have to meet this challenge?" (Palmer, 2015).

This follow-up line of questioning is important. It reinforces for the teacher that she can find a solution and promotes persistence. This prevents teachers from merely venting their frustrations but failing to take steps to address them. While a growth mindset includes the ability to admit, accept, and seek help, it is balanced by an inner resolve to rise to the challenge. This is the persistence in the growth mindset.

Create a Culture of Experimentation

"Teaching is more like a science experiment than a cookie recipe," says Dr. Deborah Norris, an early education professor with over 20 years' experience as a teacher and director. "In a science experiment, you try a few different things and see what works. When you follow a recipe, you expect it to work perfectly every time. That's not how teaching is." What Dr. Norris points to here is the willingness to embrace failure as a normal part of teaching. Just as Thomas Edison reportedly tried 1,000 versions of the lightbulb before finding one that worked, teachers might try 100 versions of an activity before discovering one that works for a particular group of children at a particular time.

I once planned an interactive story for a group of four year olds that was much too complicated for them. They quickly grew restless and began pretending to be dinosaurs, including roaring and head-butting. Even a quick change of characters to incorporate dinosaurs couldn't rescue the story. I abandoned the activity mid-way through, feeling like a failure for not knowing better in the first place. When I mentioned my frustration to a co-teacher later, she just nodded and laughed. "We've all been there. Next time, you'll know more." Those few words reminded me that failures are a normal part of life and teaching. If we want to grow as teachers, we have to be willing to make mistakes on a regular basis. When mistakes are accepted as

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something that even skilled teachers do, they are more likely to be embraced as learning opportunities.

A culture of experimentation can be supported simply by encouraging teachers to try new things. Often, teachers set goals based on student achievement or personal performance. This happens at staff meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings. Such plans emphasize outcomes like, "Kate will learn to sit with the class at circle time." These types of goals are important. If we are skilled goal setters, we include concrete action steps we will take to accomplish that goal. We can also set goals that emphasize the learning process over the learning outcome. For example, what if each teacher were expected to research and try one new idea each month? Or, if after attending a training event, each teacher was asked to identify one idea he liked and implement it in his classroom for three weeks? In these scenarios, trying a new

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idea becomes the focus, rather than its successful implementation. Of course, the hope is that over time teachers learn a wide variety of skills and new approaches and, therefore, build their skills. However, shifting the focus away

from achievement alone reinforces the experimental nature of good teaching.

Model a Growth Mindset

Just as teachers model skills for children, directors and other leaders can model a growth perspective for their staff. Directors handle multiple questions a day requiring extensive knowledge of various topics. They might handle a call from a prospective parent, visit with the licensing agent, and respond to a vacation request from a teacher all before 8:00 a.m. With so many demands on their time, directors sometimes feel pressured to have all the answers, all the time. However, if we want to create a culture of learning among staff, we must be willing to embrace it ourselves.

Just as children take their cues from teachers and parents, staff members notice how directors and other leaders approach problems. When developing a growth mindset among teachers, the importance of the director's own perspective cannot be overstated. A director who is hard on

herself, hates making mistakes, and emphasizes her role as expert will cultivate teachers who do the same.

Instead, give staff a real window into your world.

Let them see when you are trying new things and create opportunities to ask staff for their input into your work: "I'm trying a new way to structure staff meetings. After the meeting, can we take a few minutes to talk about what worked?"

Use growth vocabulary in talking about your own goals: "I have to talk to an upset parent and I don't know very much about conflict resolution yet. I need a few minutes in my office to do some reading." Or perhaps, "I'm really interested in this new idea I read about. Let's try it for a month and see how it works for us."

These phrases and others like them can make their way into our conversations many times a day. While it requires vulnerability for leaders to admit what they don't know, especially to staff, the pay-off is a community that embraces learning opportunities and develops persistence in addressing challenges.

In Summary

The research about learning mindsets is good news for our field. As we continue to look for ways to improve the quality of care that young children receive, we have another avenue for building teachers' skills. Just as early researchers discovered that intelligence isn't fixed, others have discovered that character traits are not fixed. Not only do we know that teachers can learn new skills, we know that they can learn persistence. By experimenting with some of these methods, directors can shift teachers'

perspectives from fixed to growth mindsets. As this happens, we can expect to find teachers who are more engaged, more passionate, and more confident in their work.

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In Memoriam • Vanessa Ann Rich 1951-2015

by Emmalie Dropkin

The Head Start and early learning community lost a vibrant leader in Vanessa Ann Rich when she passed away on Sunday, December 27, 2015. Born in Monmouth, Illinois, in 1951, Vanessa began her career in early childhood when she wasn't so old herself. In the summer of 1965, the Head Start program launched in her hometown and Mrs. Roby, one of the few African American teachers in town, had the job of running the summer program. As Vanessa described it, her mother sent her on over to volunteer. A high school student at the time, she was responsible for delivering milk cartons to the classrooms and opening them for the children. She was delighted to feel she was contributing to the children's experience and inspired by the sophistication and leadership of the Head Start director — a lasting impression that would shape her life.

Over the next 40 years, Vanessa remained a remarkable early learning advocate — embracing and pursuing professional opportunities that honed her passion to expand opportunity for vulnerable children and families. She served as a Head Start director, trainer, consultant, higher education administrator, and ultimately as Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Family and Support Services for the City of Chicago, where the programs she led provided services to tens of thousands of children each year. Throughout her life, Vanessa saw herself as an advocate. She was present for the creation of the National Head Start Association in the 1980s and was the Chair of NHSA's Board at the time of her passing. She believed in using all the power and access she had to make things happen for children and families in her community, and her political savvy, determination, and positive glee in making change have surely left a permanent mark on the city of Chicago.

At a celebration of Vanessa's life in Washington, DC, a few weeks after her passing, colleagues and friends — and many who were both — remembered Vanessa's exuberant laughter, her spirit and optimism, and the sparkle she had that never flagged. Her son Seth spoke of her as a loving parent and grandparent who influenced his own journey from Head Start child to becoming a teacher and program leader himself.

As part of an interview series conducted several years ago by Dr. Jean Simpson, president of OMEP-USA, Vanessa was asked, "What would you like to be remembered about you?" Here is her answer in her own words:

"Gosh, I don't know. I really don't know. I am blessed. I do have children, I do have grandchildren, and I know that I will always be. And I believe that spiritually... You remember the old African conversation when they talked about the craftsman who spent his entire life building the brick that went into the wall? And he was very happy because he knew that his son would come along and do the next one, and the next one. So he spent his time only crafting the most perfect brick. He didn't need to worry about finishing the wall. Just crafting this brick that was his life. Because the next one would be crafted perfectly, too. So that's the way I look at it. My life is about crafting what I do here perfectly, as best as I can. And the best I can has to be perfect. 'Cause that's what God did. And so when I make my transition, it will carry on. 'Cause I'm standing on somebody else's brick, and they stood on other bricks."