Mindset Practices in the Classroom: How to Effectively Implement a Growth Mindset Pedagogy

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Abstract

Research has shown that students who possess a growth mindset tend to achieve higher levels of success and a greater ability to overcome challenges throughout the course of their academic careers. There exists an abundance of articles that discuss mindset and mindset practices, as well as curriculum designed to teach mindset to young students. After compiling the research that has been done, a set of adaptable guidelines has been designed that will assist educators in implementing a growth mindset pedagogy in their own classroom, regardless of the academic curriculums that they are using. For reference, explicit examples have been included that demonstrate what this pedagogy would look like if used in a first grade classroom. These guidelines will allow educators to instill a mindset in their students that will set them up for future success, regardless of the mindset that the educators themselves possess.
Background

*Growth mindset* is based on the belief that the basic qualities of a person can be changed through time and effort (Dweck, 2008). People are always growing and learning. To a person with a growth mindset, there is no shame in failing because it only means they have more to learn. If a person is good at something, in the growth mindset, it is because they worked really hard at it and still continue to work hard at it (Dweck, 2008). The growth mindset welcomes constructive criticism and feedback, viewing it as a helpful step towards growth. People with a growth mindset seek out challenges and are persistent in their effort to meet that challenge. They celebrate the success of others and view it as inspiration for their own goals.

Conversely, *Fixed mindset* is based on the belief that a person’s basic qualities are set from the time they are born until the time they die (Dweck, 2008). These things cannot change, no matter what. If a person is good at something, it is because they were born with a natural talent, and they did not have to work very hard to achieve success. In the fixed mindset, effort is seen as failure. If somebody has to work hard at something, it is because they are not good at it (Dweck, 2008). A person with a fixed mindset tends to avoid things that will be challenging to them, and when something is challenging, they give up easily. Constructive feedback is usually ignored by a person with a fixed mindset because they are not interested in putting in the effort that would be required to improve. In the fixed mindset, success of others is seen as a threat and is discouraging.

As a teacher, an understanding of mindset is important to have. Some consider growth mindset to be vital to educational settings (Clark & Sousa, 2018). There are educational articles and curriculums available to aid in teaching growth mindset in the classroom. However, these resources mostly place focus on bringing a direct awareness of mindset to the audience, teaching
what growth mindset is and how students can use it in the classroom. This thesis takes a different approach, discussing how growth mindset can be used by educators in their daily feedback and pedagogy. After analyzing the research, this thesis will dictate a set of guidelines and samples that will outline a growth mindset pedagogy. With this new information, educators will be able to gain a fuller understanding of how their work relates to the mindset and how they can adapt to the needs of their students at any level. It will help teachers ranging from kindergarten through post-secondary as they think about how they will approach their students’ learning and foster success in their classroom and beyond.

**Synthesis of the Literature**

**Impact of Growth Mindset**

There are several factors that come into play when analyzing the achievement ability of students. Experiences outside of school, home life, self-confidence, and socioeconomic status are examples of components that play a part in the level that a student is achieving in the classroom. However, mindset may be a factor that influences achievement above all else. In 2016, Susana Claro, David Paunesku, and Carol S. Dweck conducted a study to determine if a growth mindset could mitigate the effects of poverty on student achievement (Claro, et al., 2016). To conduct this study, the researchers looked at 10th grade students in Chile and their results on government administered standardized tests. These standardized tests included questions about mindset based off of Carol Dweck’s guidelines.

Their goal was to determine if there was a pattern between achievement and mindset. Upon analysis of the data, they found that there was, in fact, a strong relationship between the two. Student mindset accounted for 11.8% of variance between average test scores in math and
language arts, while the top level socioeconomic predictor accounted for 11.3% of variance (Claro et al., 2016).

The researchers found that test scores were higher in students who held a growth mindset at all socioeconomic levels. They did consider the fact that high achievement in school could lead to a growth mindset perception, instead of the other way around. However, when they tested for these factors using a student self-assessment that included questions about perceived intelligence, enjoyment of school, and enjoyment of specific subjects, they concluded that feelings of achievement did not lead to the idea that intelligence growth was possible. Students were asked to agree with statements such as “I am smart”, “I am better than the majority of my classmates on mathematics tests”, and “I do well in language arts” (Claro et al, 2016).

Researchers also controlled for student and parent expectations, as well as the enjoyment that students experienced with each subject. With all of these factors controlled, the relationship between mindset and achievement remained significant (Claro et al., 2016).

Furthermore, researchers created a model to determine if their results at the national level were consistent with what they would find at individual schools. After analysis, they found that at 2,339 of the 2,392 schools they sampled in Chile, there was a positive relationship between mindset and achievement.

Finally, researchers sought to investigate mindset as a function of income, along with income and achievement as a function of mindset (Claro et al., 2016). They first assessed whether low socioeconomic status and the systemic barriers that come with that status caused a fixed mindset, and they found that the two were in fact, linked. As income decile increased, so did growth mindset; fixed mindset decreased as income decile increased. Students with the lowest economic status were nearly twice as likely to develop a fixed mindset as students with
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the highest status (Claro et al., 2016). Researchers also found that students who possessed a growth mindset consistently outperformed those with a fixed mindset. Additionally, students in the lowest socioeconomic class who possessed a growth mindset were performing at or above the levels of students in the highest socioeconomic class who possessed a fixed mindset. This is not to say that mindset can overcome socioeconomic barriers placed on students, but it may imply that possessing a growth mindset can help fill in a portion of the achievement gap that is seen in schools.

Effects of Praise

The way that people are praised, both in the classroom and in the workplace, can be linked to mindset (Dweck, 2008). One study looked at the effects of praise on adults in the workplace (Reaves, 2018). It discussed person-focused praise (broken into two categories – person-focused intelligence and person-focused effort) like “you are smart” or “you are a hard worker,” and effort-focused praise such as “you worked hard”. The person-focused praise is similar to the fixed mindset in that it fosters the idea that a person’s performance is based on a specific quality of that person. In contrast, the effort-focused praise is similar to the growth mindset belief system, where success is a product of effort. Effort-focused praise bases the outcome on the steps that were taken to get there, not the person who performed the steps. The study asked participants, following performance feedback, to attribute their performance to effort or intelligence, along with other factors irrelevant to mindset. They also rated their levels of persistence, enjoyment, and perceived success following the task. Upon analysis of the data, researchers found that the adults who received the “hard worker” type of praise had a less positive post-failure outcome (Reaves, 2018). They discussed that one reason for this could depend on how the adults approached challenge. Did they view it as an opportunity to learn a
new skill, or as an opportunity to outperform others (Reaves, 2018)? The former aligns with the growth mindset, as it focuses on the ability to grow and improve; the latter aligns with fixed mindset and the idea of competition and feeling threatened by the success of others. Another reason for the negative outcomes could be the meaning that adults attach to praise (Reaves, 2018). Researchers noted that some adults could view “hard worker” as a term that is used when “intelligent” is not applicable (Reaves, 2018). If this theory is correct, it highlights the importance of building a growth mindset in individuals when they are children. If the adults had a growth mindset background, they would likely not attach a negative connotation to “hard worker” feedback. Instead, they would view it as a success because they would find value in hard work. Researchers did not detect the mindset of each participant prior to the study, but it would have been beneficial to do so. It could be the case that the mindset of the performer impacted the way the feedback was received more than which type of feedback was given.

**Mindset in the Classroom**

In his essay titled “Towards a Growth Mindset in Assessment,” Geoff N Masters, of the Australian Council for Educational Research, discusses several approaches that educators may take when assessing students and providing feedback. The first approach is to provide students with ample opportunity to succeed. If students are succeeding, they will find more joy in learning, build more confidence in the classroom, and be more engaged in the learning. It is believed that this will lead to greater success at other tasks as well. However, there are risks associated with this approach. Educators may be minimizing the amount that students can actually learn by only giving them tasks that they are able to do successfully. Vygotsky’s *Zone of Proximal Development* (1978) suggests that students learn the most when they are given tasks that are just outside of their independent ability level. Masters’ second approach discusses the
specification of standards for students to achieve. If students are being judged against specific standards, the idea is that they will be meeting higher expectations, thus performing at a higher level. However, due to the wide range of ability levels that are present in a given classroom, this approach holds the same risks as the first. The third approach, which fits into the growth mindset framework, is to assess student growth over a period of time. In this approach, goals are set for each individual student based on where they begin. The focus is no longer on what standard students should be meeting, but instead shifts to promoting a certain level of growth in every student. This approach allows educators to set expectations that are appropriate for each student and will get each child into their Zone of Proximal Development as they learn. This aligns with the idea of differentiation, which is vital to a classroom setting. Educators must possess an awareness of the students in their class and at what level each student is achieving. From there, assignments and lessons can be adapted to need the needs of students at different levels. Doing away with standards and assessing the growth in every student expands upon differentiation and creates an education that is truly catered to the student.

Understanding the importance of growth mindset in an educational setting is not enough. In their article, Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) discussed the origins of children’s mindsets based on prior research that they had collected and analyzed. They found that even when adults themselves possessed a growth mindset, that did not mean it was being passed down to the children that they interacted with. They discussed that, especially when interacting with children with lower self-esteem, adults tend to revert first to boosting children’s confidence which can have fixed mindset implications. If educators wish to be successful in cultivating a growth mindset in children, they must focus less on fixing children’s self-esteem, and more on guiding children to understand that effort is more important than outcome.
Guidelines

These guidelines are adapted from the core features of growth mindset pedagogy in basic education, as laid out by Rissanen et al. (2018). Based on prior studies conducted by the researchers, the core features show the components that are needed in order for a growth mindset pedagogy to be present. Those features have been compiled into nine guidelines for educators to follow in order to implement a growth mindset pedagogy in their classroom. This set is adaptable to any level of students in any school setting.

1. **Be process focused**

   As students are working towards success, educators must focus praise on the work that they are doing rather than the individual student. Instead of telling a student that they did a good job or that they are smart, they need to be told that the work they are doing is great. This instills the belief in students that the process they are taking part in is what matters most, not the result.

2. **Focus on your academically “competent” students as well as those who are low achieving**

   Many teachers can fall into the habit of focusing on nurturing their academically low students, while neglecting their higher achieving students. These higher achievers tend to fall into the fixed mindset because they are not confronted with challenges as often as their peers. This sets students up for extreme difficulty once they reach a level at which they are not automatically competent. These students will not have the same coping skills as their peers and will have difficulty overcoming challenges at a higher age.

3. **Demonstrate failure and how to cope**
It is important for students to see examples of failure being acceptable and expected. Just as teachers demonstrate academic concepts, they should also be demonstrating the development of a growth mindset. When students see an adult that they trust failing, accepting the failure, and working through it, they will be encouraged to do the same with their own failures and challenges. Educators need to celebrate their own failures with their students, talking through the process of accepting the failure and developing a plan to move forward.

4. Create opportunity for students to fail

Students should feel successful in the classroom, but it is crucial that teachers also provide opportunity for students to fail in a safe way. This goes beyond giving students tasks that will challenge them. Providing failure opportunity means that when students are tasked with something that is difficult for them, educators are not immediately available for help. In some cases, educators may not be available for help at all. Students must be responsible for working through their challenge, and they may not always come to a solution. The focus is on developing a process for overcoming challenges rather than reaching an immediate answer.

5. Praise the use of strategies and effort when students are successful

While there is plenty of room for failure in a growth mindset classroom, there is also still plenty of room to celebrate success and boost the confidence of students. However, this needs to be done in a tactful way. When praising students’ success, remain focused on how they reached their solution, rather than what the solution was. This can be done even when students do not reach the “correct answer”. If they used taught strategies or put in a lot of effort, make note of that and praise the student for their process in reaching a solution. Validating the hard work that
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a student has put in, regardless of the outcome, emphasizes the idea that effort is valuable and good.

6. Emphasize the idea of learning how to learn

Students must be invested in learning as a process, not learning as a means to reach an answer. Fostering a love of the learning process not only helps students deal with potential failure, but sets them up for a successful future. If students are invested in learning, they will be able to better handle situations in which they do not get “the answer”. If they are fulfilled by the learning itself, they will be willing to explore other options without feelings of inadequacy. Likewise, giving students the tool of learning to learn gives them the ability to reach their fullest potential later in life. They will be able to overcome setbacks and continue towards their goals because they will understand the value of the learning process.

7. Be persistent

Students who possess a fixed mindset will be challenging to teachers trying to implement growth mindset practices. They will have a difficult time dealing with failure, they may not enjoy learning, and they will take setbacks personally. It is important for the educator not to give in to a student’s resistance. If a student is consistently exposed to the growth mindset, they will be more likely to shift their own beliefs. However, this change will not happen quickly. It may be the case that throughout the course of a school year, the educator may not even see the change in the student. The effort on the part of the educator is not wasted if the message is delivered in a clear, persistent way that the student will be able to understand and further develop on their own as they continue their school career.

8. Focus on individual interactions and complete understanding of students
Individual interactions with students allow educators to provide more personalized and meaningful praise. This gives students a greater sense of confidence in themselves and helps them develop an internal monologue that is growth mindset based. It also helps students gain a sense of trust in the educator, which will make them more willing to fail when the opportunity presents itself. While the growth mindset should be present when educators are praising a class as a whole, the main focus should be in individual and personal interactions.

9. Avoid judgement of students

Labeling a child based on their academic, social, or emotional performance puts a barrier on that student’s potential, whether the educator intends to do so or not. Implementation of a growth mindset requires a judgement-free environment in order to be successful. No matter where a child begins the school year, the educator must believe that there is an unlimited amount of room for growth. They must instill that belief in the child by avoiding any judgement or labeling.

**Implementation samples**

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<tr>
<th>Implementation of Guidelines at the first grade level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Be process focused</td>
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<td><strong>Scenario:</strong> Students have been working for several days on writing pieces that are going to be published for others to read. Students have gone through the parts of the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Their teacher is circling the room during</td>
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the writing block and offering feedback to students. She notices that a student has finished his writing piece with several errors and offers that student some feedback.

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<td>The teacher says to this student: “This book still needs work. Go back and check all of the words closely.”</td>
<td>The teacher says: “I can tell you worked really hard to listen to the parts of the words you were spelling. There are still some things that need to be fixed, but you should be proud of how focused you were while writing!”</td>
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</table>

In this example, the teacher is offering helpful feedback to the student. However, the feedback is strictly focused on the product that the student created and fails to acknowledge the work that went into the writing. This promotes the idea that putting in effort is not worth it unless the outcome is ideal.

Here, the teacher is still noting that the work is not fully meeting expectations. However, she is focusing on the process based work that the student did, placing emphasis on the effort that went into creating the finished piece. This lets the student know that even though the outcome wasn’t perfect, the effort is what is most important.

2. Focus on your academically “competent” students as well as those who are low achieving

Scenario: Students are learning a new math concept and are given time, following direct instruction, to practice on their own. All students are working on the same activity with a
partner of their choice. One set of partners is made up of two students who tend to perform at or above grade level in all academic areas. They finish their math work before any of the other partnerships and have all of the answers correct.

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<td>To fill the extra time, the teacher gives students a simple task that they can perform on their own that will review a concept that they have already learned.</td>
<td>The teacher has additional materials prepared that are more difficult for the students, but are still focused on the same topic.</td>
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<td>Given that these students finished so quickly, it can be assumed that the first task was not challenging for them. By then asking these students to do another simple concept with their extra time, the teacher is strengthening their idea that learning is easy and they don’t have to put in effort. This is setting students up for extreme difficulty as soon as they encounter a concept that is challenging because they are not being exposed to challenge regularly.</td>
<td>By giving students a more challenging task, the teacher is exposing these students to the idea that it does take effort to learn. Regularly requiring effort of high achieving students can be difficult because the activities that appropriately challenge their peers will not challenge them in the same way. It is important for the teacher to have something else prepared that can expand on student thinking, even if that means they are working beyond their peers.</td>
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### 3. Demonstrate failure and how to cope

**Scenario:** A teacher is demonstrating how to write a book review to her class. She has taught students all of the parts that they need to write a review, and now she plans to show them how to put all of those parts together to create a finished piece. Students have been given tools to keep in their writing folders, and several anchor charts have been created as a class and hung up around the room for reference.

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<td>The teacher says to the students: “Okay, students, now that you know all of the parts that we need to write a review, it’s time to put them all together!” She then goes on to write her review seamlessly, in the correct order, with no mechanical errors. After she is finished, she sends students to try it on their own.</td>
<td>As the teacher enters her lesson for the day, she has half of a sample review written. She says to students “Class, I took all of the parts that we have learned and I did the next step, which is to put them together to write a full review. When I got part way through though, I felt like giving up. It was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I think I need your help coming up with tools that I can use to help me keep writing!” She then asked students for suggestions on how she could persevere and finish her writing piece.</td>
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By demonstrating the writing in this way, the teacher is sending the message that doing the work is easy, and there is little effort that is required. This can cause students to become frustrated as they begin to write and realize that the process is, in fact, challenging for them.

In this example, the teacher emphasizes the fact that writing can be hard work. She shares feelings of frustration with her students and allows them to see her struggling. She then offers the opportunity for students to think through ways to overcome feelings of failure. By doing this in a whole group format, she welcomes the opportunity for discussion and allows students to see that others don’t view failure as a negative, but rather an obstacle to overcome.

4. Create opportunity for students to fail

*Scenario:* A teacher gives his students a STEM challenge that he knows will be difficult for them. He makes the goal of the challenge clear, but does not offer very much guidance as to how to reach that goal. As students are working, one student comes up to the teacher to ask for help. She is visibly frustrated and tells him that she does not want to try anymore.

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<td>The teacher says to her: “Why don’t I come help you get back on track.” He then works side by side with the student and talks through</td>
<td>The teacher asks: “What have you tried so far?” He listens to her response and then offers an alternate route that she could take,</td>
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</table>
her thinking with her, helping her come up with new ideas and strategies to try.

Here, the teacher is too readily available for help. This can promote learned helplessness in children and discourage them from working through failure on their own. They will be unable to use failure as an opportunity to try something else, and instead view failure as defeat.

In this example, the teacher does still offer assistance to the student; however, he limits his guidance to one tip and then requires the student to continue working on her own. This student may not be equipped with a growth mindset yet, but by offering her only a small piece of guidance, the teacher is helping her develop the idea that growth is possible in the face of failure.

### 5. Praise the use of strategies and effort when students are successful

**Scenario:** Students have been learning different ways to decode words as they are reading. Some of the strategies that the class already knows include looking at the pictures in the book, thinking about what word would make sense in the spot of an unknown word, and using similar looking words to help them. As a teacher is reading with one student, she notices that he reads an entire book fluently and accurately.

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“You have become a really great reader! You read that book so smoothly and read all of the words correctly.”

The praise in this example is very positive, but focuses on the outcome that the student produced. Praising success in this way strengthens the fixed mindset by discounting the work that went in to create the final product.

“I can tell that you have worked hard and really practiced using our reading strategies to help you become a strong reader!”

This praise celebrates the success of the student by focusing on the work that had been done by the student prior to this reading. The teacher notices that the student used taught strategies and highlights the importance of that through the praise.

6. Emphasize the idea of learning how to learn

Scenario: A teacher is reviewing the concept of addition with his students. He displays the equation “5+3=___” on the board and asks students how to solve it. One student raises his hand and says “The answer is 8.”

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<td>The teacher responds, “Yes, that is correct!” and moves on to the next problem on the board.</td>
<td>The teacher responds, “That is the right answer, but let’s make sure we understand how you got to the answer. What strategy did you use?”</td>
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By simply validating the correctness of the answer and moving on, the teacher has missed the opportunity to emphasize the importance of the learning that took place which allowed students to understand the concept of addition.

By asking the student to share his thought process, the teacher places emphasis on the importance of the actual learning rather than on the answer. After the student shares his ideas, the teacher may then open the conversation for more ways that the problem could have been solved. This takes the value off of getting the correct answer and places emphasis on all of the different ways that the students are learning and then using their learning to reach a solution.

7. Be persistent

Scenario: A student and teacher are having a conversation during snack time. The student mentions that she is the smartest in the class because math is easy for her. This is not the first time that this student has made a comment like this. The teacher knows that math does come easily to this student, but that she performs averagely in writing and reading. Last time the teacher tried to instill growth mindset in this student, she was met with resistance and ended up leaving the conversation frustrated.

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By asking the student to share his thought process, the teacher places emphasis on the importance of the actual learning rather than on the answer. After the student shares his ideas, the teacher may then open the conversation for more ways that the problem could have been solved. This takes the value off of getting the correct answer and places emphasis on all of the different ways that the students are learning and then using their learning to reach a solution.
“You’re right, you are smart at math.”

Here, the teacher simply agrees with the student’s fixed mindset. Given that this is not the first time this has happened, the teacher likely does not want to get into an argument with this student and finds it easier to just agree. This can be a typical response from adults in this situation, either because they aren’t sure how to respond or because they don’t want to appear to be arguing with the student. This is a disservice to the student because it instills the belief that being “smart” requires no effort.

“You work very hard in math. Actually, all of the kids in our class work hard every day! It makes me so happy.”

In this response, the teacher acknowledges the student’s success in math by attributing it to hard work. This helps strengthen the growth mindset and the idea that succeeding is a result of effort. She also negates the idea that this student is the “smartest” by acknowledging the hard work that other students in the class do as well. It is important for the teacher to respond in a similar way every time this student makes a comment like this so that she can try to build this student’s growth mindset.

| 8. Focus on individual interactions and complete understanding of students |

**Scenario:** A teacher is developing the small groups that she will work with during reading time. She typically sets her groups based on reading level so that she will have an entire group with the same ability. She does not have a specific size for her groups, and will take as many students as she can fit at her table.
### Fixed mindset feedback

This year, she continues with this format for reading groups. It is what she is comfortable with and even though she knows it doesn’t give her a lot of individual time with students, she still wants to stick with the format and instruct the whole group together.

With groups organized this way, the teacher is not able to focus on the needs of each student. She may end up challenging some students to the point of frustration, while failing to challenge others and making them feel like the learning is easy.

### Growth mindset feedback

This year, she decides to switch how her groups are organized so that she can offer more individual feedback to each student. She makes her groups smaller, with each containing only three students – one needing little support, one needing a medium amount, and one needing lots of support.

By organizing groups this way, the teacher sets herself up to be able to focus on each individual student as opposed to the whole group. The students may have different goals, but will be able to have a fair amount of time working with the teacher individually on their goals.

### 9. Avoid judgement of students

_Scenario:_ It is the second week of school, and a teacher is starting to do some activities with his students to get a baseline for their learning. He has students respond to a writing prompt,
solve some math problems, and he listens to them read. When looking through the results of each activity, he notices that several students are performing below grade level in all areas.

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<td>The teacher makes note of these students and decides that</td>
<td>The teacher notes the achievement levels of these students</td>
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<td>they will need the most support.</td>
<td>for his records and sets goals for their growth.</td>
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<td>They likely don’t get extra help at home, and they will</td>
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<td>be challenging to work with.</td>
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<tr>
<td>By judging these students based off of their scores, the</td>
<td>By simply setting goals and avoiding any judgement based</td>
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<tr>
<td>teacher unintentionally sets a barrier for their growth.</td>
<td>on scores, the teacher is allowing students the freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>He will likely not push these students as hard because he</td>
<td>to grow and to meet the goals he sets. He will not have any</td>
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<tr>
<td>has the idea in the back of his mind that they will not</td>
<td>limitations in his mind as he works with them, and will be</td>
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<td>reach the goals he sets for them.</td>
<td>able to nurture all of his students with the same beliefs.</td>
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**Conclusion**

Educators must be aware of how they are interacting with children on a daily basis. Haimovitz & Dweck (2017) found that even adults who possess a growth mindset themselves may not be passing that quality on to the children that they are intending to. Operating under a growth mindset pedagogy takes active effort on the part of the educator at all times. The results
of this effort will benefit children tremendously by helping them see the value in hard work, encouraging them to seek challenge, and setting them up for future academic success.
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References


