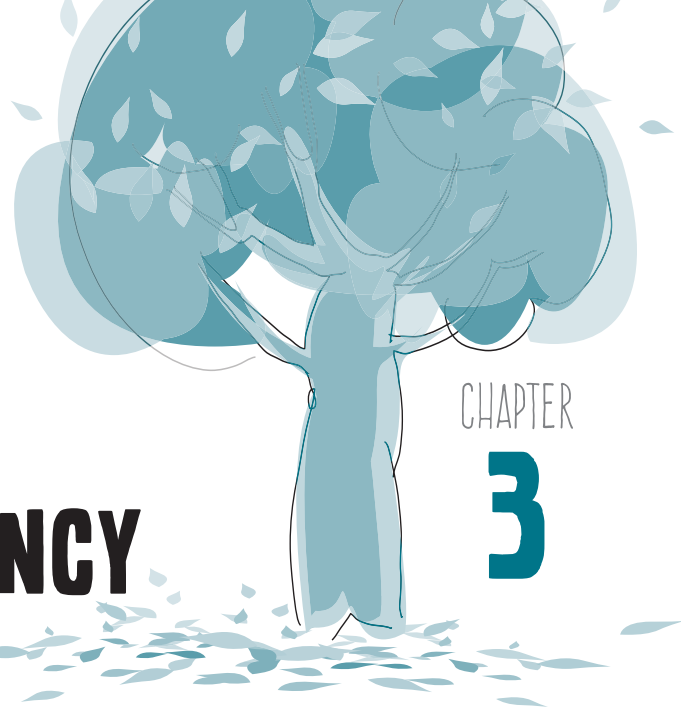


CREATING STUDENT AGENCY THROUGH SELF-EFFICACY AND GROWTH MINDSET



CHAPTER 3

*All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

—Samuel Beckett

●●● “I THINK I CAN. I THINK I CAN” AND AGENCY

When recalling the familiar children’s story *The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930), most people remember the famous line “I think I can. I think I can.” Some use that phrase as a model for positive thinking. And while it is true that the little engine needed positive thinking, something deeper was going on. The little engine had a resolute belief that she really could pull those heavily loaded cars of toys over the mountain. She had a profound conviction that if she exerted enough effort, she could accomplish this major feat. If she had not first believed

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she could actually do it, it is doubtful she ever would have been able to summon the amount of effort it took to accomplish her task. The little engine had *self-efficacy* (the learner's belief that she has the skills it takes to reach a goal).

It should also be noted that the little engine had a plan of action. She assessed the problem, thought about what skills she possessed, and devised a means to achieve her goal (putting her self-efficacy into action).

On the way down the other side of the mountain, the little engine fortified her assuredness with the self-message "I thought I could. I thought I could" (buttressing her self-efficacy by reflecting on what worked and what did not).

The little engine also evidenced a *growth mindset* (a frame of mind that values effort and learning from mistakes). The little engine did not succeed on her first try, but she was willing to keep working and make incremental progress.

Having self-efficacy, planning and taking action, reflecting on learning, and having a growth mindset are all instrumental to long-term student success. Researchers refer to this composite set of essential skills as *agency*.

While uplifting message posters, T-shirts, cheers, and mantras in the classroom can certainly reinforce positive belief systems, they need to be undergirded with an intrinsically held confidence of the learner and a plan of action—*student agency*. Not only did the little engine "think she could," she acted with what we might refer to as "little engine agency." ●

Agency is what allows students to take an active role in shaping their future, rather than being solely influenced by their circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Student agency includes a capacity for self-efficacy but also requires the intentional forethought to set a course of action and adjust it as needed to fulfill one's goal (Bandura, 2001). In writing about this very important concept, educators and researchers at the University of Chicago stated, "This definition of agency acknowledges that external factors form very real constraints, and also that people have the will and the power to influence external factors and can make choices about how to respond to constraints" (Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015, p. 14). In other words, students can be empowered to Thrive through guidance on how to control those aspects of their lives they can change.

A Harvard study, sponsored by the Raikes Foundation, suggests that *student agency* may be as critical to outcomes of schooling as basic academic skills (Vander Ark, 2015). In this chapter, we explore two dynamic components of student agency: self-efficacy and growth mindset. A student's value system is also associated with his sense of agency, and we examine that proficiency in Chapter 7.

Self-Efficacy: What Is It?

"Efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (Bandura, 1993, p. 118). Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy will work harder, try longer, overcome greater obstacles, and bounce back more quickly from setbacks than their less self-efficacious peers. Students with self-efficacy are more likely to engage in tasks they feel confident in completing successfully and tend to withdraw from tasks for which they lack such confidence.

Self-efficacy affects

- The choices we make
- The effort we put forth (how hard we try)
- Our perseverance (how long we persist when we confront obstacles)
- Our resilience (how quickly we recover from failure or setbacks) (Silver, 2012) ●

HOW CAN STUDENTS EXPAND SELF-EFFICACY?

Bandura (1985) describes four chief ways he thinks students gain self-efficacy:

1. **Mastery of learning experiences.** Providing opportunities for genuine competency and a sense of earned accomplishment is a strong way to boost students' self-efficacy. Using carefully designed lesson strategies that stretch students' abilities is also an excellent way to structure and reinforce it.
2. **Vicarious experiences.** Observing or reading about more accomplished peers or role models with whom they can relate is a secondary way for students to add to feelings of self-efficacy.
3. **Verbal persuasion.** Though generally not as effective as the first two methods, providing guidance and feedback can boost students' sense of control.
4. **Physical and emotional states.** Each of these can influence perceptions both positively and negatively. Emotions are formidable and can have a spiraling effect. In maintaining a stress-free classroom, a teacher can help students learn to regulate their moods (e.g., mindfulness). Teachers can also encourage good health habits in their students.

Annie Murphy Paul (2013) contends that a feeling of hopefulness can lead students to try harder and persist longer if it is paired with practical plans for achieving their goals. Together with a teacher, they formulate a plan ahead of time for how they will proceed when (and if) their original plans don't work out as expected. This implementation planning (as discussed in Chapter 2) is a valuable strategy for students who are easily discouraged or hesitant to try new things.

Self-Efficacy: What Is It Not? (Learned Helplessness)

A learner with little or no self-efficacy often manifests *learned helplessness*. We sometimes think of these students as Eeyore, the gloomy little donkey from the *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories. Students with Eeyore-like characteristics are generally passive pessimists who

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consistently evidence a victim mentality. They believe they have no power over what goes on around them, and nothing they do contributes to their success or lack of it. In 1965, Martin Seligman and Steven Maier (see Seligman, 1990) did experiments at the University of Pennsylvania, which led them to originate the term *learned helplessness*. In experiments with dogs, they showed that they could influence dogs to behave in a powerless manner and, therefore, proved the dogs' helplessness was learned. They went on to conclude that helplessness in students is generally learned behavior and can be *unlearned* under the purposeful intentional attention of educators (Seligman, 1975).

In her book *Fall Down 7 Times, Get Up 8*, Silver (2012) identifies several intentional ways teachers and parents can help students *unlearn* their helpless dispositions:

Self-efficacy is bolstered when a student achieves something previously thought unattainable. Overcoming initial failure is a powerful incentive for further pursuits. We should provide students with numerous examples of ordinary people who have become extraordinary by overcoming failure repeatedly. We ought to model for them how to learn from missteps and how to stay true to their goals. We have to help students understand that their efforts and their choices make a tremendous difference in outcomes. (pp. 4–5)

On the next page are some suggestions for working with students who lack self-efficacy.

In addition to implementing these tips to enhance self-efficacy, try to avoid certain traditional practices that tend to diminish self-efficacy such as placing too much emphasis on direct instruction or comparing students with each other. Instead, try using instructional approaches like the workshop model, project-based learning, and inquiry-based instruction. These styles are focused on direct experience and lend themselves to a responsive teaching model that is more student centered.

Aim for the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Silver (2012), Tomlinson (2001), Weiner (1980), and others advise that self-efficacy is optimized when students are asked to work

CLASSROOM TIPS

Enhancing Self-Efficacy

1. Help students understand that everyone has problems, fears, failures, and self-doubt. Share stories about people like those who have overcome similar or even harsher circumstances.
2. Help learners attribute their success or lack of it to internal rather than external causes and show them how they have power over the results.
3. Treat students' successes as though they are normal, not an isolated example or a fluke.
4. Help learners seek alternate paths to success when they encounter a roadblock or setback.
5. Help students learn the difference between hard work and strategic effort.
6. Continually reinforce the idea that the students can work on things within their control, like effort and choices, and they can always control those parts of their lives.
7. Concentrate on improvement rather than on a finite goal. Give frequent feedback on progress towards the goal.
8. Keep the learner operating in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Tasks that are too easy or too difficult will squash motivation.
9. Help students understand that intelligence and talent are not permanent entities. They can be incrementally improved in everyone.
10. Use feedback that is specific, constructive, and task specific. (Silver, 2012, pp. 61–64)

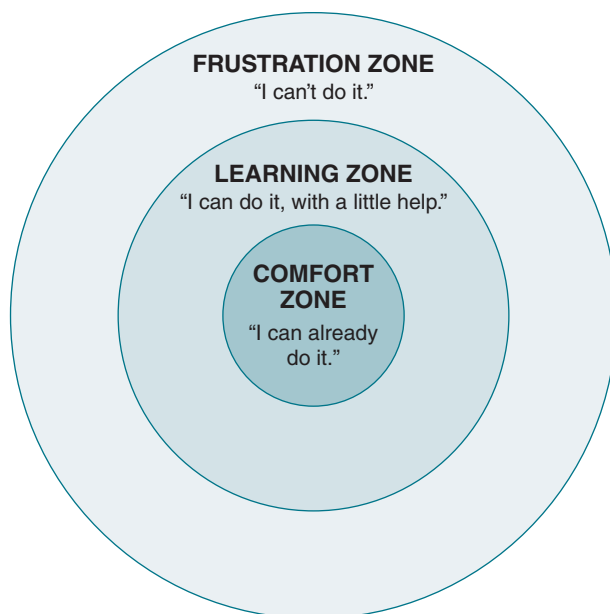
within their *zone of proximal development* (ZPD; see Figure 3.1). Lev Vygotsky (1980) developed his theory that students thrive in the sweet spot of engagement between what they can do easily without help and what challenges their present capabilities. It is important for teachers to regulate tasks and offer needed assistance (when necessary) so that an activity is not so difficult the student will lose interest or confidence.

Working within a student's ZPD (where she is pushed but not overwhelmed) is a major key to building self-efficacy and—eventually—student agency. By understanding what students are able to achieve alone as well as what they are able to achieve with assistance from an adult, educators can develop plans to teach skills in the most effective manner, gradually encouraging students to perform tasks independently. This process is referred to as *scaffolding*, which is the way in which an adult helps the child

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Figure 3.1

Zone of Proximal Development



learner move incrementally from not yet being able to perform a task to being able to do so without help.

As teachers, we have all seen each of these children in our classrooms:

- Learners who are operating in the **Comfort Zone** are students who complete the independent assignment while the teacher is still introducing the lesson. They are unmotivated and often bored in class. Children who are always operating in this zone never learn what challenge feels like. When they reach the inevitable place where learning is no longer comfortable or easy, they often experience diminished self-efficacy and an inability to move forward.
- Learners who are operating in the **Learning Zone (Vygotsky's ZPD)** are students who have that lightbulb moment in class. They struggle, but it is a good struggle. The teacher is there to act as a facilitator and help them *right the course* as they learn. They are engaged, on task, and after a little

success eager to try the next problem or challenge on their own. The new information is resonating, and they are applying it in ways that are meaningful while gaining confidence with each new step. All children, despite their ability level, deserve to be working in their Learning Zone. This experience is what fuels the fire of learning and propels them to the next challenge.

- Learners who are operating in the **Frustration Zone** are students who feel like the pace of the classroom is too fast or the demands are too stringent. Students around them seem to know the answers while they are still struggling to understand the question. In a classroom setting, these children are often *carried along* by teachers or other students, and no real learning is happening. These students often exhibit learned helplessness and simply stop engaging out of frustration or fear of looking dumb.

Students' Beliefs About Success (Attribution Theory)

One of the major considerations in determining student self-efficacy and student agency is how learners view their success or their lack of it. Do they attribute the result to external factors such as the difficulty of the task, an innate ability, talent, or luck? Or do they attribute the result to the amount of effort they did or did not put in? When people attribute their task success or failure to factors that are external, they are essentially giving away their power. They say things like this:

“Oh, I aced that test because it was easy.”

“Well, if I had a better teacher, I would not have missed all those problems.”

“Of course I didn't do well on that project. I'm not an artist!”

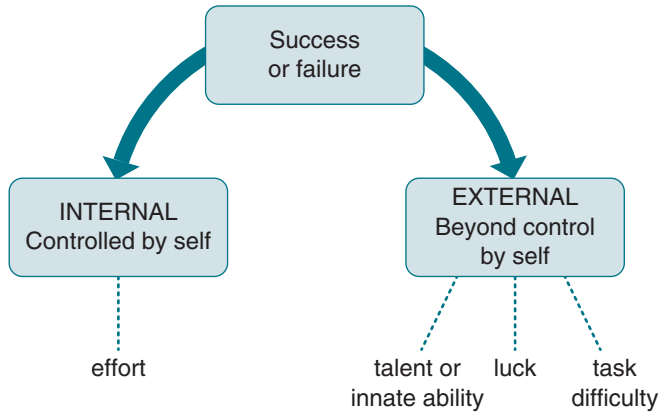
“That tryout was a piece of cake. I've always been good at this.”

“Well, yeah, if my mom helped me with my homework, I might make good grades, too.”

“I did well in the game because I'm lucky enough to have athletics in my genes.”

Figure 3.2

Attribution Theory



As long as students can point to external causes for their success or lack of it, they can deny their own responsibility for making good choices and putting in the amount of required effort. They can remain in a state of learned helplessness. If, however, students are taught to ascribe results (positive or negative) largely to their effort and their choices, they assume control over their destiny and develop self-efficacy. Attribution theory (see Figure 3.2) has been significant in shaping its successor, growth mindset.

USING ATTRIBUTION THEORY TO BUILD STUDENT AGENCY

In order to reinforce self-efficacy, teachers who are attentive to attribution theory make changes in the way they give feedback. Figure 3.3 shows some examples of small but very significant changes in wording that put the learner back in control.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindsets

Growth Mindset (Incremental Theory): A set of beliefs that suggest one can grow and develop intelligence and skills needed for success. People with a growth mindset focus on how they can get better.

Figure 3.3

Build Self-Efficacy With Words

FROM	“Wow, you aced the test! You are so smart!”	TO	“Wow, you aced the test! All your extra effort to study certainly paid off!”
FROM	“I don’t want you to feel bad about losing. Maybe this sport is not your thing.”	TO	“Nobody likes to lose. That’s not a good feeling. So what did you learn from what happened today? What can you do to get the results you want next time?”
FROM	“Count yourself lucky to be so talented. You are so blessed.”	TO	“It is obvious that you care a great deal about your craft. Tell me how you have managed to make such progress.”
FROM	“Don’t worry about your grade on the project. That was a hard assignment.”	TO	“It looks like you are disappointed in your score on that project. Let’s talk about some of the choices you made that left you in this position.”
FROM	“Oh, look how fast you finished. I guess this task was too easy for you.”	TO	“You are already through? You must have been really prepared and focused.”

Fixed Mindset (Entity Theory): A set of beliefs that suggest a person has a predetermined amount of intelligence, talents, or skills. People with a fixed mindset focus on how they look compared to others.

Carol Dweck, who began her career as an attribution theorist, took her research one step further to develop one of the most influential theories in current education, *mindset theory*. Mindsets are a group of beliefs and attitudes about oneself, the external world, and the interaction between the two. They are the filters through which individuals process everyday experiences. Mindsets are an outgrowth of self-efficacy and a subset of student agency. Though mindsets are malleable, they tend to persist until they are disrupted and replaced with a different attitude or belief.

Growth Mindset/Fixed Mindset Preassessment

Activity

This is an activity to get a quick overview of students' beliefs regarding growth mindset. The teacher stands in front of a line of students who face her standing one behind the other. As she reads each statement, students can do one of the following:

- Step to their right to indicate "I agree"
- Step to their left to indicate "I disagree"
- Stay in the line to indicate "I am not sure"

The teacher notes the choices and asks the students to step back in line (or remain in line) to listen to the next statement.

Sample Statements:

1. It is actually possible to get smarter.
2. Once a failure, always a failure.
3. Some kids are born smarter than others.
4. If you can't sing by now, you will never be able to.
5. Some people have all the luck.
6. Working hard is for people who are not gifted or talented.
7. If I set my mind to something, I can usually make it happen.
8. The smartest kids make the best grades.
9. Making a mistake means you do not know what you are doing.
10. Real pros are those who no longer make mistakes.

A student's mindset about whether she can or cannot learn has a direct effect on her academic perseverance. Our learners need a growth mindset in order to have agency. Students also need to understand that struggle is part of learning and that it is ultimately a worthwhile endeavor. When students hold a fixed mindset, they try to circumvent challenge and struggle as a way to avoid failure, and too often they are overly concerned with others seeing them struggle or fail (Farrington et al., 2012). Students with a strong growth mindset

can struggle, fail, and face challenges while working toward a long-term goal more successfully than students who have a fixed mindset (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011).

We have observed both struggling and highly accomplished students deny the fact that they tried hard or put in a lot of effort. They seem to believe that trying hard is evidence that they are not as talented or as gifted as others. This belief is one indication of a fixed mindset. They need “plausible deniability” for coming up short, so they tell everyone (including themselves) that the task was unworthy of their effort. However, students with a growth mindset understand that even geniuses have to work very hard for their achievements, and they feel gratification in striving for their goals.

Classrooms that focus on productive effort more than on finished products help students feel they have more agency. Teachers who value valiant attempts, risk taking, and perseverance more than perfection also provide a place for students to feel safe about taking control of their learning. In such classrooms, failure is seen as an event, not an outcome. Failure can even be celebrated! For a fun example of this, see the *Meet the Robinsons* video clip in the Resources section on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com).

Effective teachers create a classroom environment that values learning as a journey and requires effort, choice, and reflection. They promote and grow learners who have control over their own experiences. We suggest making it possible for students to “fail forward.” If students fail a quiz or a test, consider allowing them the option of completing a reflection sheet and attaching it to the failed assessment to gain a chance to retake the test (or a similar version) to raise the grade. Reflection question possibilities include (1) When you finished the test, how did you think you did? (2) Explain how you prepared for the test. Be specific. (3) If you got another chance to take this test, what would you do differently? Why? (4) What have you learned from this experience? See Activity Sheet 3.1, “Redo Request,” on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com).

How Do We Help Students Develop Growth Mindsets?

Mindsets are hard to shift and shape, and like all new habits, shifting to a growth-oriented mindset takes practice and rehearsal. As discussed in Chapter 2, a good starting point is for teachers to

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make the time to teach students about the basic physiology of the brain and explain how it works. Students can understand that exercising the brain will help them become better learners. Offering challenges that stretch students in a safe environment is one way to reinforce how people learn differently and at varying rates. We offer several ideas for teaching about the brain in the Resources section on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com) and in the Thrive Skills in Action section at the end of Chapter 2.

It bears noting that teaching growth mindsets is a relatively new concept in education. Currently, educators are trying new ideas, many are writing about it, and a few are trying to find ways to assess it (we hope they proceed very carefully with that). There are some problems in schools that profess to be focused on growth mindset but still maintain routines and policies that are extremely fixed. There are teachers who claim to be committed to growth mindset but conduct their classrooms like autocrats and still praise kids for being smart and talented and compliant. As with all unfamiliar territories, there is always room for—pardon the pun—growth. Teacher and author of the blog *The Accidental English Teacher* Cheryl Mizerny (2015) writes about some of these problems, but she sums it up with what she likes about growth mindset:

What Is Good About Growth Mindset Instruction

1. **It is not summed up by a grade.** Teachers tell students they should grow from their mistakes. Rather than mark an *F* on an assignment and dismiss the student, the teacher uses something like “Not there yet” and helps the learner work to complete the task.
2. **It is not a now-or-never experience.** Teachers revisit ideas and concepts to make sure that students are making progress toward their goals.
3. **It is not a race to the finish.** Teachers encourage collaboration and inquiry rather than speed and competition. The goal is for growth rather than perfection.
4. **It is not about intimidation.** Teachers create safe classrooms where students are encouraged to try new things, test new ideas, and understand that everyone’s journey is important.
5. **It does not foster lazy assessment practices.** Teachers do not just grade a myriad of assignments, then average the scores for an end-of-the-period mark. They give regular constructive feedback throughout the learning process as they guide students to mastery toward the end. ●

●●● TEACHERS AT LENOX ACADEMY FOR GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DON'T USE THE TERM *GIFTED*

Lenox Academy, located in the heart of Brooklyn, New York, offers an academically accelerated program for middle school students in Grades 6–8. While the overwhelming majority of the school's students exceed New York state standards in English language arts and mathematics, a deeper analysis reveals a disturbing trend. In 2011, the school discovered that as the curriculum became more challenging over the course of middle school, many of its high-achieving students retreated from putting forth the effort needed to Thrive. The result was that academic performance actually declined in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades for a large number of students.

In 2011, the school embarked on a growth mindset program, *Brainology*, in the hopes of changing the culture of the school to one that focuses on growth mindset. "Kids no longer hear 'You're so smart!' or 'Brilliant!' Rather, teachers praise students for their focus and determination. 'You must have worked really hard!' or 'To have performed this well, you must have put out a lot of effort'" (Smith, 2014).

Teachers even shy away from using the term *gifted* to describe their students or their school, even though it is part of their official name, Lenox Academy for Gifted Middle School Students. They want to focus instead on the effort and strategies students use to make progress. From 2011 to 2014, not only did Lenox Academy change its general focus to one that values process over product, but its students also raised their test scores by ten to fifteen points (Smith, 2014). ●

While self-efficacy, growth mindset, and student agency do not provide a panacea of solutions for every academic and social-emotional challenge in our schools, they do provide promising avenues for improving the way we can help learners master habits and skills that will serve them in whatever future paths they choose. The ideas behind them are based on strong empirical data, and so far, the anecdotal evidence of their success has been overwhelming.

What Supporting Self-Efficacy and Growth Mindset Looks Like in the Classroom

Teachers emphasize *how to think* and how to learn over *what to think* and what to learn. Instead of always questioning to see if students know the “right” answer, the teacher uses probing to push students to think about their learning. Questions like “How did you reach that conclusion?” “What is another possible answer?” and “Walk me through your process” help to deepen student learning and build growth mindset.

Real learning is messy and not easy. A supportive learning classroom emphasizes effort, practice, and determination. By witnessing how their classroom community honors and appreciates learning, students will start to realize learning is not *just* about getting the right answer; it is about understanding *how to get* the right answer.

TEACHERS MAKE SURE ALL LEARNERS GET A CHANCE TO THINK

Teachers do not readily give away “the answer.” They provide students with time and support to grapple with the problems. They encourage learners to use the problem-solving techniques they already know and are cautious about jumping in too quickly with an unneeded assist. They maximize wait time for every learner.

TEACHERS MAXIMIZE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The classroom culture makes it acceptable to struggle and to fail as one strives for mastery. Teachers don’t grade every single assignment. They rely on mostly formative assessment, and they teach students to take risks in their learning.

TEACHERS VALUE AND MODEL RISK TAKING

Teachers model risk taking by attempting things that are new to them in front of students. Instead of saying, “Oh, I can’t do this,” they say, “Okay, that didn’t work. I see now where my mistake was. Let me try something else.”



Learning is not just about getting the right answer; it is about understanding how to get the right answer.

TEACHERS INCORPORATE THE POWER OF YET WITH STUDENTS

The teacher makes it a habit to answer every student “I can’t” statement with the word *yet*. For example, a student says he can’t do a math problem. The teacher responds, “You can’t do the math *yet*. You’ve got lots of time to figure this out.”

TEACHERS TURN MISTAKES INTO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Whenever students stumble, teachers ask them, “So what did you learn from what just happened?” “What will you do differently next time?” Teachers help their students see the inherent value in making mistakes as long as they learn from them.

TEACHERS NORMALIZE THE STRUGGLE

Students are taught the value of the struggle. Praise isn’t heaped on them for being the first, the fastest, or even the best. The focus of the class is on learning and for every learner to get a little better than she was the time before. Teachers focus feedback on things learners can control and refrain from making judgment calls that serve to excuse or rationalize failure or reinforce feelings of entitlement.



Frequently Asked Questions

1. I like the idea of not overly praising kids, but I have some students who expect it, and I’m talking about my high fliers. What do I do with these overachievers who are used to praise?

It is true that we as a collective society have been guilty of praising kids so much that many have become dependent on it for their sense of well-being. We know that long term this does nothing to help them become self-fulfilled independent thinkers. It will not happen overnight, but we can begin by tapering off the praise and substituting it with feedback that genuinely helps learners get better. We can turn their need for attention into personal reflection by asking them how they feel about their work. For students who have easy success

and want us to brag on them for finishing work early with almost no effort, we need to sincerely apologize to them for wasting their time and direct their attention to something more challenging.

2. My school requires me to give grades. How can I promote a growth mindset in my classroom and then turn around and do something with a fixed mindset like giving scores?

Even if you are required to turn in a final grade, it may be that you can use more alternative assessments, in which you give students a choice about the way they are assessed (an oral presentation, a PowerPoint presentation, a written exam, a demonstration, a debate, a letter written to the editor, etc.). As long as you make sure that each assessment choice clearly demonstrates mastery of the curriculum content, there should be no problem with differentiating assessments. On a daily basis, you probably want to do a lot more formative assessment and give the students feedback rather than giving a grade or score. It is all about growth. So when you are teaching a new skill rather than grading their first effort, it is far better to let your students learn from their mistakes and try the task again (and again, and again, if necessary). Formative assessment takes the pressure off your praise-oriented how-can-I-make-a-perfect-score obsessives as well as your oh-no-I-can't-ever-pass-a-test strugglers. In life, everyone has to pass tests of some kind or another, but life is usually a little more forgiving of first attempts than classrooms. We need to turn that around.

3. Can you have a growth mindset about some things and a fixed mindset about others?

Definitely yes. Much like self-efficacy, a growth mindset is specific to certain tasks or areas of one's life. It is not unusual to have a growth mindset about school work and a fixed mindset about participating in sports. A student can have a growth mindset about math and science and a fixed mindset about reading and language. Even people we know with growth mindset in most areas of

their lives sometimes surprise us with a sudden attack of fixed mindset thinking. It is the same with our students. Sometimes they manifest what appears to be an irrational fear or worry over a particular task or situation. Following the incremental steps for ZPD, helping students focus on the things they can control and offering support and guidance work well to help students move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset in almost any situation.

4. Are researchers saying that helping all students develop agency will help close the achievement gap?

Helping students develop personal efficacy as well as a growth mindset is a huge step toward empowering all students to be lifelong learners and self-advocates, but there are other factors involved. Something we do not address in this book is the concept of *integrated identity* because it generally does not fall within the scope of a classroom teacher's control. An integrated identity means that students are able rather smoothly to transfer their agency from school to the other facets of their lives. While having agency equips students to make good choices and take positive action, their ability to successfully pursue a desired path can be limited by financial resources, parental support, community norms, and any number of external factors outside of school that differ from student to student. For some kids, the support and encouragement they get at school are the opposite of what they face when they get home. While researchers routinely agree that helping students have agency is an excellent idea, they understand that inequitable factors outside the school setting still influence the achievement gap. As educators, we have to do the things we can do in the classroom to help our students have a fighting chance to have successful lives. In our many years in education, we have not seen an educational strategy as promising as targeting social and emotional learning (SEL) skills in general (and bolstering student agency in particular) to help close the achievement gap.

Discussion Questions and Exercises



We encourage you to tweet your responses to @tchkids2thrive.

1. Describe a scenario in which you were asked to perform a task far beyond your existing ability level and no scaffolding was provided. How did you respond to the challenge? What happened to your self-efficacy?
2. What is the difference between scaffolding for learners and “dumbing down the curriculum”? Do you think parents and the general population understand the difference? Explain.
3. What kind of praise do you typically give students who are extremely bright or talented? Has new research on mindsets persuaded you to alter your praise statements? Explain why or why not.
4. Do you teach any students who have to act differently outside of your classroom? (For example, in his neighborhood, a boy cannot let people know he’s intelligent and interested in learning, or he will be ridiculed.) How do you help the learner who has to maintain two separate identities—a school persona and an “everywhere else” persona?
5. Name three to five areas of your life where you exhibit a growth mindset. Name two or three areas in your life where you are trapped in a fixed mindset. How might you go about changing from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset in those areas?
6. The authors assert that it is beneficial to students to experience hard-earned success. How is that any different from success that is easily achieved? Which of these is appropriate for the classroom? Why?

ACTIVITY 3.1

Attribution Theory Assessment

Questions can be modified to best suit the developmental level of your students. In the classroom or hallway, tape evenly spaced large printed numerals (1–5) on the wall above student height. There should be enough room for a line of students to stand in front of each number. Tell the students you are going to read some statements about something that might happen, and you would like for them to think about what would be the most likely cause if it happened to them.

Number 1 stands for “It has nothing to do with me,” and number 5 stands for “It has everything do with me.” Ask students to stand in front of the number that best represents how the event would relate to them. They can stand in front of 1 or 5 or one of the numbers in between. If multiple students pick a number, they should make a line in an orderly fashion one behind the other so that they are all facing the number. For each question, record the number of students who selected each number so that you can create a graph for later discussion. Alternatively, you can take digital photos after each question to capture the representative bar graph students have created with their lines.

Sample Statements

1. The teacher passes back a set of tests. More than half the class has really low scores. You made a failing grade.
2. You tried out for a team. You didn’t make it.
3. Your best friend made a better grade than you did on an assignment.
4. One of the honors (GT/TAG) students outperformed you on an assignment.
5. You are struggling in math class.
6. Students are choosing sides for team play. You are the last to be chosen.
7. You did your homework, but now you can’t find it.
8. A lot of kids are off task. The teacher calls you out for talking.

9. You can't do your homework because you don't understand the assignment.
10. You just got selected for the Honor Society.

Feel free to change the statements to personalize them for your own class. This activity is an excellent introduction to a discussion on attribution theory. It is interesting to use this as a pre- and postassessment.

ACTIVITY 3.2

Me Me Me

Students create a life-size outline of themselves using butcher paper or cardboard.

Students label each part:

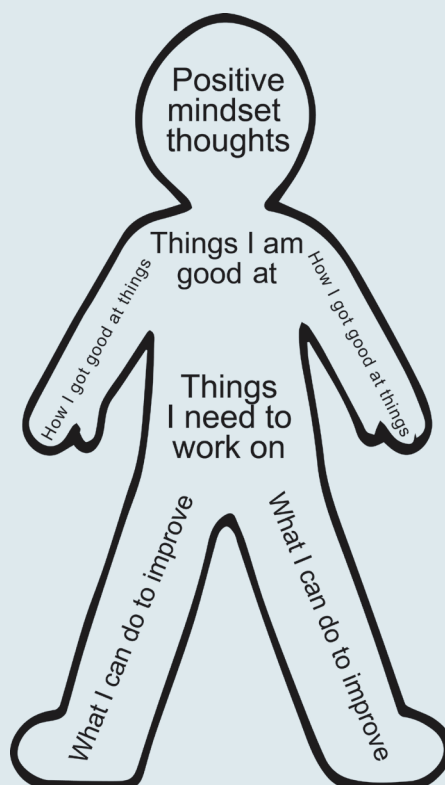
Top of body: All the things I can do well.

Bottom of body: All the things I need to work on.

Arms: Ways I got good at the things I can do.

Legs: Things I can do to improve on the things I need to work on.

Head: Positive thoughts that will help me work hard.



ACTIVITY 3.3

Failing Isn't Final

Teach students that to succeed at something difficult, you must fail before you learn. Challenge students to practice one of the activities listed. All of these activities have an element of failure before success. Encourage your students as they take on one of these challenges. Give students plenty of time to practice and find success. Pick one of the activities and model as you learn each new step.

As students struggle, help them make the connections that will stay with them far beyond your classroom:

- **Acknowledge that learning new things is hard:** Don't get frustrated. Take a break and come back at it again and again. Think about the mistakes and how you can approach it in a different way.
- **Don't give up:** When you accomplish that first (knot, fold, stitch, or step), practice it over and over, note your improvement, and then move on to the next step.
- **Keep track of your efforts:** Journal what went well and what you are struggling with. Look back on past practice period journal entries and see the progression.
- **Acknowledge your feelings of frustration:** Talk about what you are feeling. Failure is frustrating. How you deal with frustration can help you or hold you back. How can you deal with frustration in a positive way? How can you deal with frustration in a negative way?
- **Celebrate with others:** As students around you have success, celebrate with them and encourage those who are struggling. We all need cheerleaders.

Possible Activities

Art of Knot Tying

Juggling

Balloon Animals

Origami

Crochet or Knitting

Rubik's Cube

ACTIVITY 3.4

Rolling From Fixed to Growth Mindset

After students learn about fixed and growth mindsets, this activity can reinforce the words we use in each type of mindset. Students work in groups of two, and each takes turns rolling a die. The number they roll determines the statement. (If the same number is rolled

FIXED TO GROWTH



	FIXED STATEMENT	GROWTH STATEMENT	MY EXAMPLE

more than once, the student needs to roll again until a new number comes up.) They then reframe the statement from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset out loud to their partner. Each student records the statement and one other statement that could be used to promote a growth mindset. Visit the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com) to access Activity Sheet 3.2, "Fixed to Growth."

Die Roll: Fixed Statement to Turn to a Growth Statement

- 1: "I have never been good at _____!"
- 2: "I have to win."
- 3: "This is too hard. I quit!"
- 4: "I am finished with my project; I can't do any better than this."
- 5: "My parents both sing, so it's easy for me."
- 6: "She's so good at sports. I wish I were."

A few other statements to use: "It's not my fault, she didn't explain it right." "I am no good at math." "I think I know the answer, but I am not saying it. I might be wrong." "I don't care what you think of my essay!"

ACTIVITY 3.5

Fabulous Fails

This activity looks closely at mistakes and how we can learn from them.

Model

Start the lesson by telling a personal story about a time you remember making a mistake—not a simple easy-to-fix mistake, but one that was big and had consequences. Talk about why you made it and what it felt like in the moment to realize you had made such a mistake. Then ask students if they think they learned anything from that mistake. Would it have been better not to have tried than to have tried and made the mistake?

Journal

Next, ask students to write a journal entry about a time they made a mistake and what they learned from the experience.

Task

Students become reporters who investigate learning.

- Ask several people of different ages (under 12, 12–20, 21–50, 51–99) to tell about a mistake they made and what they learned from it.
- Transcribe the interview in writing or record it with a voice recorder (first ask permission if you can record the information “for the record”).
- Note the interviewee’s name, age, and profession.

Reflect

Students reflect on the stories they heard trying to discern a central theme or common element.

Product

Student reporters use their collected data to write a newspaper article about learning from mistakes.



Access the website www.teachingkidstothrive.com to find more classroom-ready activities, author-recommended videos, websites, and other resources.

