

Mindset for Leading a Differentiated Classroom

How teachers view the learners in their classrooms shapes the decisions that they make about how the classroom is organized and ultimately how students think and feel about school. Learners can have either a positive or negative outlook, depending on how the teacher interacts with them and how he or she invites all learners in the classroom to trust that the journey they are embarking on will be met with success. This requires leadership on the part of the teacher to partner with students in structuring the learning environment that supports each learner to reach his or her potential.

Good leaders are ones who have a clear vision about the goals they are trying to achieve and who develop a plan for how to reach those goals. Effective teachers must be leaders in their classroom—leaders who set a clear vision about the learning goals and develop a plan to help their students reach these goals. After all, the diverse learners who ultimately show up in our classrooms require varied learning experiences so that each student can grow and meet with success in learning.

In a differentiated classroom, the role of the teacher is especially important. "The teacher is an irreplaceable leader in moving differentiation from an idea on paper or in a professional development session to a way of life in the classroom" write noted differentiation experts Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia Imbeau (2010, p. 9) in their book *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*.

Here are some characteristics that good leaders in classrooms possess. They

- Hold a vision for something good.
- Have the capacity to share the vision and enlist others in it.
- Build a team for achieving the vision.
- Renew commitment to the vision.

- Celebrate successes.
- Are about people.

Fixed and Growth Mindsets

The way a teacher leads a classroom is shaped by the teacher’s mindset, which is a set of beliefs about the human ability to learn and to succeed. Likewise, students’ attitudes toward learning are shaped by their beliefs about learning and success.

To learn more about the work of Carol Dweck, go to <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2007/marapr/features/dweck.html>.

Check out an online resource on mindset at <http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/index.html>.

According to research on motivation by Carol Dweck (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), beliefs about the nature of intelligence and success form at a young age. To describe these beliefs, Dweck uses two terms: *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset*. These two mindsets are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

In practice, teachers with the fixed mindset may underestimate student capacity and motivation to work hard and may “teach down” based on student’s language, culture, socioeconomic status, race, and other characteristics. Even when teaching students with high ability, they may accept their high grades or grade-level work as adequate.

On the other hand, teachers with a growth mindset encourage and insist on student effort and hard work—and, over time, they are able to change the mindset of students by creating the conditions in which students can experience success through hard work (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Figure 1. The Predictive Power of Mindset

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Success comes from being smart.	Success comes from effort.
Genetics, environment determine what we can do.	With hard work, most students can do most things.

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Some kids are smart, and some aren't.	Teachers can override students' profiles.
Teachers can't override students' profiles.	A key role of the teacher is to set high goals, provide high support, ensure student focus—to find the thing that makes school work for a student.
Success comes from being smart.	Success comes from effort.

How do fixed and growth mindsets play out in the classroom? Review several examples in the table below.

Figure 2. How Teacher Mindset Looks and Sounds in the Classroom

Teacher Mindset in the Classroom	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Crafting a classroom environment	Order and rules are prioritized over relationship-building. Students believe the classroom belongs to the teacher.	Teachers partner with students to determine how the classroom can be organized so that it will work for everyone. Students view the classroom as "our" classroom—one that they have helped develop.
Designing student tasks	Learning experiences follow a script or pacing guide to ensure that all learners are treated the same way and that key goals are met.	Learning experiences are developed based on the needs of individual students.
When a student is stuck with a task	Students who do not understand curricular material are seen as having reached the natural limits of their capacity. Assistance may be provided to help get a student "unstuck," but there is no assumption that all students can perform to equally high levels.	Students who do not understand curricular material are seen as facing challenges that can be overcome through effort. Students are taught what to do when they encounter difficulty. Teachers provide various support systems, with the assumption that high effort can lead to high achievement for all students.

Teacher Mindset in the Classroom	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
When homework isn't done	The assumption is that the student is irresponsible or unmotivated.	The teacher reflects on what could have caused this to happen and investigates what supports or changes might be necessary to help the student get on track.
When giving feedback on student work	Feedback is summative and evaluative—work is graded and rated. Little attention is paid to improvement or revision.	Feedback is formative, with an emphasis on student growth and next steps in the learning progress.