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## Creating Lifelong Learners at Home and at School

By Andrea Gough

Over this past February break, I had the opportunity to attend an education conference by John Hopkins University held here in California. The theme was "The Teacher as Risk Taker", and over the weekend we were graced by many inspiring and thought-provoking speakers, as well as being sent home with copies of their books. In this blog I want to share with you some of the insights from one presenter in particular, Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D. A professor and researcher at Columbia and Stanford Universities, Dr. Dweck has spent the last ten or so years researching the effects of praise on children's development into "learners and non-learners". Her presentation and her book both begin with the question: What do we do to make kids into non-learners? Her findings intrigued me for many reasons, not the least of which was Ring Mountain's own mission to help our students grow into life-long learners.

Her work divides people's attitudes, or "mindsets", into two main categories: fixed and growth. For the purposes of this blog, I'll focus on intelligence as the subject of these mindsets, since it most directly relates to education and academic achievement. A student with a fixed mindset would view "intelligence as a fixed trait, something one is born with and that cannot be changed very much over the course of one's lifetime. You may learn new things, of course, but your actual intelligence and capacity for learning difficult tasks would not change." (*Side note: Did you know that the inventor of the IQ test, Alfred Binet, developed it only to find those students for whom the educational system in France was not meeting their needs? Until I read this book, I did not realize this at all. In fact, although he acknowledged individual differences in children's intellects, he also believed that education and practice could bring about fundamental changes in intelligence!*) But back to our two hypothetical students. A student with a growth mindset, conversely, would view "intelligence as a malleable quality, a potential that can be developed." These two students may seem quite similar, however, if they were working on a task that they both understood. It is when faced with challenges, set-backs, and failures that the two students would stand in stark contrast to one another.

A student with a growth mindset might want to deconstruct what he or she did wrong, or did not understand the first time around, so as to learn the necessary information for success in the future. According to Dr. Dweck, the fixed mindset "provides no recipe for recovering from failures. Students might blame others, give up, or try to find someone else who failed or did worse, in an effort to feel better about themselves." In fact, in one experiment that measured brain waves of adults with the two mindsets, Dr Dweck found that those with a fixed mindset only had focused brainwaves when they were learning which answers they'd gotten right and wrong on a test. When they were presented with feedback on how they *should* have answered or approached problems, their brain waves showed no sign of interest. Meanwhile, the group with the growth mindset, as you may guess, paid close attention to the feedback that would stretch and increase their knowledge.

So what does this mean for us as teachers and parents? Although we play quite different roles in children's lives, we are still in a similar category when it comes to the power and influence our praise has

on children. Dr Dweck advised against using a student's intelligence or smarts as the basis of praise. She even said that the old teacher's standby, "You're so smart, you could really do better if you put more effort into this" could backfire if one wasn't in touch with that particular student's mindset about challenges and risk-taking. She said that the most important kind of praise we can give, as teachers and as parents, is specific praise that focuses on:

- Process
- Effort
- Struggle
- Persistence despite setbacks
- Strategies
- Choices
- Choosing difficult tasks instead of comfortable ones
- Learning
- Improving

One other thing that struck me was an insight she'd received from a European colleague of hers once. This woman noted that in America, the word struggle often has a negative connotation, while in her country, struggle is something that is celebrated, for out of struggle usually comes some kind of growth. Dr. Dweck challenged us as teachers to take the time to celebrate academic struggles in our classrooms, occasionally asking of our students, "Who had a fantastic struggle today?"

I highly recommend the following New York Magazine article that focuses on Dr. Dweck's specific research findings and further explores the impact of these two mindsets on children's growth into lifelong learners or non-learners: <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/>

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