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Using Growth Mindset Strategies in the Classroom

Amani Altaleb

Abstract

This article explores the effects of teachers using growth mindset strategies in the classroom on student achievement. A review of the literature found that teachers with a growth mindset have great influence on student achievement. This type of mindset can give students the ability to overcome difficult challenges. As part of a growth mindset approach, the researcher found the importance of teachers focusing on academic growth rather than on proficiency in subject areas. This in turn encourages students to believe they can achieve at a higher rate. In conclusion, the principal plans to translate the action research project into Arabic in order to share with her staff and school district. After that, she will provide several workshops for teachers to explain to them how to utilize growth mindset strategies in the classroom. After several months of implementing these new strategies, teachers and students will be surveyed to see the impact on student achievement and attitude from using these techniques.

Growth Mindset

As school principal every Sunday I held a meeting with five teachers to discuss one topic that we will focus on during the week. Every Sunday I made this meeting with different teachers in order to select students for the gifted program. I was sitting in the meeting room waiting for my teachers to arrive one morning for our 9:00 a.m. meeting. All the teachers arrived on time for the meeting and I was excited to talk about the topic of our gifted students. I started the meeting by asking them to choose the gifted students in each subject area and write down the

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names of students to be sent to the district because there is a competition between schools and each school will give their students training for that competition. Our goal was to challenge them to improve on their gifted abilities. The art teacher started the conversation by stating, “I have a gifted girl in my class, and she is a very talented drawer.”

Suddenly the math teacher asked, “Do you think that it is important for us to choose students who have the ability to draw? I think we need to focus only on students who have high skills in math and computer science. That is the true gifted student.” I replied that we were looking for gifted students in all subject areas, including but not limited to math and computer science. The math teacher stated, “We will be wasting our time in my opinion. Other schools only focus on students who have high academic achievement in core subject areas like math, science, technology, and English. These are our intelligent students.”

As a group, we spent a great deal of time discussing this topic. The discussion was good for teachers to be involved in, as we learn about challenging our students. Each teacher has his or her views which conflict with those of other teachers. Some teachers believe that all students should be gifted students. On the other hand, other teachers believe that only creative students should be gifted students. After the meeting, I wondered about why teachers and schools focus almost exclusively on students with high abilities in mathematics, science, and computer science and ignore other subject areas, such as art. Do my teachers really believe that only the high/gifted students in certain areas can make an impact on the world around them? Do they not want to challenge all students to have a positive impact on society?

I researched successful people and the contributions they have made in our world and was surprised by their education and social upbringing. Many of them were not born rich or geniuses, such as Steve Jobs. However, what they all possessed was a belief in themselves, that they could make a positive difference in the world and that with hard work and positive thoughts they would succeed. These beliefs represent the true meaning of a growth mindset. It means that students in art, for example, can be successful and make a positive change in the world. This understanding set me on my path to learn more about growth mindset, and how it could potentially change the lives of the students at my school. The research I did reinforced my beliefs that all students can grow and learn. I am extremely excited to take this new knowledge back to my school, and begin to transform the lives of the students we impact. A growth mindset can be an important component to the Saudi 2030 initiative.

The Saudi 2030 policy initiative began as an effort to improve the Saudi economy by reducing its dependence on oil. To do this, Saudis will examine all economic activities, such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. Furthermore, on 25 April 2016, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman introduced Vision 2030 stating, “My primary goal is to be an exemplary, and leading nation

in all aspects, and I will work with you in achieving this endeavor.” He is planning to provide all citizens with what they need to live economically strong lives, starting with their housing, improving their education, and creating jobs for young people. Education plays a significant role in this policy initiative, particularly because Vision 2030 requires that people change the way they think about society. Saudi citizens need to learn better how to communicate so that they can achieve social change. Education will develop critical thinking and communication skills so that citizens can achieve this vision.

Using growth mindset strategies in the classroom will play an important role in the Saudi 2030 policy initiative. For example, to reach the required development in our society, we need people who have the determination and willingness to try to *create anew*. Saudi citizens must have a growth mindset to do that. It helps people to engage in addressing social problems and to face challenges in order to reach their target for improving themselves and their society. Including a growth mindset in education and as part of Saudi 2030 could impact the social, economic, and political situation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) by improving the thinking of people so that they are not afraid of challenges. My goal is to equip them to try innovative solutions to social issues in KSA. Having a growth mindset will help Saudis believe in their ability to create and innovate and build collaboration between people in society. Specifically, having a growth mindset will improve gender equality by showing that creativity and ability are not particular to a specific gender. Education can prepare women to step into jobs they could not have before Vision 2030.

In many schools, teachers often focus on proficiency in subjects instead of on individual academic growth. By doing so, “[they] risk discouraging growth by primarily praising intelligence and sheer effort instead of acknowledging the importance of planning and trying new approaches” (Guido, 2016). There are differences between students with a fixed mindset and those with a growth mindset. According to Dweck (2010), “students with a fixed mindset do not like to exert effort. They believe that if you have the ability, everything should come naturally. They tell us that when they have to work hard, they feel dumb. Students with a growth mindset, in contrast, value effort; they realize that even geniuses have to work hard to develop their abilities and make their contributions” (p. 2). Furthermore, the ability to overcome challenges and succeed is not limited to people with high intelligence: “Dweck and her colleagues believe that everyone can learn if they work hard, and that those who see things that way will do better at school than those with fixed mindsets” (Young, 2019).

However, teachers must be careful when practicing mindset training and should consider not only each student’s age and goals but also the school environment. Markman (2017) points out that certain research “found that teaching some high-achieving students that anyone can do well reduced their motivation to come to school” (as cited in Young, 2019). Thus, teachers must be careful when

practicing mindset training and should consider not only each student's age and goals but also the school environment. Markman (2017) points out that certain research "found that teaching some high-achieving students that anyone can do well reduced their motivation to come to school" (as cited in Young, 2019).

Students cannot learn effectively from teachers with a fixed mindset because those teachers lack flexibility to work with various learning abilities and capacities of students. Instead of solely prioritizing high grades and exam-taking skills, teachers should adopt a mindset that will positively affect students' feelings. According to Dweck (2015), "the growth-mindset approach helps children feel good in the short and long terms by helping them thrive on challenges and setbacks on their way to learning. When they're stuck, teachers can appreciate their work so far, but add: 'Let's talk about what you've tried, and what you can try next'" (p. 1).

When I was in my country before I came to the United States, I heard and read that education in American schools is different from Saudi schools. I had a passion to know why most students in American schools enjoy attending school. I asked myself, maybe school buildings or the methods of teaching are different than they are in Saudi Arabia. I was lucky because I have children of my own with different levels of education. This experience helped me to understand the American educational system from a parent's perspective. I also had a chance to visit many schools during the program at Arizona State University. These experiences gave me deep knowledge about the American school system. Furthermore, during my visit to various schools, I noticed that each district has a different system from others, but all focused on student talent, and what they will need to be in the future. The schools then gave their students the support they needed to achieve their goals. They helped everyone, not only "high achievers." The schools I attended focused on student needs and built their confidence. For example, my son, who is in third grade, has a passion for drawing. His teacher noticed this passion, and gave him some books to teach him how to draw in more advanced ways. A simple act by the teacher supported my son's hobby. The teacher's act made him love school and gave him more confidence in his academic abilities.

I observed that when I was visiting classrooms there was a corner for thinking outside the box. In this corner students had their own space to create ways to solve the problems. I love this idea because it prepares students for real life where they will face challenges by thinking "outside the box," or outside the norm. Students in Saudi Arabia need to learn to think "outside the box," or learn to think differently about problems, so they can arrive at creative solutions. When students have a growth mindset, they believe in their abilities to solve difficult problems and have the freedom to think differently. The Saudi 2030 initiative poses problems that require creative solutions. Teaching students to have a growth mindset will help them engage these problems. My experiences in the U.S. strengthened my belief about my topic because I saw examples of a growth mindset strategy. It also gave me more passion to implement a growth mindset in my school. It will have a huge

impact on my school and students and parents. I now have a clear vision about making changes in society at the start of school. Teachers have great influence on students and when they employ a growth mindset, they help students develop their passions and prepare them to meet life's challenges in creative ways.

When I return to Saudi Arabia, I plan to share my project with other principals to give them an opportunity to make new changes at their schools. First, I will translate my action research project into Arabic. Then, I will provide several workshops for teachers to explain how to utilize a growth mindset strategy in their classrooms. These workshops will help teachers develop new knowledge directly related to their classrooms, and promote reflective teaching and thinking. I will create a *look-for list* for teachers to observe the change in their classrooms. A *look-for list* is a list of criteria I will use to evaluate teachers and their classroom environment as well as to observe students and their in-class work. I hope to see whether students are using growth mindset strategies, if they are encouraged by or learning from their mistakes, and if they are pushing past their mistakes to solve problems. I will share the growth mindset philosophy with students because students need to believe in their ability to do hard work, and to learn about the power of their minds to help them to achieve their targets. Teachers will be surveyed to see the impact on student achievement and attitudes from using these techniques. As we know, if you want to see changes in students, one needs to increase parental involvement. Therefore, I will hold several meetings and conduct surveys to teach parents the value of having a growth mindset at home in their daily lives. This is important because growth mindset strategies will be more successful if they are reinforced at home.

Furthermore, any new change is not easy to implement, and there will be some barriers I might encounter. For example, from the teacher's side, there may be a fixed-mindset teacher who does not accept the changes. This kind of teacher needs to work with a growth mindset teacher in a team to learn from him or her. Some teachers will refuse to make the effort with their students. The reason for that, in my opinion, is the number of students in the classroom. Teachers have huge jobs with many demands on their time and energy beyond their teaching responsibilities. Learning to have a growth mindset takes time and energy. By giving teachers training in new methods, I can help them to maximize their time in the classroom. Maybe using a growth mindset strategy will help teachers to be motivated in the classroom. Other obstacles I might encounter are from the parent side. Some parents do not have a great deal of interest in the school or their children's education. They do not want to help in the school or be involved with their children at school. Parents need to feel comfortable contacting school and finding answers to their inquiries. By providing them with opportunities to share the school vision and classroom goals, I hope to encourage them to be more involved in their children's education. Another barrier to implementing growth mindset strategies is that my district office has limited understanding of what it

(growth mindset) is and how to implement it. However, with time and hard work people at the district office will begin to understand what it is and why change is necessary.

Change is important, but after being in the United States, I realized that there are several aspects of education in KSA that I think we should try to preserve. The first is in Saudi Arabia, a free education is available for everybody from primary education through college. Free education is a value that is important to preserve because it provides everyone an opportunity to learn. Also, our curriculum is aligned with our values and cultures. Our cultures and history tie us together. Saudi Arabia's education system has not allowed men and women to be in the same class. This system is important to preserve because it allows women to feel comfortable at school. If women are in classes with men, they may feel self-conscious and not able to speak freely. Gendered classrooms allow women to speak freely and feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. This freedom is a basis for a growth mindset. Separate classrooms give women their own spaces at school. Based on my research and my own experience, using a growth mindset in the classroom will help teachers to be more flexible with students in the classroom. Teachers with this strategy will build great relationships with students and parents. It will help educators to positively influence students' achievement and promote low stress.

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