**Importance of praising effort not intelligence**

Teachers are often puzzled about what to do when students don't make an effort to learn, or when they become discouraged by setbacks or material they perceive to be too difficult. One cause of this behaviour is the mindset that many students have about their own intelligence. Research has clearly demonstrated that having the mindset that you are either smart or not smart has serious negative consequences for learning. Fortunately, one powerful way that you can intervene as a teacher is by being careful about how you give students praise. Offering praise for students' work and efforts can alter this mindset so that students can begin to view their own intelligence as something that can be developed. This mindset of developing intelligence will increase students' ability to "bounce back" in the face of academic setbacks and other difficulties.

How we talk to our students about their performances and work ethic affects their mindsets. Feedback for intelligence increases fixed mindset thinking; feedback for effort and strategies decreases it.

Fortunately, Dweck and her colleagues have also found that fixed mindsets are susceptible to change with relatively straightforward interventions, such as how praise is given for learning outcomes (e.g., Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Molden, 2005, Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Dweck's research has shown that it is more constructive to attribute successes and failures to effort and to successful selection and use of problem solving strategies that are under one's own control, rather than to attribute successes to an unchangeable entity labelled "intelligence," which would not be under one's own control.

The key to this strategy of praising effort is the well-established psychological concept of **attributions** — what a person thinks causes his or her successes and failures. Are your successes and failures due to things you have control over? Or, do you relinquish responsibility for directing your life decisions because you believe that your successes and failures are due to forces beyond your control, such as bad luck, poor teaching, or just being too "dumb"?

Although praise for intelligence is usually well-intentioned and can be motivating when students are doing well, it backfires when students eventually face work that is difficult for them. When this happens, the failure is a threat to the person's sense of his or her own intelligence — a situation to avoid. Thus, praise for intelligence is a short-term strategy that makes successful students feel good at the moment, but one that is detrimental to students in the longer run.

Most people believe that it is good for children's learning to praise their intelligence. Praise for intelligence might be conducive to learning only as long as the work is easy for the child; otherwise such praise has many unfortunate side effects. Mueller and Dweck (1996) reported that 85% of parents hold the erroneous belief that praising children's intelligence when they do well is necessary for children's **self-esteem** and academic development. On the surface, this may be intuitively appealing and is endorsed by many parents and educators because it seems to be ego boosting and encouraging. However, this well-intentioned but erroneous belief is clearly contradicted by extensive research.

##### Do's:

* Notice students' good efforts and strategies and praise them.
* Be specific about the praised behaviours and reinforce this behaviour with your feedback.
* Use praise to link the outcomes of an assignment to students' efforts.
* Talk explicitly and in detail about the strategies a student has used. Comment on which strategies were helpful, and which were not.
* Ask a student to explain his or her work to you.

##### Don'ts:

* Don't offer praise for trivial accomplishments or weak efforts.
* Don't inflate praise, particularly for students with low self-esteem.
* Don't let a student feel ashamed of learning difficulties. Instead, treat each challenge as an opportunity for learning.
* Don't ever say, "You are so smart." in response to good work. Instead, praise the work a student has done (e.g., "Your argument is very clear" or "Your homework is very accurate").
* Don't comfort students following a failure by telling them that not everyone can be good at everything.

How does the strategy of praising students for effort and effective strategies work?

* A person's beliefs about why successes and failures occur are very powerful predictors of their behaviour in the face of difficulties.
* Belief that intelligence is unchangeable (fixed mindset) leads to withdrawal of effort when difficulties that challenge a person's view of his or her own intelligence are encountered.
These beliefs have been measured by Dweck and colleagues (Dweck, 1999) by asking people how much they agree or disagree with statements such as, "Your intelligence is something basic about you that you can't really change" (fixed mindset statement) or "No matter who you are, you can substantially change your level of intelligence" (growth mindset statement).
* Belief that intelligence can be increased through effort — staying with the task and finding the right strategy ("growth mindset") — leads to increased effort and challenge-seeking.
* Growth mindsets lead to resilience and higher academic achievement.
* Fixed mindsets lead to increased probability of academic withdrawal and alienation, and decreased engagement — all of which lead to lower achievement.
* Praise for intelligence increases fixed-mindset thinking. Praise for effort and strategies decreases it.

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