



## Contemporary Issues

## Definitively unfinished: Why the growth mindset is vital for educators and academic workplaces



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### *Are you a growing person or a growing résumé?*

(Clark and Sousa, 2018a, 2018b) page 130

Higher education provides the most ironic of challenges to us: to be and remain growing educators in workplaces primed to focus us on growing our résumés (Clark and Sousa, 2018a, Clark and Sousa, 2018b). Seeking to always develop, improve and be truly open to learning demands viewing yourself as being *definitively unfinished* - a massive ongoing work in progress. You never arrive. For educators, the notion of being *definitively unfinished* is immediately appealing because it places learning at the center. Who wouldn't want that?

However, being and staying *definitively unfinished* in academic settings is very difficult because our academic workplaces overtly and implicitly don't emphasize growth - but rather are oriented around success, ability, qualifications, expertise and status (Clark and Sousa, 2018a, 2018b). Crucially, research increasingly shows that linking these facets to our successes reduces both the performance and well-being of individuals and their workplaces (Dweck, 2008). This occurs because implicit personal and organizational assumptions about intelligence and performance - known as our 'mindset' (Murphy and Dweck, 2010; Dweck, 2008) - not only heavily influences our personal perceptions, behaviors, and performance but also aspects of our workplace working cultures (Murphy and Dweck, 2010). What then does it mean to be *definitively unfinished* as an educator and how can workplaces promote this growth-approach? It's key to focus on the growth mindset over the fixed mindset.

### 1. What are the Fixed and Growth Mindsets?

*Fixed mindset* approaches (known as entity implicit theory) attribute personal success to individual ability and talent - which are assumed to be fixed (Murphy and Dweck, 2010). With this fixed mindset, both yourself and other people are perceived to be smart or able, gifted, or

possessing the inherent skill that then leads to successes (Dweck, 2008). Conversely, in the absence of such assets, both the self and other people are viewed as being unable to improve because it is assumed that people don't change and can't then be successful (Buckingham, 1999). Dweck (2008) identifies five situations in which your mindset particularly influences outcomes (Table 1).

Due to this, from a fixed mindset, failure often leads to crises in confidence and deep fundamental doubts about ones' ability (Dweck, 2008). For similar reasons, feedback (particularly negative or critical feedback) tends to be avoided or ignored because it also casts doubt on personal competency (Murphy and Dweck, 2010). Consequently, the fixed mindset is associated with low resilience in the face of obstacles and avoidance of difficult situations, defensiveness in the face of others' successes or feedback, and a lack of prioritization of professional development (Brock and Hundley, 2016; Dweck, 2008).

Conversely, the *growth mindset* (also known as incremental implicit theory) views abilities, skills, or talents as being always amenable to improvement via effort and learning (Murphy and Dweck, 2010). This mindset dwells far less on the perceived adequacy of results and threat from obstacles and challenges than one's willingness and capacity to work hard and learn from each and every situation irrespective of failure or success.

Viewing yourself as definitively unfinished via a growth mindset means that your perceptions and efforts prioritize learning, persistence, and working smartly or strategically over an ongoing sense of your perceived ability, qualification, or track record (Dweck, 2008). Growth mindsets contribute to being more open to embracing uncontrollable situations, difficult challenges, and poor results, because personal competence is never at stake and true failure can only occur if you fail to learn (Dweck, 2008).

Rather than being linked to shame, growth mindsets are associated with higher self-esteem and improved performance (Brock and Hundley, 2016; Dweck, 2008) because links between results and the

**Table 1**  
Types of situations in which mindsets influence outcomes (adapted from Brock and Hundley, 2018).

Situations in which mindsets influence outcomes	Fixed mindset view	Growth mindset view
Challenges	Challenges are avoided to maintain appearance of intelligence and ability	Challenges are embraced, with a desire to learn and grow
Obstacles	Giving up or lowering aspirations in the face of obstacles is common	Showing resilience, grit, and persistence in the face of obstacles is common
Effort	Putting effort in is negative – being skilled should be enough	Effort and hard work are integral to success and achievement
Criticism and feedback	Negative feedback is ignored often defensively and usually is interpreted as a personal attack	Criticism is seen as a source of learning and improvement
Others' Success	Others' success is threatening and evokes insecurity	Others' success can be a source of inspiration and learning

self are broken (Brock and Hundley, 2016) - this leads to higher willingness and capacity to learn, especially from new information or difficult situations (Brock and Hundley, 2016) - abilities likely to be vital for succeeding in jobs now and in the future (Bakhshi et al., 2018).

## 2. Mindsets in Educational Settings

Our mindset is expressed in how we each see ourselves as educators (Table 1). While most educators are inclined to associate readily with the wholesome values of the growth mindset, seldom does one mindset entirely dominate (Brock and Hundley, 2016). Our mindset in any one situation is best understood more as a continuum than a dichotomy because in most instances, elements of both mindsets are present, and from situation to situation, our own dominant mindset may change. For example: a person may have a growth mindset when learning from difficult conversations with challenging colleagues but may be far more fixed in other situations - such as a tendency to derive their sense of worth from their job title or performance. Mindsets in this way are very personal – reflecting deep, diverse and profound aspects of identity and self-esteem.

Our mindsets not only reflect how we view our self, but also how we view other people and events. In this way, mindsets are more like psychological worlds which we inhabit rather than discrete cognitions (Brock and Hundley, 2016). Accordingly, the presence of our dominant mindset can be inferred from our perceptions of others and ourselves (Table 2).

Mindsets don't only exist in individuals but both reinforce and shape workplace cultures. Is your workplace “a culture of genius and talent or one that endorses a culture of growth and development”? (Murphy and Dweck, 2010 Page 283) Given organizations with fixed mindsets are around 80% more likely to hire employees who share this mindset - with reverse trends evident for the growth mindset (Murphy and Dweck, 2010), mindsets form an influential and perpetuating element of workplace culture.

Fixed mindsets define success in terms of results, but are prone to avoiding challenges because these threaten with a sense of perceived abilities and talents (Table 1). Obstacles often impede progress

**Table 2**  
Fixed versus growth mindset views of others and the self.

	Fixed mindset perceptions	Growth mindset perceptions
....of the self	<p>“I am smart because I have a doctorate.”</p> <p>“There are some things, like statistics, that I will never be good at.”</p> <p>“Professional development...boring! I just don't have the time.”</p>	<p>“I don't always succeed in what I do, but no matter what, I try to reflect on what happened and take lessons forward”</p> <p>“I am not always confident, but I do try to bring my best to work each day to work strategically and I will never give up!”</p> <p>“I know I over associate my confidence with my job title. What can I do in future to approach work differently?”</p>
...of others	<p>“With her poor study skills, she won't graduate”</p> <p>“This student is smart. She does not need my attention or help.”</p> <p>“He is just naturally brilliant which is why he always gets the awards.”</p>	<p>“That student really impressed me - she only just passed but I can see that she has learned so much”</p> <p>“Wow, I can see he was having real difficulties for a while, but worked so hard to find a solution”</p> <p>“My colleague was really nasty to me today. But perhaps if I tell her she hurt me, she won't do that again in future”</p>

Partially adapted from (Brock and Hundley, 2016).

immensely because failing at a task becomes cast as a failing as a person – it reflects a lack in the abilities of the self and undermines a personal sense of smartness, skill, or talent. Consequently, the fixed mindset is strongly linked to lowered aspirations because failure gives rise to intense feelings and sensations of personal shame (Brown, 2015).

## 3. Mindsets in Higher Education

Although research and commentary around mindsets has informed education in children and elementary teaching (Brock and Hundley, 2016), there has been surprisingly little focus or work on the implications of mindsets in higher education (Clark and Sousa, 2018a, 2018b), including the preparation of health professionals and educators (Klein et al., 2017). What then are the implications for students and educators in academic workplaces?

### 3.1. Implications for Students

Students, though defined by their status as learners, often possess dominant fixed mindsets following years of reinforcement of fixed mindset thinking in schools (Brock and Hundley, 2016) via feedback from teachers that they are smart, able, and skilled (Table 2). While this immediately seems suitably positive, when this entrenches and reinforces fixed mindsets, the more demanding and difficult work of higher education can significantly threaten their self-esteem and competency, promote avoidance and personal shame, and reduce the likelihood of sharing difficulties with peers or educators (Dweck, 2008). To date links between fixed mindsets and high anxiety and depression in students are not well known understood – but patterns in adolescents suggest that avoiding fixed mindsets can contribute substantially to reduced anxiety (Schleider and Weisz, 2016) and stress (Schroder et al., 2017) – and in adults lead to improved higher subjective well-being and relationship satisfaction (Van Tongeren and Burnette, 2018).

To promote growth mindsets in students, most obviously, educators can teach students regarding research into the nature and implications of both the fixed and growth mindsets via readings and seminars, encourage them to reflect on their own dominant mindsets in different

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