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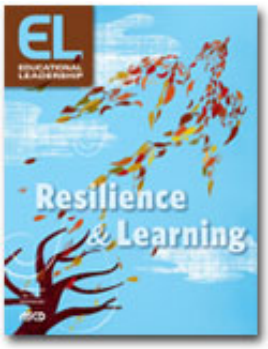




- Read Abstract

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# Afraid of Looking Dumb

*Mark D. Jacobson*

**For many students, the classroom is a stage where they must step up and perform—and risk public failure every day.**

I was sitting at a table with Brenda in my 2nd grade classroom at the conclusion of a math lesson. This is the conversation we had:

*Brenda: I feel like I'm not good in math, and I get scared. I feel like I'm the dumbest in the class in math.*

*Me: In just math or other things, too?*

*Brenda: Other things, too.*

*Me: Why do you feel that way?*

*Brenda: I can't do as much as other people.*

*Me: When you start math, what do you tell yourself?*

*Brenda: I can't do it. I'm scared.*

*Me: What if you couldn't do it?*

*Brenda: I wouldn't be smart in that subject. I should be able to do it. I'm scared that people will tease me.*

*Me: What would it look like if you were smart?*

*Brenda: I'd be a fast thinker, quick learner. The first time I try things, I'd get it right.*

*Me: What do you tell yourself when I tell you that you're better than you think in math?*

*Brenda: I don't believe you.*

*Me: Do you want to change?*

*Brenda: Yes, but how? How are we going to change our thinking?*

How can this be? How can a child in just the 2nd grade become so defeated? How can she come to believe that all her classmates are superior and that she's utterly inadequate as a learner? Brenda's words perplexed me and motivated me to launch my journey to seek answers and solutions.

## Learned Helplessness and Mind-Sets

Carol Dweck's theory (Dweck & Bempechat, 1983) speaks to the heart of this. Dweck found that children and adults hold one of two basic beliefs about intelligence: (1) We're born with a fixed amount of intelligence that remains static throughout our lifetimes—that is, we get what we get; or (2) with effort, our intelligence will grow. A fascinating piece of Dweck's theory is this: The goal of those with a fixed belief is *to look smart*, whereas the goal of those with a growth belief is *to get smarter*. Moreover, those fixed believers who think of themselves as not very smart develop a pattern of learned helplessness: *If I'm not very smart and can't get any smarter, why bother?* I worry about fixed-belief students who lack resilience, who give up at the first signs of challenge.

Students' beliefs trump facts. Students are less motivated by their own ability than by what they believe to be true about themselves. Whether aware of it or not, we are what we think. And what students think affects what they feel and do.

The implications are profound. If looking smart is a student's goal, then entering the classroom door is like stepping on stage to perform. With appearance as the central concern, the student loses touch with true learning; his focus shifts to trying to see himself through others' eyes.

The teacher owns one of the most important pairs of eyes. Fixed-belief students concern themselves with their teacher's every glance. They see the teacher not as a facilitator and resource for their learning but as a rewarder and punisher, as a judge and critic (Dweck & Elliot, 1983). These students become anxious that their responses, mistakes, or lack of perfection will embarrass or humiliate them.

We know little about how these negative beliefs come to be, but we do know that we can retrain young minds to believe in effort, persevere, develop resilience, and attain high levels of achievement. As a classroom teacher, after hearing Brenda declare her helplessness and hopelessness, I became determined to understand and try to undo these destructive beliefs.

## What My Research Revealed

Using a series of questionnaires and one-on-one and small-group interviews, I began collecting data from students and their parents. I asked such questions as, What does it mean to be smart? Do you think you're smart? Can all people get smarter? The answers I gathered helped me understand each individual's beliefs and differentiate those students with fixed mind-sets from those with growth mind-sets. (Roughly one-half of the students held each mind-set.) A note of caution here, though: Teachers should view this information more as tendencies than as absolutes, to avoid placing kids in boxes.

This experience proved to me the value in being both a researcher and a teacher. Had I not known these students, I most likely would have taken their responses at face value. But now my research had given me a wealth of information that enabled me to see the discrepancy between my students' self-evaluations and my assessment of their abilities.

I found that some of my kids aimed to please and wanted to look good, and their responses reflected their concerns about how they were perceived. Emily told me she rated herself lower "because I didn't want to brag." Shevon simply believed she "wasn't smart at anything," failing to see her true abilities in problem solving and social intelligence. Omar consistently equated his self-control and behavior issues with being "bad" at everything.

This idea of wanting to look good is problematic because children go through their school life looking to their teachers for answers: They ask, Am I competent in this? Am I good enough? Am I smart? Am I right? Did I make a mistake? How will others see me? Does my teacher like me?

How teachers answer these questions will profoundly influence a student's experience. Students with fixed beliefs suffer from what I call *public performance anxiety*. Because of this, they will hear the teacher's answers differently from those with a growth mind-set, as the following examples illustrate.

### Misinterpreting

Let's say a student responds to a question I've asked, but her answer is inaudible. If I ask, "What?" those who want to look smart often stop in their tracks, saying "never mind" or "I forgot." Some students are likely to assume that my "What?" indicates they're mistaken, whereas other students are more likely to take this opportunity to risk an answer and try again in hopes of gaining knowledge and skill, a true sign of resilience.

### Cheating

Cheating is another protection that kids use to avoid the appearance of failure. When I asked why she copied her neighbor's work, Shirley told me she was afraid of getting the wrong answer. "Are you afraid to ask for help?" I asked. "Yes," she said. Shirley was trying to protect herself from looking incompetent.

### Giving Up

Sometimes just the teacher's presence can lead a student to give up without trying:

> *Me: James, sometimes it seems as though you act like you can't do something when I know that you could do it, right? You think it's too hard?*
>
> *James: Yeah, last time I thought it was too hard. Remember I gave up, and you came when me and Lee were doing the hard math problems?*
>
> *Me: It seems like you gave up as soon as I walked over. Did my coming over have something to do with you giving up?*
>
> *James: Well, just it feels like you're gonna help me.*
>
> *Teacher: So if I come over, you just want me to start helping you?*
>
> *James: Yeah.*

Students can also give up when confronted with even the most subtle of perceived cues. Take Talisha, who read her story to the class during the sharing component of writer's workshop. When I blew my nose, she stopped reading and looked at me as though I had laughed at her. Then a few students gave her suggestions for improvements in a pleasant and unassuming tone.

"I think I'll throw this away," Talisha responded. She seemed to think that if people thought the story needed changes, it just wasn't good enough.

## Self-Evaluating Effort

We always ask students to try—especially when they believe something is really hard. However, for some students, "hard" means "impossible." We want these students to develop a growth mind-set, to believe that effort will get them smarter. As they gradually accrue evidence that an effort approach works, they'll become more willing to take on tasks they had previously perceived as hard—even those tasks they feared would reveal their lack of "smartness."

However, we need to talk to students about what *trying* is—about what effort actually looks and feels like—so it doesn't just remain an abstract concept to them. For example, James came to me one day, looking for the moon he'd made. "I can't find it," he said. I suggested a couple of places to look. When he came back with it, I asked him how hard he'd tried to look, on a scale from 1 to 10. "Two," he said. He gave a realistic assessment of his effort.

I had developed this rating vocabulary with James and his classmates as a tool they could use to self-assess their effort and the quality of their work. I routinely asked James to trace back in time to the moment he had decided to give up in a particular situation. I wanted him to gain insight into his state of mind *at that moment*. In terms of exercising effort, where was he, I asked? At a 2? A 4? A 6? I challenged him to push beyond that level, to exert more effort, and to do so before asking for help.

## On a Stage No Longer

Teachers need to see the classroom through the eyes of fixed-belief students—those who feel they are sitting up on a stage and who are anxious about being judged, criticized, and evaluated. As long as students are driven by what others think of them, they're focused on the external. We teachers need to turn them inward, to refocus their attention on their own effort and abilities. We have the power to change the classroom from a stage to a learning forum.

So how do we move students away from a fixed-intelligence mind-set to one in which they're less concerned with how they look and more concerned with how to get smarter through their efforts?

### Give Better Feedback

Students need evidence that what they're doing works. External rewards—or the praise of a teacher, like "good job"—are hollow and ineffective. Teacher feedback is crucial (Hattie, 2009), but it must be consistent, specific to the tasks or concepts being learned, and inclusive of the incremental progress that students are making.

For example, with assessment in hand, show your students that their reading level has increased, explaining the data as

evidence of improvement. Comment on the task completed and what the student has accomplished or was successful at, avoiding opinions that make it about the teacher's approval. Keep the focus on the student and on his or her own actions and efforts.

## Ask Open-Ended Questions

Ask questions that don't require a right answer. This allows for thinking more than knowing, as opposed to questions that simply reward students' speed of response. Teachers should use lots of wait time between posing a question and accepting responses. No one should raise a hand until signaled to do so. Developing a classroom practice of *accountable talk*—in which every student is accountable for his or her thinking, participation, and behavior—provides the perfect medium for this.

## Engage the Disengaged

Teachers can stop a lesson or discussion to challenge a student who's avoiding being engaged: "Lexi, are you with us? What are your thoughts?" They can enlist the entire class in the process in an atmosphere built on the deliberate goal of helping everyone succeed. This means making each student's learning trajectory transparent and training the class to root for and support every learner to improve. One student might point out, "Hey, Emma just raised her hand and is taking a risk!" Teachers can encourage and highlight effort at every opportunity: "That was a good start, Jeffrey. Now I'm going to stick with you a bit longer while you find the complete solution, OK?"

## Examine Your Own Mind-Set

Teachers should also reflect on their own mind-set, asking themselves such questions as, Do I have a fixed mind-set? If so, how does it manifest in the classroom? How can I change my behaviors to work around these beliefs? How do my beliefs interact with those of my students who have a fixed mind-set and with those who have a growth mind-set? Teachers can also examine how they define effort, intelligence, resilience, and perseverance. These reflections can occur during professional development or within a professional learning community.

Entering one's classroom with full awareness of the mind-sets students tend to have and embracing a growth mind-set of one's own will help every student learn with far less anxiety in this public place that is the classroom.

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