

Fostering a “Growth” Mindset in Students

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University) say that part of school leaders’ job is to help students develop their personal narratives – their beliefs about who they are. One crucial aspect of this is helping students move from a *fixed* mindset to a *growth* mindset. Students with a fixed mindset believe their personal qualities are fixed at birth and it’s necessary to keep proving themselves to others. Students who have a growth mindset believe their basic qualities can be continuously cultivated through effort and persistence.

Parents, teachers, and other adults shape young people’s mindsets by what they say about successes and failures. Praise for being “smart” leads kids to believe that learning should be easy – and if it feels difficult, they’re not smart. Praise for focusing and sticking with a task fosters a much more positive mindset – you can get smart through effective effort.

Fisher and Frey say educators can foster students’ motivation by the way they talk to them about accomplishments, identity, and agency:

- *Accomplishments* – “When teachers phrase compliments so that students understand their own roles in the accomplishment, they will begin to see that their efforts allow them to meet their goals,” say Fisher and Frey. “In doing so, teachers can guide students to ‘attend to their internal feelings of pride’ (Johnston, *Choice Words*, Stenhouse, 2004), which will build students’ internal motivation and reduce their need for external praise.” Some examples:

- “You figured that out. Feels good, huh? Tell me how you did it.”
- “I bet you are proud of yourself.”
- “Marcos, your group tells me that you were very helpful in figuring out the answer to this problem.”

- *Identity* – Teachers’ comments can help students build a sense of who they are in the world. Some examples:

- “How are you thinking like a historian today?”
- “Your opening line reminds me of one thing that other authors do. As a reader, I enjoy openings with a startling statement and you really captured that here.”
- “There are so many ways to solve this problem, and I see that you solved it two different ways... I’d bet it was fun to see it work out both ways.”

- *Agency* – This is the feeling that one’s efforts lead directly to accomplishments, as opposed to luck being the main variable. Teachers can build children’s sense of agency by talking to them in specific ways:

- Asking “Why?” is a helpful way to get students to connect actions to effects.
- “What might you do next?” helps students plan actions that will produce results and also communicates the teacher’s belief that students can and will succeed.
- “You did it, but tell me how,” a teacher might say. “I’m particularly interested in efforts that were and were not helpful.”

Fisher and Frey suggest that when principals visit classrooms, they should listen carefully to teachers’ language and see if it’s appropriately praising accomplishments and building identity and agency.

“Choice Words” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Principal Leadership*, December 2012 (Vol. 13, #4, p. 57-59), http://www.nassp.org/tabid/3788/default.aspx?topic=Instructional_Leader_1212
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