

The Educator's Mindset: The Basis for Touching a Student's Mind and Heart

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Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have emphasized the concept of mindsets in our books pertaining to resilience. We have defined mindsets as assumptions and expectations that we possess about ourselves and others. We may not always reflect upon or even be aware of these assumptions, but they play a major role in determining our actions and behaviors. We have described the features of a resilient mindset, a mindset associated with optimism, hope, satisfying interpersonal relationships, and effective coping strategies.

During the past few weeks millions of children and adolescents have started a new school year. Thus, I believe it is an opportune time to devote this article to a theme I have spoken and written about extensively during the past decade, namely, the mindset of educators who truly enrich the hearts and minds of students. A number of the ideas presented in this article were initially articulated in a presentation I gave and a paper I wrote for the Center for Development and Learning (CDL) in Covington, Louisiana and were further elaborated upon in a chapter and article I wrote for Learning Disabilities Worldwide (LDW) in Weston, Massachusetts. Both of these groups are headed by wonderful, dedicated individuals, Alice Thomas at CDL and Teresa Citro at LDW. Through their workshops, conferences, and publications CDL and LDW have made significant contributions to our understanding of successful learning and educational practices (please visit their websites at www.cdl.org and www.LDWorldwide.org for more information about these groups).

My professional activities have provided me with an opportunity to visit many schools and speak with many educators. In addition, I have reflected upon my own experiences as a principal of a school in a locked door unit of a psychiatric hospital and as a consultant to both public and independent schools. My journeys have introduced me to teachers and school administrators who are skilled in reaching the “whole child,” who recognize that even at a time when standardized (some would say “high stakes”) tests dominate the educational landscape in many schools, it is important that we focus not only on the intellectual lives of students but their emotional and social lives as well.

These educators recognize that a student's intelligence or competence is more than a score or a percentile on an IQ test or an achievement test, but should also include an appreciation of the student's "emotional intelligence," a concept about which Daniel Goleman has written extensively and which captures a child's social, emotional, and interpersonal skills.

These talented educators are guided by a mindset that influences their interactions with students, colleagues, and parents. The more aware we are of the main ingredients of this mindset, the better equipped we will be to impart this information to professionals preparing for careers in teaching as well as to experienced educators who are continually seeking to refine their skills and articulate the principles that serve as the foundation for their teaching practices.

The following are five of the key beliefs that I believe represent the mindset of the effective educator. Space limitations do not permit a lengthy discussion of each of these beliefs nor the inclusion of other beliefs. However, it is my hope that this relatively brief description will provide the reader with a sense of the mindset that I advocate be defined, embraced, and incorporated by all educators in their teaching activities. It is also my hope that the ideas I advance will prompt discussions among educational colleagues as they consider the assumptions that direct their work. I want to emphasize that I believe that many, if not most, of the educators reading this article are already engaged in practices that follow from the precepts of this mindset, and in that case I hope it will serve as a validation of one's existing teaching style.

The Mindset of the Effective Educator

1. To believe that what we say and do in the classroom each day can have a lifelong influence on students, including their sense of hope and their ability to be resilient. I as well as others have found that the seemingly simple comments or actions of an educator can make a profound difference in the paths that students choose in their lives. Schools have been highlighted as environments in which self-dignity and resilience can be nurtured. I have frequently quoted the late psychologist Julius Segal, who wrote:

From studies conducted around the world, researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them.

One factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult—an adult from whom they can identify and gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher.

A basic belief that resides within the mindset of effective educators is that they have the power to be the charismatic adult in a student's life and they actively seek opportunities to do so. I should note that this recognition can enhance the sense of meaning that teachers experience in their work, lessening feelings of disillusionment and burnout. We are less likely to experience stress and burnout when we feel that our work makes a difference in the lives of others.

As American historian Henry Brooks Adams noted, “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” (I would add “she” and “her” to the quote.)

2. To believe that addressing the social-emotional needs of students is not an extra curriculum. Some educators have voiced concern that if they expend energy on what might be considered the emotional lives of students (e.g., their sense of security, their confidence about learning, their view of the teacher), it will take time away from teaching academic content. It is unfortunate that a belief has emerged in some quarters that nurturing a student's emotional and social well-being is mutually exclusive from reinforcing academic skills. I am convinced from my own experience as well as the feedback I have received from numerous educators that strengthening a student's self-worth is not an “extra” curriculum that siphons time from teaching academics; if anything, a student's sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in a classroom provides the scaffolding that bolsters the foundation for enhanced learning, motivation, self-discipline, and caring. Examples supporting this position may be found in several of my website articles as well as in my book *The Self-Esteem Teacher*.

3. To believe that all students enter school wishing to learn and to succeed. Without wishing to sound facetious, I have never met a young child first beginning school who says, “I hope I do not do well in school, I hope I have trouble learning, I hope my parents and my teachers are always on my back criticizing me about my school performance.” If we accept that all students truly wish to succeed, then if they are displaying academic and/or behavior problems, we must ask, “What is it that we can do differently so that the student will succeed?” As an educator at one of my workshops

eloquently voiced, “This belief should not be interpreted as blaming teachers but rather as empowering them.” She explained, “Why continue to do the same thing over and over again if it doesn’t work? It is empowering to realize that we have the ability to think about new strategies that may be successful.” Once pejorative labels such as lazy or unmotivated are affixed to students, we will often respond to them in ways that confirm the label. In such instances we will get what we expect—a seeming lack of motivation and school failure. In many of my writings I have offered examples of educators who had the courage to replace their ineffective scripts with new scripts. When they did so, they were pleased to see the greater willingness of even so-called “resistant” students to modify their own scripts and become more cooperative.

4. To believe that students will be more responsive and motivated to learn from us when we first meet their basic needs. Effective educators subscribe to the view that before they attempt to teach a student academic skills or content, their first task is to create a safe and secure environment in which all students feel comfortable and motivated to learn. As has often been said, “Students don’t care what you know until they first know you care.”

One of the foremost researchers in the area of motivation is psychologist Edward Deci at the University of Rochester. Deci’s model suggests that students will be more motivated to learn when particular needs have been met. Deci articulates three such needs: (a) to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school (I would add the words “to feel welcome”), (b) to feel a sense of autonomy and self-determination, and (c) to feel competent.

An understanding of these needs can serve as guideposts, prompting educators to ask:

How do I help each student to feel welcome in my classroom?

What choices do I provide my students so that they develop a sense of ownership for their own education?

Do I incorporate and teach problem-solving skills in my activities so that students have an opportunity to learn to make informed decisions?

Do I discipline more as a form of punishment or as a way of teaching self-discipline? That is, do I involve students in helping to create some of the rules and

consequences in the classroom so that they experience greater responsibility for their own behavior?

Do I identify and reinforce the strengths or “islands of competence” of students?

Do I convey from the first day of school that mistakes are part of the learning process, that mistakes are expected and accepted and not to be feared?

A consideration of these and similar questions will help educators to develop a classroom environment in which students will not only be more receptive to learning but they will learn skills that will serve them well in all parts of their lives.

5. To believe that parents are our partners, not our adversaries. I have witnessed far too many situations in which educators and parents have become adversaries and it is the child who suffers. I once heard a saying that is apropos: “When the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.” I realize that it is not always an easy task to develop positive parent-teacher relationships, especially when a child is demonstrating academic or behavioral difficulties in school, but it is an important goal to achieve. I visited one elementary school in which teachers called each parent the day before the school year began to express their desire to work closely together; they encouraged the parents to contact them with any questions or concerns and they conveyed the wish for a positive relationship during the year. The teachers at the school told me that they initiated this practice since they realized that typically the first time they called parents was when there was a problem. Thus, their initial contact centered around a negative issue. They said that communicating with parents in a more positive way enhanced their relationship with parents and, very importantly, had a beneficial effect on the learning and motivation of the students.

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As I noted at the beginning of this article, mindsets are powerful determinants of our behavior. The more aware educators are of the assumptions and expectations that guide their teaching style, the more they can adopt practices that will lead to the creation of a positive, vibrant, secure learning environment.

In closing I should like to share the often-cited observation of psychologist and educator Haim Ginott:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a person's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated or a person humanized or de-humanized.

Ginott's words are well worth considering as we seek to enrich the lives of both students and staff in the school setting.

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