

Introduction

This book is about getting our students to believe in themselves, to believe that they have able brains, and to believe that effort is the main determinant of their academic success, thus the subtitle “Smart Is Something You Can Get.” If they are behind academically, it is not because there is anything wrong with their brains or that their “ability” is deficient.

We will alternately call this belief and knowing how to act from it a belief in *malleable ability*, *effort-based ability*, and the *growth mindset*: malleable ability meaning ability can be altered, effort-based ability meaning one’s ability to do something is based on the effort extended to build it, and growth mindset meaning believing one can grow one’s ability.

For students to accept this message, they need to hear that *we* believe in their capacity and they need to be surrounded by an environment that sends these messages at every turn:

- What we’re doing is important.
- You can do it.
- And I’m not going to give up on you.

These messages don’t get sent by osmosis, cheerleading, or signage. They get sent through everyday behavior—what a teacher says and does. It is not a matter of personality, but it is a matter of behavior.

It will help to share current research with students and teach them about brain plasticity, but that will not be enough for many students. This is because most of them have already accepted the message of the bell curve that ability is fixed . . . ability to do math, to do sports, to do public speaking—anything. This book assembles the evidence that fixed ability is a myth.

All children in all schools, regardless of income or social class, will benefit from the application of the skills in this book. But for children of poverty and children of color, our proficiency with these skills is essential, in many ways life-saving. I am well aware that children of color and children of poverty are in a vortex of many pernicious forces that limit their opportunity to learn and that tell them they are “less than.” These forces

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range from pervasive racism to restrictive housing policies that trap minorities in environments of poverty and low opportunity, to inadequate health care, to public transportation systems that make it hard to get to work from poor neighborhoods, to an unfair criminal justice system. We acknowledge the influence of all these factors on far too many children. But the one thing we can do the most about is the messaging and positive support, both emotionally and instructionally, of the environments we control—the classroom and the school. And the power of that environment has been demonstrated again and again (see schools identified each year on the Education Trust’s website).

The point we want to make here is that students who are on the low end of the achievement gap—usually children of color and often also of poverty—have been getting messages about their “ability” all their lives and have experienced being behind academically so long that they have bought the story. How could they not? So if we are to eliminate the achievement gap, we have to change these students’ minds about their supposed low ability and persuade them about the benefits of becoming good students. Taking that on will bring us face-to-face with our *own* beliefs about our students’ capacity, our own biases, our racial assumptions, and our own inevitable doubt about malleable ability.

If one grows up in the United States, it is impossible to escape the pervasive message that ability is fixed, unchangeable, and unevenly distributed. So as we attempt to inspire our students to believe in themselves, we will need to wrestle with our own histories and conclusions about our own abilities.

There is an embedded concept about the job of teaching here that is particularly important for underperforming, low-confidence students. It goes like this: Our job, especially with students who are behind, is to (1) convince them that they can grow their ability, (2) show them how, and (3) motivate them to want to. To take on this mission we will need to be convinced ourselves that ability can be grown, and we will have to become convinced that learning can be accelerated for students who have experienced systematic disadvantages.

Students are profoundly influenced by the messages they get from the significant people in their lives about their ability. (So are we as adults!) So it is particularly important that we be consistent and authentic in sending the three critical messages—this is important, you can do it, and I’m not going to give up on you—in every way we can, explicitly and implicitly, in our interactions with our students. Each chapter of the book is about specific ways we can do this, ways that encompass deliberate use of language, classroom structures and routines, particular instructional strategies, and school-level policies and procedures.

The task is convincing students that they are not behind because they are deficient learners or lack ability. They can, in fact, grow their ability. They can not only catch up but also achieve proficiency if they learn how

to exert effective effort and have sufficient time. Today this is popularly called the *growth mindset*. In previous decades it went by the name of *effort-based ability*.

After decades of advocacy by many educators, the growth mindset has achieved a major presence in educational literature. It has a dynamic and challenging message, especially in the United States, where belief in the bell curve of innate ability is so strong. The growth mindset says that academic ability in any area is not fixed; it can be grown, and performance can be grown to the point of proficiency given sufficient time, good instruction, and, above all, effective effort by the student.

The challenge for us as educators is to

- get our students to believe this,
- teach them how to exert effective effort,
- make them feel known and valued, and
- give them high-quality instruction

all at once! This is especially needed for those students who do not have confidence in their ability and are significantly behind their peers.

Carol Dweck brought us to a turning point in consciousness with her 2007 book *Mindsets*. One of the most important researchers on this topic for some 40 years, she translated her research with great clarity into a readable book aimed at a lay audience. Other writers advocated the same message over the decades (e.g., Jeff Howard, Bernard Weiner), but Dweck's book threw the window open as none before and has thankfully spread like wildfire through the educational community and the popular press. The challenging message out there is that ability is not fixed; ability can be grown if one exerts effective effort. And the evidence is in: Students who proceed from that mindset do much better!

It is important to directly teach students about the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, as Dweck advocates, and to show that students with growth mindsets do better. It is a great door-opener to share the research that brains are malleable and dendrites and synapses can be grown. But it is yet another thing to convince students that I, your teacher, who know and value you, am convinced that *you* have an able brain and can grow *your* ability in the academic content for which I am your teacher. While teaching students about brain growth and brain malleability certainly has a place in the education of students of color and of poverty, in fact for all students, much more is needed.

Low-confidence, underperforming students have been receiving messages their whole school careers (and out of school too) that they are not smart enough (perhaps not smart overall, but certainly not smart in subject X, which could be math, writing, anything). They don't see the point of putting forth more effort in an area where they are "dumb." Thus they require much more than information about brain malleability. I'd like to

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focus on the interactive skills that convince them that their teacher believes the growth mindset applies to *them* and that their teacher is committed to and believes in *their* success. This book is about how to do that.



Chapters 1 and 2 are about debunking the idea of the bell curve of ability and intelligence. Chapter 1 traces the history of how fixed intelligence and measurable IQ got established so soundly in the United States. Chapter 2 presents the evidence that ability can be grown and that the bell curve of innate ability is false.

The three key expectations messages—what we’re doing is important, you can do it, and I won’t give up on you—can be communicated explicitly. But what makes them believable and motivates students to invest in school are the *implicit* messages embedded in the way teachers handle everyday events with them individually.

Say a student asks for help. A teacher communicating belief in a student might respond as follows:

SCRIPT 1

Student: I can’t do number 4.

Teacher: What part don’t you understand? [*“Part” implies there are parts the student does understand.*]

Student: I just can’t do it.

Teacher: Well, I know you can do part of it, because you’ve done the first three problems correctly. [*Explicit expression of confidence.*] The fourth problem is similar but just a little harder. [*Acknowledges difficulty.*] You start out the same, but then you have to do one extra step. [*Gives a cue.*] Review the first three problems, and then start number 4 again and see if you can figure it out. [*Provides a strategy.*] I’ll come by your desk in a few minutes to see how you’re doing. [*I’ll be back and follow through to make sure you succeed.*]

A teacher who doesn’t really care, or who does care but doesn’t believe the student really “has it,” might respond as follows:

SCRIPT 2

Student: I can’t do number 4.

Teacher: You can’t? Why not? [*A vapid question. If the student knew why he couldn’t do it, he wouldn’t be stuck.*]

Student: I just can’t do it.

Teacher: Don't say you can't do it. We never say we can't do it. *[Perhaps the teacher wants to urge perseverance. But instead he gives the student a moralistic message about having difficulty.]* Did you try hard? *[That's a no-win question. What if he did? Then he must be dumb. What if he didn't? Then he's a slug.]*

Student: Yes, but I can't do it.

Teacher: Well, you did the first three problems. Maybe if you went back and worked a little longer you could do the fourth problem too. *[So working longer and harder with the same old inadequate strategies might somehow magically work?]* Why don't you work at it a little more and see what happens? *[So maybe there will be a miracle. Not likely. I'm out of here.]*

None of the bracketed messages above are communicated explicitly, but they are embedded in the choice of language the teacher employs.

Examining our use of language in arenas of classroom life is the first strand of this work. Similar arenas of classroom life that powerfully communicate embedded belief messages through language are these:

- calling on students
- response to student answers
- giving help
- changing attitudes toward errors
- giving tasks and assignments
- feedback
- positive reframing of re-teaching
- tenacity
- pushback on fixed mindset language

In Chapter 3 we will look in detail at these subtle but powerful ways in which we consistently communicate to our students with choice of language (or not) our own view of their ability. It matters a great deal that our students, *all* our students, get the three crucial messages from us about the importance of what we're doing in school and how persistent we will be in helping them achieve the proficiencies of which their able brains are capable.

That they get these messages from us consistently makes a big difference in their belief in themselves, their investment in school, and their ultimate achievement. And the messages don't get sent by accident; they get sent through deliberate behavior we display in specific arenas of classroom life, that is, things we say and do. Very formal, reserved people and relaxed, outgoing teachers can both succeed in sending these messages. It is not a matter of style, but it is a matter of behavior.



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The second strand of the work is creating classroom routines and structures that help students see their progress and take responsibility (agency) for their learning. These routines give real horsepower and constant reminders to students of their role in doing well academically and embed by their very nature the message that they *can* do well (Chapter 4.) We will introduce these action steps with convincing research that these actions play a significant part in student achievement.

For example, if quizzes are frequent and students have to retake quizzes when they didn't attain proficiency, there is a powerful embedded message: "Nothing short of proficiency will do. You can get there, and I'll make sure you do." Teachers who want to convince their students of the growth mindset provide multiple access channels to learn the content when the students didn't perform well on the quiz. And then the students retake the quiz and get the highest grade they got—not an average. That structure embeds the high, positive expectations message the students need on a daily basis.

Below is a list of other structures we will dig into in this book that embed this message through giving students tools to be active agents in their own learning (known these days as *agency*):

- frequent quizzes and a flow of data to students
- student self-corrections/self-scoring
- student error analysis
- student self-evaluation (e.g., an effort rubric)
- student goal setting
- student feedback to teacher on pace or need for clarification
- regular re-teaching, retakes, and required redos
- grading practices that reward effort
- cooperative learning protocols and explicit teaching of social, group, and language skills for supporting one another
- rewards and recognition for effective effort
- extra help

At this point, for teachers following this path, our verbal behavior and our classroom structures and routines would now be aligned to communicate to students:

Your brainpower is quite competent to do well in this subject and I'm going to show you how. If you are struggling, it's because you have gaps in prior knowledge or don't yet know the best strategies for mastering this content. I'm going to help you find the gaps and fill them and teach you whatever strategies you need.

There would be nothing wrong with saying this explicitly to students, but to get them to believe it, we have to *act* as if *we* believe it ourselves in

all the daily interactions of class instruction and class business that make up the emotional environment. And we have to create structures and routines that would exist only if we believed our students could be successful at a proficient level.

The third strand is that certain instructional strategies emerge as vital to convincing students we believe in them and enabling them to succeed (Chapter 5). For example, underperforming students often don't know what our expectations are even though we think our explanations and assignments are perfectly clear. Going out of our way to be sure our students understand exactly what the criteria for success are and take the time to do so with them, perhaps individually, has two implications: First, we wouldn't take the time and effort to do that if we didn't want them to succeed and believe they could. Second, when they actually *do understand* exactly what we want, it is surprising how quickly students rise to the level of expectation.

The fourth strand of work is deliberately and specifically teaching students *how to exert effective effort*. Then we add frequent self-evaluation on how well they have exerted it. Effective effort isn't just working harder and longer, though persistence is an element of it. Effective effort has six specific attributes that can be built into our instruction. We'll take them up in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 is about student choice: when, where, and how to make students feel legitimately that their voice influences classroom life and their choices exert influence on their learning.

Chapter 8 shows how we can shape school policies and programs that embed by their very nature the tacit assumption that ability can be grown. Examples include the rationale for how teachers are assigned and the reward structures of the school.

All of these approaches together can create a powerful environment of confidence building and achievement for students who otherwise would fail or just slip through the cracks without getting the first-rate academic competencies they could have achieved.

So the intent of this book is to give readers a comprehensive map of personal and institutional responses for fighting the myth of the bell curve of ability. This is a how-to book about getting all of our students, especially our low-confidence, underperforming students, to believe in the growth mindset and acquire the tools to act on it effectively.

While we will focus on the power of in-school approaches to eliminating the gap in this book, we are fully aware of the other factors that surround the problem. Other authors have focused on these factors, such as working with parents, creating comprehensive afterschool programs, encouraging culturally responsive teaching, and changing negative peer culture. Still others who start from a social justice point of view focus on eliminating structural obstacles to equal opportunity, such as tracking, referral and placement procedures, and embedded assumptions for

implementing special education services. These are all important approaches to closing the achievement gap. Concerted, coordinated approaches are needed for this deep issue.

But if we can teach students to believe that “smart is something you can get,” we can act powerfully in the zone we control—the school—to disable the preschool-to-prison pipeline for students of color and of poverty. It is a personal tragedy for them and their families; it is also a devastating loss and a moral crisis for our country. And it does not have to be. We believe the teaching skills, the classroom structures and routines, and the schoolwide programs and policies described here can surround students with an environment of belief and aspiration that changes their lives.



In 1973 Paul Simon recorded a song titled “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover.” Putting that syntax in a more serious title, beginning on page 9 is list of “50 Ways to Get Students to Believe in Themselves” . . . and to act on that.

Each of these 50 ways is a way we would act in our teaching and our schools would organize in their practices if we wanted to press a comprehensive set of levers to get students to believe in themselves. The list is, in effect, the map for a call to action and the outline of this book.

THE BOTTOM LINE OF EFFORT-BASED ABILITY

The ability to do something competently—anything, whether it’s mathematics, race-car driving, dancing, or public speaking—is primarily determined by *effective effort* and your belief that you can get proficient at it. “Smart is something you can get.” The bell curve of ability is wrong. Even what we call “intelligence” is malleable.

Thus our work as educators, in fact a major part of it for some students, is

1. to **convince** them they can grow their ability at academics,
2. to **show** them how, and
3. to **motivate** them to want to.

50 Ways to Get Students to Believe in Themselves

or

How to Do Attribution Retraining

Verbal behaviors and teacher choice of language in daily interaction:

1. Calling on students
2. Responses to student answers
 - Sticking
3. Giving help
4. Changing attitudes toward errors
 - Persevere and return
5. Giving tasks and assignments
6. Feedback according to criteria for success with encouragement and precise diagnostic guidance
7. Positive framing of re-teaching
8. Tenacity when students don't meet expectations: pursuit and continued call for high-level performance
9. Pushback on fixed mindset language and student helplessness

These nine are how we do attribution retraining: "It's effort, not innate ability."

Regular classroom mechanisms for generating student agency:

10. Frequent quizzes and a flow of data to students
11. Student self-corrections/self-scoring
12. Student error analysis
13. Regular re-teaching
14. Required retakes and redos with highest grade
15. Cooperative learning protocols and teaching of group skills

**All
observable
in
classrooms**

- 16. Student feedback to teacher on pace or need for clarification
- 17. Reward system for effective effort and gains
- 18. Extra help
- 19. Student goal setting

No Secrets teaching **instructional strategies** promoting clarity:

- 20. Communicating objectives in student-friendly language and unpacking them with students
- 21. Clear and accessible criteria for success, developed with students
- 22. Exemplars of products that meet criteria for success
- 23. Checking for understanding
- 24. Making students' thinking visible
- 25. Frequent student summarizing

All
observable
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classrooms

Explicitly teaching students:

- 26. Effective effort behaviors
- 27. Student self-evaluation of effective effort
- 28. Learning study and other strategies of successful students
- 29. Attribution theory and brain research

Opportunities for choice and voice:

- 30. Stop my teaching
- 31. Student-generated questions
- 32. Negotiating the rules of the classroom game
- 33. Teaching students the principles of learning
- 34. Learning style
- 35. Non-reports and student experts
- 36. Culturally relevant teaching
- 37. Student-led parent conferences

Schoolwide policies and practices for:

38. Hiring teachers
39. Assignment of teachers
40. Personalizing knowledge of and contact with students
41. Scheduling
42. Grouping
43. Content-focused teams that examine student work in relation to their teaching
44. Reward system for academic effort and gains
45. Push, support, and tight safety net (hierarchy of intervention)

Programs that enable students to value school and form a peer culture that supports academic effort:

46. Quality afterschool programs and extracurricular activities
47. Building identity and pride in belonging to the school
48. Creating a vision of a better life attainable through learning the things school teaches
49. Forming an image of successful people who look like them and value education
50. Building relations with parents through home visits and focus on how to help

It is important to keep in mind that we do not take on any of these 50 items with commitment unless we conceive of our job description in a certain way.