

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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School/Grade: Byram Hills High School/9-12

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context

I am a Spanish teacher at BHHS who teaches four 9th grade classes. The 9th grade is the transition year for all students and thus, not all students will view their new learning situation from the same perspective. In World Languages as in other disciplines, the expectation is that students remember what they have learned in middle school and be able to apply it to the new material being taught in 9th grade. The curriculum is expanded and taught at a faster pace, requiring some students to adapt their skills, attitudes, and study habits in order to be successful. While some students openly embrace the opportunity for a fresh start that each September brings, others react to new situations with trepidation. Many, many, times I hear, "I don't get it. I was a straight A student in middle school." I have heard this enough to realize that it is a common theme amongst the 9th grade. I began to wonder about how I could foster persistence in my classroom so that students would persevere in a new situation and adapt his/her study habits to lead to a more thorough understanding and production of Spanish? What is the mindset that each student should have so that he/she becomes a lifelong learner instead of living from from test grade to test grade?

Action Plan

I started out this year of Action Research with the question: Why do some students immediately say: "I'm going to fail - I don't know anything." before any kind of assessment? Hearing this on a consistent basis compelled me to search out the reason for this perception. So, I began to focus on finding and creating additional materials that would provide extra practice so that

whatever standard was being taught could be reached multiple ways. But I still heard the same outcry even after the scaffolding was in place.

I wondered if students were just not accepting responsibility for their learning. But in my classes I heard the “I’m going to fail” comment from students who worked and sought help as well as from those who didn’t. The next thing I did was to reflect on where I had heard this “I can’t” attitude before and recognized a personal experience for which the answer was to persevere. Was perseverance, or lack of it, the reason students believed that they couldn’t achieve? I conferenced with both my colleagues and Tim Kaltenecker and realized that I needed to do some reading on this issue. I began by reading an article on creating a safe environment in which students could take a risk, and from there, read *Mindset* by Carol Dweck.

Results

The first article I read was by Anne Sobel in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Her article, *How Failure in the Classroom is More Instructive Than Success*, allowed that one of the most important criteria for success lies in creating a safety net in the classroom such that students may take calculated risks, become more resilient, and actually view failure as a step to success. Her focus is away from the grades and more into the learning process much the same as a child learning to walk: a few steps, stumble, get up again.

Anne Sobel then gives five suggestions for creating a safe environment for students to risk failure without failure being the end result. They are:

1. Create an ethos - failure is normal and the practice that ensues after failure is valuable
2. Find new definitions of success
3. Give real-time feedback
4. Build it into your grading (taking a calculated risk is okay)
5. Reflect on failure

I then read *Mindset* by Carol S. Dweck and found it difficult to put down. Dweck posits that there are two mindsets that directly affect all decisions in life: fixed and growth. With a fixed mindset a person will only go so far to solve a problem. If the tried and true strategies don’t work, the only option is to give up. The fixed mindset says that “I have only so much talent and intellect to work with and I guess that I’m not good at something so why try? The belief that abilities are fixed and cannot be enhanced or even created is the cornerstone of the fixed mindset. Abilities are finite and a person with a fixed mindset doesn’t risk giving it his all because there is a possibility of

failure. Risk is seen as fear rather than the possibility that something new can be learned. Taking on a task where failure might be the outcome is paralyzing for someone with a fixed mindset. “The fixed mindset limits achievement and learning.” It “fills people’s minds with interfering thoughts, makes effort disagreeable, and it leads to inferior learning strategies.”

On the other hand a “growth” mindset is one that embraces challenge, creativity and learning. Someone with a growth mindset “takes charge of his/her motivation and learning.” People with a “growth mindset often develop their minds fully.” Their perspective is that life is a smorgasbord of experiences to be sampled and embraced. A student with a growth mindset might relish the challenges that come with an advanced level course and put a lot of effort into solving complex problems.

The implications for each mindset in and out of the classroom are enormous.

This past school year provided me with the informal data I needed to realize that with a fixed mindset, it is very tough to be persistent. My students provided comments on a regular basis, such as, “I didn’t know how to do it so I left it” or “I got stuck so I didn’t do it” or “I didn’t know some of the vocabulary so I couldn’t finish my homework.” I thought, “That’s it, something has to be done. What is really going on here?”

Implications

I worked for months on my initial plan of gathering ancillary materials that would provide extra practice for students struggling with any of the 4 skills of language acquisition. I presented my thought to Tim Kaltenecker who quickly saw that I was trying to fix the outside without fostering a paradigm shift in student perspective. My data collection will begin in the new school year when I ask students to characterize themselves as learners through a survey. When I have that information I can begin to zero in on those students whose mindset is becoming a stumbling block to them and begin to awaken them to a different perspective which would foster perseverance because there will be a positive payoff even if the grade is not what was expected. Learning is so much more than grades.

Although I have been teaching for many, many years, there are many lenses through which I observe my students and even more exist than I thought possible. After reading Dweck’s book, I

have been looking for examples of both fixed and growth mindsets among my students. Today, one of my students voiced his opinion that he would prefer an authentic assessment of his speaking skills in Spanish because it was what he was excited about learning. He can't wait to show me what he can really do outside the parameters of vocabulary specific dialogues. He is not afraid of failing. He is not limiting himself to specific phrases, and he is relishing the challenge of having a conversation with all its natural twists and turns.

This research project has opened my mind to the possibilities of changing students' self-talk and perspective. Helping students move from a fixed to a growth mindset has the potential for creating a paradigm shift in the student so that he no longer fears academic risk, but rather embraces those opportunities that challenge what he knows.

One of the implications for practice is in my own head. When I hear "I'm going to fail" or "I'm not good at this," Dweck would say that this is an indication of a fixed mindset. I can then ask a pointed question like, "What makes you say that?" or "Tell me how you've prepared so I can see if there are any gaps in your learning." Thus, I can address the feat with specific steps while encouraging the student to persevere until he proves to himself that in fact, he or she can do it.