

What's Missing from the Conversation: The Growth Mindset in Cultural Competency

August 31, 2015 National Association of Independent Schools

<https://www.nais.org/learn/independent-ideas/august-2015/what%E2%80%99s-missing-from-the-conversation-the-growth-m/>

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Everyone knows that conversations about identity, inclusivity, and cultural competency can be touchy. That's why a facilitator describes a series of dialogue norms when the day begins. Among them are aspirational goals: "Lean into discomfort," "Assume positive intent," and "Listen to understand." All agree to operate by these norms and profess that authentic dialogues are critical for living, learning, playing, and being in diverse communities.

And yet...

In the midst of a discussion on educators' implicit bias and the resultant underperformance and over-disciplining of students of color, a faculty member erupts: "I am *not* racist! I treat everyone the same — I don't care if my students are black, white, purple, or green; they *all* have a fair shot in my classroom!"

And yet...

After a teacher unveils an upcoming third-grade unit on family that will discuss different kinds of families, including adoptive parents, different race parents, foster parents, grandparents as primary parent figures, same-sex parents, and more, one parent raises serious concerns. "Children are so innocent, and they don't notice these differences. Why do we have to expose them to ideas they're not ready for and make things worse?"

As an educator, I have been teaching youth about identity, culture, bias, privilege, oppression, and cultural competency for more than 18 years. As a facilitator and trainer, I have worked with schools, universities, nonprofits, government agencies, etc. toward greater inclusivity and equity for more than 10 years. I have found that the scenarios above are more common than not because many cultural myths proliferate. If we are willing to move beyond these myths and integrate a growth mindset into cultural competency work, we can progress toward the truly inclusive communities we all aspire to be part of.

Overview of Two Mindsets: Growth and Fixed

The term growth mindset was coined by Carol Dweck of Stanford University to explain why some individuals seem to succeed in almost anything they set their mind to. After conducting several powerful experiments and producing long-term studies, she found evidence of two mindsets:

“In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success — without effort. They’re wrong,” according to [Dweck’s website](#).

“In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work — brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Virtually all great people have had these qualities,” according to [Dweck’s website](#). ([See graphic by Nigel Homes.](#))

There are varying degrees of growth and fixed mindsets — these mindsets describe two extremes of a spectrum. Also, we can have a growth mindset in one area (If I practice my volleyball serve for an hour every day, I will eventually ace it consistently), and have a fixed mindset in other areas (I can’t draw. I’m no artist). But no matter the field or skill, the evidence is clear that a growth mindset can make the difference between success and failure.

I attribute my personal success in this area to my upbringing, even if my parents and teachers did not know the terminology at the time. I have taught the growth mindset to my sixth-grade

science students, and have seen a positive impact. Students are more willing to tackle challenges and seek feedback, and they bounce back from setbacks more easily.

Moreover, I have incorporated the growth mindset into my diversity trainings and workshops, and witnessed significant shifts in minds and hearts. Several times, veteran faculty who, in the past, have responded to professional development with guilt, defensiveness, or outright dismissal have expressed a sudden understanding, a curiosity to learn more, and an eagerness to implement changes in the classroom.

Three Myths around Cultural Competency

When we unpack the fixed mindset nature of three common myths surrounding cultural competency, we see how having a growth mindset can help us move beyond the silence and paralysis, and surface political correctness that can hinder our forward progress.

THE TWO MINDSETS - CULTURAL COMPETENCY

FIXED MINDSET

If you are a good person, you must be competent.

I don't feel safe.

If we talk about it, things might get worse.

We had that conversation once, and it was disastrous.

I tried to build relationships with members of that group, and they weren't interested in connecting with me.

These folks are stuck in inaction, worried that they might give themselves away as incompetent. Much energy is spent intellectualizing, deflecting, and defending actions or points of view.

Central Belief



Some Challenges



Obstacles



Overall Outcome



GROWTH MINDSET

We are all on a journey, and competence is always aspirational.

I am uncomfortable; I must be learning a lot.

Not talking about it will result in status quo, and status quo is not an option.

Mistakes in this work are inevitable.

I learned so much in that setback.

These folks are always becoming more and more competent. Their relationships are more authentic and comfortable, they are resilient through rough patches, and they are eager to learn more.

[VIEW FULL CONCEPT DOCUMENT](#)

Myth 1: All or None

The “All or None” myth teaches us that there those who are “with it” and those who are not. Under this myth, those of us who understand or experience one of the societal isms (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, etc.) automatically assume that we understand the issues of other isms. “As a woman, I understand oppression — I know what it must be like to be poor in this world.” This myth also makes us unwilling to acknowledge privilege surrounding one of our identities because we experience oppression in another. “As a gay man, I wouldn’t know what white privilege feels like.” Finally, this myth implies that if we make mistakes or have an area of weakness or ignorance, it must be because we are not culturally competent after all. “You don’t *know* what cisgender means? Wow...” This myth keeps us from asking questions when we don’t know; we spend more energy protecting our competency status rather than listening, learning, and growing.

In the growth mindset, we understand and accept that there is always room to grow. No one can fully master all aspects of cultural competency for all cultural identifiers, and mistakes are inevitable. With humble curiosity, we seek to better understand ourselves, understand others, develop cross-cultural skills, and work toward equity and inclusion.

Myth 2: Mistakes and Moral Worth

The “Mistakes and Moral Worth” myth teaches us that those who offend or hurt must be doing so because they are bigoted and morally deficient, and good-hearted people do not speak or act in ways that marginalize. Under this myth, those of us who make an offensive comment, even if unintentional, are attacked as though we had professed to be a member of a hate group. “You are such a sexist pig for saying that!” We feel morally justified in treating others inhumanely for their ignorant behavior. “People who act like you should be fired.” We deny hurt feelings of others when they point to our words or actions as their cause. “I am a good person – what I said was not homophobic.” Consider the social media response to any public figure caught saying anything remotely offensive, as well as the public figure’s defensive responses. This myth leaves us afraid to speak our mind for fear of public shaming. It keeps us focusing on our intentions rather than on our impacts. We try to prove our moral worth by debasing others who have displayed shortcomings.

In the growth mindset, we understand that good people can make mistakes. Mistakes do not define us. As Brené Brown says, we feel guilt — “I did something bad” — and own our mistakes,

apologize, and try to make amends. But we do not feel shame — “I am bad” — and thus respond with negative behaviors associated with shame. When others make mistakes, we are likely to respond with patience and desire to teach, understanding that it’s possible to dislike an action without disliking the person.

Myth 3: Tonsils of Bias

For the final myth, I borrow heavily from Jay Smooth’s TEDx talk, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race.” The “Tonsils of Bias” myth teaches us that bias and prejudice are like tonsils. We either have them or we don’t — and we can get them removed. Under this myth, those of us who’ve had some training to understand another’s identity and difference assume that we have learned everything we need to be competent. “I took a workshop on ageism last year. What else is there to learn?” We also believe that relationships can “fix” our misconceptions about a whole group of people. “I have lots of friends who are immigrants. I’m not xenophobic.” This myth leaves us slipping into complacency and clinging to a false sense of mastery, reluctant to look for authentic understanding and growth. It makes us think, “If we just find the right all-school read, the right professional development workshop, the right speaker for the MLK assembly, we can fix all the problems at the school.”

In the growth mindset, we understand that bias and prejudice, as Jay Smooth puts it, are more like plaque. There is so much misinformation in the world reinforced by history, systems, and media. If we are to keep the myths at bay, we must get into a regular practice, much like brushing and flossing every day. And just as good oral hygiene does not guarantee we will never have bad breath or have food stuck in our teeth, a regular questioning, learning, and engaging across difference can only decrease how much our bias and prejudice show up in our daily thoughts, words, and actions. We accept this reality and keep practicing.

It’s About the Practice

Our schools can have great intentions, powerful mission statements, moving programs, people from diverse backgrounds, and time and resources devoted to big name speakers. Without regular practice, however, these elements become mere artifacts to protect our competence status. I hope NAIS schools will embrace the growth mindset as a critical component of their cultural competency work. Only then can diversity, inclusion, equity, and cultural competency transform from professed values to lived values.

Resources

- *Men, Women, and Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough* by Brené Brown.

- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck.
- TEDx Hampshire College, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race” by Jay Smooth.
- *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* by Claude M. Steele.
- *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives* by Shankar Vedantam.