

A Mindset for Success

**In Your Classroom
and School**

Tony Swainston



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Part I

Why changing mindsets in our schools matters

Chapter 1

The academic and social impact of mindsets

Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right.

Anon.

Mindsets and academic progress

Professor Carol Dweck, in her remarkable book *Mindset*, provides many examples of where children with a growth mindset academically outperform those children with a fixed mindset.¹

As we will explore in more detail later on, one such example looked at a group of American students who all had the same maths score when they left elementary school to enter junior high school. (In the UK this would be students leaving junior school to go to secondary school at 11 years of age.) The students were assessed in terms of their mindset: some of them had more of a fixed mindset and others had more of a growth mindset. The students were tracked over a two year period to see how their maths scores changed. The findings showed clearly that the maths scores of the students with a fixed mindset went down, whereas the scores for the students with a growth mindset progressively rose. We will return to what growth and fixed mindsets mean in more detail in Chapter 2.

From my own experience, I too have found that working with schools on a mindset for success programme has brought about significant academic change. For example, a school in Ripon in north Yorkshire that I worked with found that at the end of one year of focusing on mindsets, the academic results were the best the

¹ C. S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

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school had ever had. Of course, it is notoriously difficult to measure the impact of individual interventions in schools. There are so many variables that come into play that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about what particular intervention has created any change that takes place. The mindset of this head teacher, with his readiness to take a risk on trying something new, being open to possibilities, believing in the potential within each of his staff, as well as the pupils, and having a willingness to find solutions that come from strategies that may not be the most obvious ones, inevitably contributed to the success of the school. However, the head teacher is also convinced that the mindsets intervention was a significant factor in raising the level of attainment in the school. In addition to the academic progress of the pupils, the head teacher reported that both adults and pupils were talking about learning in a very different way at the end of the mindset for success programme than they were at the beginning.

I believe that the two things are in fact interconnected, with the change in language about learning impacting on learning and attainment levels. Although it is far easier to measure changes in something like examination results compared to changes in the beliefs and attitudes of adults and pupils, the latter are nevertheless critically important. There is, obviously, an ongoing and vigorous debate about whether the things that we measure or count in schools, such as examination results, are in fact the things we should focus so much of our attention on in the 21st century. Research clearly indicates that, for example, emotional intelligence (EI) seems to play a far bigger part in the level of success an individual experiences in life compared to the part that IQ plays.² Is the main reason that our focus is on IQ in schools because EQ is harder to assess than IQ? Once again, we are reminded of the maxim mentioned earlier on – ‘Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted’ – and how this suggests that we are often drawn to the easier alternative, even though it may not be giving us the best results.

The evidence clearly shows that the type of mindset that a child has will impact on their academic progress, but there is more.

2 See, for example, D. Rosete and J. Ciarrochi, Emotional intelligence and its relationship to workplace performance outcomes of leadership effectiveness, *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 26 (2005), 388–399.

Mindsets impacting on the social development of pupils

Schools are clearly, and rightly, concerned with providing the best learning for their students. Better academic outcomes for students will enable them to have more options in their lives. But I also know, from personal experience, that teachers, head teachers, support staff, parents and everyone else involved in the nurturing of young people in our schools also care enormously about developing what we might call the 'holistic child'. This is why it is important that, as they progress through and eventually leave school, children are given the tools to support them to face life's challenges and to show determination, grit, resilience and perseverance. These things, which they can learn and develop, will help them to get the most from their lives. Significant in all of this is for children to learn about mindsets and how adopting more of a growth mindset will help them to develop their determination, grit, resilience and perseverance.

In Chapter 4 we will look at the meta-research (research of the research) carried out by Professor John Hattie, which examined a wide range of influences that impact upon the learning of students. His investigation revealed that the most significant thing we can work on as educators, and which makes the biggest difference to the learning of students, is the expectations of the student. Think for a moment about all of the things you could do to support the learning of your students in the classroom. Out of all of these, Hattie has found that it is student expectations (with an effect size of 1.44 for those of you who would like to know this) that comes out as being the most important. And this resonates perfectly, as we shall see, with the findings of Carol Dweck on mindsets. In addition, Hattie found that interventions like social skills programmes, not generally associated directly with academic progress, do in fact support learning in all subjects. This indicates again that enabling and encouraging students to understand more about themselves and others provides them with a better chance of learning well in academic subjects. There is a direct correlation between personal and social development and academic success; in other words, increased levels of EI (which we will look at in more detail in Chapter 8) will support a student's academic progress.

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Growth mindsets offer an optimistic view about what is achievable in life for each and every student. But at this point we might want to ask ourselves how much we personally believe that it is possible for people to change the way they view life. For example, how much of our optimism or pessimism is changeable? Well, according to research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky it seems that half of a person's baseline level of well-being comes from their DNA.³ This baseline level indicates how much we lean towards either cheerfulness or negativity. But, as Donna Wilson says, this leaves plenty of room for each of us to influence our level of optimism through three easy steps.⁴

These three steps involve thoughts, behaviours and brain chemistry, and they help students to improve their feelings and well-being. The following summary provides a little more information about these steps.

- 1. Thoughts.** In Chapter 7 we will explore the TEA-R model and how our thoughts affect our emotions, which in turn affect our actions and results. Essentially we are what we think, and students should be taught this in school. We can learn to think in ways that enhance our level of optimism, and the work on mindsets will definitely support this.
- 2. Behaviours.** In order to achieve things in life we have to *do* something. Thought itself is not enough. Positive actions and determination will help us to achieve a great deal and alter our level of optimism. In terms of learning, a student needs to know where they are with their learning now, where they want to get to and the next step (or steps) they need to take in order to get there. As educators, it is important that we can provide them with this information and also with the skills they need in order to make the transition. This constant movement towards higher levels of mastery will again encourage the student to have a more optimistic outlook.
- 3. Brain chemistry.** The brain produces chemicals called neurotransmitters that affect how we feel. The chemicals that are associated with making us

3 S. Lyubomirsky, K. Sheldon and D. Schkade, Pursuing happiness: the architecture of sustainable change, *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2) (2005), 111–131.

4 D. Wilson with M. Conyers, Positive brains are smarter brains, *Edutopia* (9 December 2015). Available at: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/positive-brains-are-smarter-brains-donna-wilson-marcus-conyers>.

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feel good and creating a positive mood include dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin. One way of producing these chemicals is through physical activity. Therefore, it is wise to tell children that if they are feeling less positive, then some form of physical exercise may well help them to feel a lot better. This message will clearly help them throughout their entire lives, and these 'good mood' chemicals will support them to focus more clearly on the academic work they are doing.

Expanding on the first of these steps, and as a way of helping students to think effectively about their own thinking, I have developed a simple metacognitive model which I use with schools called FACT. F stands for *focus* control, A stands for *advice* control, C stands for *centred* control and T stands for *thought* control.

F Focus control		A Advice control
	FACT Supporting the thinking of children every day	
T Thought control		C Centred control

Focus control

Focus control is about accepting that we have a choice about what we decide to focus our attention on. For example, do we focus on our strengths or our weaknesses? Do we focus on our successes or our failures? Whatever we decide to focus on is our choice, but we must accept that this will influence where we direct our energies. And, of course, once we decide what our main focus of attention is, then our reticular activating system (RAS) will direct our subconscious to be on the lookout for things that correspond to this focus.

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(The RAS is something that is very important for us all to know about, and will be explained in Chapter 5.) Teachers who are focused on the ‘bad’ behaviour of students will see this everywhere, whereas teachers who understand that students can sometimes be challenging but nevertheless also have a lot of very positive characteristics will see examples of students displaying these things all around the school.

Perceptions rule and create our reality for us. We have all come across those people who are doubters or cynics and who want us to prove to them that something is possible. They may say to us, ‘Show me and then I’ll believe it,’ and this is often said with a high degree of self-assurance that sometimes verges on arrogance. In a way, they are saying ‘seeing is believing,’ and if they don’t see it then they won’t believe it. In my training, I often say to people that ‘seeing is believing’ is not always true, and that ‘believing is seeing’ is more in alignment with the way we operate as human beings. Two people may witness the same thing and yet they often see, or experience, wildly different events. As a playful way of illustrating this, I often flash up a PowerPoint slide of the following 20 letters, which is just a series of words without the gaps between them. Before I show them the slide, I ask them to feel free to shout out the words they see as soon as they become apparent. Try this out yourself.

opportunityisnowhere

Okay. What did you first see? Was it ‘opportunity is nowhere’ or ‘opportunity is now here’? I see this as a metaphor for the way we experience the world (though, to be clear, if you happened to read this as ‘opportunity is nowhere’ I am in no way suggesting that you might have a tendency towards a glass-half-empty approach to life). The point is that we all interpret what we experience around us each and every day, and most of this is happening subconsciously. Some people walk around with an ‘opportunity is nowhere’ frame of mind, and, surprise, surprise, they wouldn’t recognise an opportunity if it came and hit them right between the eyes. Other people walk around with an ‘opportunity is now here’ frame of mind, and they will be what the ‘opportunity is nowhere’ folks may call the lucky ones. They find new opportunities around every corner.

If you want to experience for yourself how it is possible to look at something and not see it then you may want to take a break here and look at a video by Daniel

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Simons and Christopher Chabris called 'Selective attention test.'⁵ In addition, you may like to watch another video about Richard Wiseman's work called 'The luck factor.'⁶ This clip demonstrates how it is not so much life events that determine our sense of happiness, positivity and how we describe ourselves as being lucky or unlucky, but rather the way we frame our mind to interpret things.

Focus control therefore reminds us that we must be careful about what we decide to focus on. This is why it is so important for us to have clarity about our goals. With clarity about where we are trying to get to and what we want to achieve, we will be constantly on the lookout for things that support us to achieve our goals. We will return to this idea in Chapter 5 when we learn about how affirmations can support us in our daily lives, together with further information about how the RAS in our brain operates.

Advice control

Many people accept what they are told by other people in matters of critical importance in their life. They may ask a friend, 'Do you think I should go for this job?' and if the friend says, 'No, you're too old for it,' they might decide not to bother applying. A child might have been told at an early age that they cannot draw, and as a result they never put energy into drawing in school. In fact, they may decide that they hate drawing. Of course, it is important that we listen to what other people say and the advice they might give. But, equally, it is also important that we ultimately decide on which comments offered by other people we wish to accept and therefore effectively store in our brains as the 'truth' through neuron connections. We have more choice and control over the acceptance or otherwise of comments made by other people than many of us would perhaps imagine. We can sanction, accept and absorb some ideas and reject others. We have to be very careful about what we accept because this will influence what we think of as being

5 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>. See also D. J. Simons and C. F. Chabris, 'Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattention blindness for dynamic events', *Perception*, 28(9) (1999), 1059–1074.

6 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojcM76QLt78>.

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the way we are. So, we can simply ask ourselves the following: is the thing that is being said to me something that is true, helpful and supportive of my growth? This is not about ignoring good advice; in fact, it is quite the opposite. But it is important for us to be mindful concerning the views of others about ourselves that we accept as being true.

Centred control

A very important psychological idea is the locus of control (LOC). This refers to where we believe the ability to make choices and decisions and to take action is centred in any situation. It is about where we believe the control centre lies: is it within us or does it lie outside of us? When we believe the LOC lies inside of us then we are able to take on responsibility for the actions we decide to take. When we believe the LOC lies outside of us then we believe that we cannot influence things. But at the same time we may complain about things that we have no control over, such as the weather (which is a very popular topic of discussion in the UK). Some of us like to moan about things we have no control over because we can disown responsibility. However, people who are successful in life tend to focus on the things that they can influence. In other words, they direct their attention to where the LOC lies inside of them. This is what we should be encouraging our students to do. Indeed, the research carried out by Carol Dweck shows us that those people with growth mindsets are able to do this. They don't blame themselves or other people for things that might not be exactly the way they would like them to be, but rather they look to see how they themselves can change and improve things. Centred control is very much linked with, and an extension of, focus control, in the same way that all elements of FACT are interrelated.

Let us think for a moment about how important the LOC is for us as teachers and educators. For some teachers, no matter what they try, nothing seems to work the way they would like it to. The students don't respond to them or learn in the way that they would like. They may even become disillusioned with teaching. Teachers are often faced with a stark choice: do they continue to teach and hope that things will improve, or do they decide to leave the profession? Many do leave, often in the first three years of their teaching career. Sometimes, it has to be said, this might

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well be the right move for everyone involved. Neither teachers nor students will be happy in a classroom that is not filled with optimism, positivity and energy. However, a lot of great expertise and potential is lost from the teaching profession when teachers leave reluctantly but would prefer to stay and become successful. In some cases, there are teachers who were once successful but now find themselves no longer able to recapture the spirit, passion and confidence they once had as educators. In the worst-case scenario, these teachers might end up simply hanging on in there and blaming the students, the leadership in the school, the government, the world and life in general! Their negative beliefs have become hardwired into their brains and they begin to perceive the world, and in particular the students, in a certain way. You may then hear them saying things like:

Students don't show respect to me these days the way they once did.

The curriculum keeps changing and I can't keep up with it.

Society has made it impossible for me to teach the way I want to.

The school doesn't help me. I feel I'm on my own.

I have heard these statements spoken by various teachers on occasion, and there may be some validity in them. Certainly, for teachers who believe these things to be true they are absolutely true! But remember that perception rules. They will find evidence all around them to satisfy their personal beliefs. However, all of these beliefs take responsibility for success away from the teachers themselves, resulting in them being what I refer to as 'effect teachers' (as opposed to 'cause teachers').



Effect teachers believe:

- The LOC lies outside of me.
- My success is determined by external factors.
- I control very little.
- My self-efficacy is low.



Cause teachers believe:

- The LOC lies within me.
- My success is determined by me.
- I am in control.
- My self-efficacy is high.

The ways in which schools currently conceptualise and measure success could be limiting students' potential to achieve it.

It is critical for schools to move away from the many talent and IQ myths that presently exist and to stop categorising students in a way that damages their ability to grow and develop. *A Mindset for Success* outlines key practical steps that can be taken in order to do just this, building instead a growth mindset culture in all classrooms and across schools.

Crucially, Tony Swainston explains how a mindset for success can benefit everyone, giving more meaning to learning that, in turn, brings greater fulfilment for teachers and pupils. *A Mindset for Success* illustrates how grit, resilience and perseverance can be nurtured in every child, enabling them to take on the challenges of life and our changing world, which will lead them to greater academic success and personal happiness.

A practical guide to changing mindsets in schools. Suitable for teachers and school leaders.

A must-read and must-do for school leaders who are serious about creating the very best organisational culture and environment for success.

Michael Gernon, CEO and Principal, GEMS Wellington Academy

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Hattie, Dweck, Seligman and Ericsson, Tony explains how the brain works and how we can develop motivation, resilience, grit, perseverance and well-being in students.

Steve Smith, former head of MFL, author of the forthcoming *Becoming an Outstanding Languages Teacher*

A great insight into the ways in which we can improve outcomes for students.

Ian Mottram, Head Teacher, Le Cateau CP School

Tony's book is a reminder not only of why we work in schools but also the impact we can have on children's lives.

Paul Bowlas, Head Teacher, Holy Trinity CE Junior School

Tony Swainston is a UK born and based trainer and writer. Following on from a 20-year career in teaching, for the past 15 years he has delivered training, in both business and education, in over 15 countries around the world. Tony has a passion for developing individuals as leaders and coaches, working with people across a broad range of levels in organisations. He is a sought-after keynote speaker with clients that include Shell, the British Council and the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. He has, so far, taken over 20 UK schools through his 12-month 'Mindset of Success' programme.

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