

A Mindset for Success

In Your Classroom and School

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Introduction

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child'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, and a child humanized or dehumanized.

—Haim Ginott¹

If our schools are to truly bring about the kind of advances that are both desired and required by the changing world that we live in (and that our children will inhabit in the future) then things must change. And a critical part of that change is for schools to move away from many of the talent and IQ myths that presently exist. Schools must stop categorising students in a way that damages their ability to grow and develop. I am not in any way suggesting that schools do this deliberately, but it happens nevertheless, and it is crippling the prospects of many young people to achieve their potential. No matter how well-intentioned it may be, classifying certain children as G&T (gifted and talented) or SEN (special educational needs) and perhaps the bulk of children as RHINOs (really here in name only – maybe this is a new acronym for you to add to your growing list of educational acronyms!) can be extremely dangerous. (RHINOs are the group of children who don't create any fuss. They are neither viewed as being the exceptionally gifted or talented students, nor the students who are judged to have SEN issues or are behaviourally challenging.)

There is research, for example, which shows that “88% of children placed in sets or streams at age 4 remain in the same groupings until they leave school”². It is shocking to think that by the time children are 4 years old they might be put into a box of ultimate predetermined achievement, decided for them by other people, and from which they will very likely not escape during their school life. This

1 H. G. Ginott, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 15.

2 A. Dixon, Editorial, *FORUM*, 44(1) (2002), 1.

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is particularly disturbing when we all know that children develop at very different rates. If a child is placed into a “low group” then it is difficult for them to overcome their own belief, and the beliefs of others, that they will never achieve a great deal. They might be presented with less demanding, less satisfying and less stimulating work by sometimes less qualified and lower skilled teachers. The only time they might have the chance to socialise with children from the higher groups may be during breaks away from the set curriculum being delivered in the school. Schools around the UK assert that they are committed to developing the potential inside each child, while at the same time there are customs and practices, like streaming and setting, which actively act against this.

The so-called level of intelligence of students has become so much part of what schools explicitly or implicitly seek to establish that it is likely to take some time to alter this culture. It is all too easy for us to stay with the old ways of assessing students and providing them with unhelpful feedback. It is easy to assess what we presently assess. Our laziness is hidden by references to “hard data” concerning students which gives us the impression that this is the stuff that really matters. But we should be reminded that “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (this quote is often attributed to Albert Einstein, although it may have been William Bruce Cameron who first said it), instead of continuing to blindly promote a system that doesn’t fit the requirements of the 21st century. The broad bands of uniformity and crude segregation that schools once tried to fit students into, in order to accommodate the industrial world, no longer match the requirements of today’s society. And it is not just the very obvious and blatant structures of inequality in educational opportunity on offer to different children that we should be concerned about. It is also the subconscious processes that go on in our schools which present an equally challenging danger for all of us. It may be hard for many of us to leave behind old ways of talking about students, including references to them being “intelligent” and “talented” (or otherwise!).

To illustrate how so much that is going on in our subconscious mind radiates out from us to the students, I will describe an experiment carried out by Robert Rosenthal back in 1968.³ I will tell the story in my own words, which is how I

3 R. Rosenthal and L. Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), see esp. p. 61.

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explain it to the audiences I work with, and let you research more about this if you decide to do so. Rosenthal and his research colleague, Lenore Jacobson, devised an IQ test that was given to students in a primary school, the results of which were analysed by the two researchers. From these investigations, the teachers who would be taking the classes the following year were informed that around 20% of the students had an “unusual potential for intellectual growth”. These were the students who could be considered the so-called “intellectual bloomers” in the coming year. The teachers were asked not to indicate to any of the students what the test had shown. Then the researchers left the teachers to get on with their teaching until they came back at the end of the year to give the students the same IQ test. These test results were compared with the first test results and it was found that there was a surprising correlation between the predicted “bloomers” and the children who had done particularly well that year.

I try to imagine what the conversation may have been like between the researchers and teachers when they sat down to discuss the findings. It may have gone something like this.

Rosenthal: You know, these results are astonishing.

Teacher A: Why? You knew from your original test that certain students were going to do particularly well. In fact, you told me the names of the 20% of the students who were going to do well. So why is it now such a surprise to you?

Rosenthal: Well, the truth is that we chose the 20% students that we said would do well completely at random. We had no idea who the so-called “bloomers” might be.

Oops! We can only guess at the sense of surprise, and perhaps a little bit of annoyance, that the teacher would have felt in realising that they had been given false information. Even more surprising for them may have been the fact that the students whom they had been told would be “bloomers” turned out to be the students who did very well in their class. This is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. What the teacher thought about the students had a significant impact on how they performed that year: the students that the teacher thought would do particularly well did do well.

This phenomenon is called the Pygmalion effect. It describes the finding that how a teacher perceives a student will have a very powerful impact on how they develop. And this does not just apply to teachers and students; it happens in the

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families of the students we teach as well, with parents being very powerful “Pygmalions” to their children. We might summarise this phenomenon as when we expect certain behaviours from another person, it is very likely that we ourselves will behave in such a way as to make their expected behaviours ever more likely to manifest themselves.

When I have told teachers about the Rosenthal experiment their response is often that the teachers in the experiment can't have been very good, otherwise they would not have been influenced by the information they were given. My understanding is that the teachers chosen for the experiment were in fact good professionals, but they had no idea that they were influencing the children in their classes to succeed in different ways. In fact, just like you or I, they were convinced that they treated all students in a fair way. The truth is that once we accept information we have been given as being a reflection of the truth, then it is very difficult for us not to act on this information, and much of our acting is going on at a subconscious level. Key messages that we are giving out as educators are not always transmitted through the words we speak. In fact, research by Albert Mehrabian indicates that in face-to-face communication the degree to which we decide we like somebody, for example, is influenced only to a small extent by the words spoken.⁴ In terms of percentages, it was found that 7% of the signals we receive that influence whether we like another person is through their words, 38% is through the way they speak these words (including tone, intonation and volume) and the other 55% is through their body language (including facial gestures). This gives us an idea about the way that many of the other thoughts and attitudes we have about the students in our classes will manifest themselves beyond the words we speak.

The psychological concept of “thin-slicing” describes how in a very short period of time, usually less than five minutes, it is possible to draw very accurate conclusions concerning the emotions and attitudes of people interacting with each other. When defining the thin slice, I usually draw on the analogy of a stick of rock, let's say from London, and with the word “London” written inside. If we were to take a sharp knife and cut very thin slices from the rock, each one would have the word London written on it. In a similar way, from very short interactions – or thin slices

4 A. Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981).

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– we pick up essential information from another person that enables us to make an assessment about them. It lets us know their central message – and whether they are from London or Birmingham!

Pupils, therefore, pick up a thin slice of who their teacher is from their behaviour. This includes the beliefs that the teacher has about each and every one of them as individuals. If a teacher thinks about a particular pupil, “You are intelligent”, then this pupil will thin slice this message without a word being spoken by the teacher. The corollary is that there will be other pupils that the teacher will believe are not quite as intelligent, talented or full of potential, and they will thin slice a very different message which tells them that this teacher thinks they are not intelligent, not gifted, slow, lacking in ability, lacking in potential and so on.

Some teachers have said to me that the experiment carried out by Rosenthal was morally wrong because the teachers were provided with information that was incorrect. Some teachers have also observed that if the school which their own child attends were to carry out an experiment like this then they would be very annoyed, particularly if their child was not one of those randomly chosen to be a “bloomer”. The reason they give is that their child might be disadvantaged because the teacher does not have a high opinion about their ability to develop during the coming year. And, of course, I can understand this. But at the same time, all of us in education need to take into consideration the high levels of data collection and tracking of students that is going on every day in our schools.

We might need to ask ourselves some of the following questions.

- Is the information and data in our schools helping our students to achieve their full potential? (It is often argued that our schools are now information rich but knowledge poor.)
- Is the information and data in our schools building glass ceilings that limit the full development of the potential that lies inside each student?
- Is the information and data in our schools, which we sometimes pass on to the students themselves, creating self-fulfilling prophecies in their minds?
- Is the information and data in our schools unintentionally encouraging students to take on a fixed mindset?

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- Is the information and data in our schools encouraging teachers and other adults in the school to take on a fixed mindset?
- Is the information and data in our schools creating a lot of Pygmalion teachers who actively, although unintentionally, support the development of certain students but at the same time negatively affect the development of other students?

Whatever the answer to these questions might be, and if we can't or don't want to change the present requirement for us to collect data, then we can at the very least move towards a mindset for success approach that encourages every child to take on responsibility for their own development. At the same time, each of us as educators can support them through the beliefs that we have about their true potential to achieve amazing results.

We need to remind ourselves that when we stand in front of students and communicate with them they are picking up a thin slice from us which communicates many different things. It might be a frightening thought, but we need to be aware that all students have the equivalent of a PhD in applied psychology when it comes to their ability to interpret the underlying meaning from this thin slice. They are the equivalent in the world of tennis to Venus and Serena Williams and Andy Murray. They have intuitive classroom insights that enable them to read the game of education in a similar way to how Tim Cahill and Mia Hamm read the game of soccer. They instinctively sense patterns in the classroom. The thin slice of us that they take contains clear indicators of all our beliefs, habits, attitudes and expectations about them, and they sense this almost instantaneously. They don't just "see right through us" as teachers, they also pick up all the messages that "radiate out from us" and which provide the building blocks of how we think.

Two themes run throughout this book. These are that (1) the beliefs of students are of crucial importance to their learning, and (2) the potential for achievement and success, which each of us possess through the impressive capacity of our brains, is enormous and largely unknowable. For the purpose of this book I have used the terms "pupils", "students" and "children" in an interchangeable way to refer to the body of young people in our schools who we have the pleasure to see develop and flourish before our eyes. At times, I may also refer to teachers, support staff, classroom support assistants, educators and adults in a similarly

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interchangeable way. We are all the people who seek to support the development of the young people in our care, and the content of this book is relevant to each and every one of us, no matter what our particular role might be.

Now let us start on a journey into the world of mindsets and learn how we can move towards a mindset for success in our schools.