

## Mindsets and Gifted Education: Transformation in Progress

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by **Dona Matthews, PhD, and Joanne Foster, EdD**



Many people believe that exceptionally high intellectual ability (aka 'giftedness') is innate and stable. Their attitude is that some kids have it and most don't. This way of thinking prevails in many places and reflects what Carol Dweck and her colleagues term a fixed mindset. From this standpoint, giftedness can be determined by the results of an IQ test (for example), and once a person has been identified as gifted, they're considered gifted forever. Those not so identified—those who don't get tested or whose scores aren't high enough at the time of testing—are thereby placed implicitly in the 'not-gifted' category.

We're happy to observe that the field of gifted education is being transformed by the mindset research findings. We discuss here some details of how that's happening, why it's beneficial for children, and its implications for the adults who care about them, at home and at school.

Increasingly, educators are conceptualizing giftedness in a way that's closely aligned with a growth mindset. They're seeing intelligence as something that develops over time, with the right kinds of motivation, opportunities to learn, and environmental supports. From this standpoint, gifted learners are those who are exceptionally advanced in one or more domains at a certain point in their development, and who therefore need the usual school curriculum to be adapted if it's going to match their ability levels.

The mindset findings have been enormously helpful for those of us making the case for, or directly involved in, this paradigm shift in the field of gifted education. The research findings demonstrate the important benefits of a growth mindset—better long-term outcomes in every domain of functioning—and illustrate the urgency of making this shift as expeditiously as possible. They also help us challenge the myths that have long been held dear by many gifted education advocates, myths that have made it hard to ensure that those who are exceptionally capable in one way or another get the learning opportunities they need:

### **#1. Giftedness - Nature or nurture?**

One of the most damaging myths has been that some people are born with more intellectual ability than others, and that they retain this competitive advantage throughout their lives. This belief that some people are inherently smart, and some aren't, reflects a fixed mindset perspective. From a growth mindset perspective, however, intelligence develops over time, with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. Ability is not a static attribute of a person. Instead, it develops actively, with motivation and effort. Looked at this way, basic principles of giftedness and talent development apply to all children, not just a select few.

## **#2. Giftedness - "You're brilliant!"**

Another myth, one that's commonly held across the population (and not just among parents and teachers of gifted learners) is that adults should praise children for their intelligence. The mindset findings are shattering that myth, and in fact illustrate exactly the opposite: "Praising children's intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance." (Mindset, p. 170) Rather than lauding children for innate and stable attributes, and saying things like, "You're so smart!"—it's far better to praise them for what they can do and change, what they can accomplish through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. Adults can ask children about their work in ways that appreciate their effort, and encourage them to think about their options and choices: "Your drawing is so vibrant! That design must have taken a lot of thought. What other colors and shapes do you enjoy working with?"

## **#3. Giftedness - To label or not to label?**

The gifted label is another way of praising selected kids for their intelligence. It can work to inculcate a fixed mindset, reinforcing the notion that intelligence is something that some children have and some just don't, and implying that the bestowal of the gift is out of the individual's control. As Carol Dweck wrote in her preface to *The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span*, "To the extent that young people believe they simply have a gift that makes them intelligent or talented, they may not put in the work necessary to sustain that talent. Moreover, the gifted label that many students still receive, and that their parents relish, may turn some children into students who are overly cautious and challenge-avoidant lest they make mistakes and no longer merit the label." (p. xii)

Educators who understand the importance of the growth mindset are aware of this problem. When they use the gifted label (which they do sparingly), they use it to denote a child's need for advanced learning opportunities in a certain subject area at a certain point in time.

## **#4. Giftedness - Does that mean segregation?**

From a fixed mindset perspective, the best kind of gifted education is segregated so that all the kids with the gifted label are grouped together, separately from the others. From the growth mindset perspective, however, gifted education is much more broadly based and inclusive in every way. It can happen seamlessly when a teacher in a regular classroom provides more challenge to a student who needs it in a history class; it can happen in an after-school language enrichment program; it can happen in a summer program for exceptionally capable math learners. It can also happen in a segregated gifted program. The key question about any option is, "Does it provide the kind of learning challenge a particular child needs at a particular point in time?" Fortunately, more schools are adopting a flexible, inclusive, and broad-based approach.

Teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the mindset research. Parents, too, are discovering its importance when advocating for the best possible education for their children. In fact, some enlightened schools are using the [Brainology](#) program and encouraging a growth mindset

throughout the school—helping students, teachers, administrators, and parents to understand and embrace this way of thinking. This can have enormous benefits for all students, but perhaps most particularly for those with learning differences, including those who are exceptionally advanced in one or more areas. Teachers with a growth mindset appreciate the incremental nature of all learning, and are better able to provide a good match, whether a student is ahead of grade-level curriculum or behind.

Other schools are using different approaches to accomplish goals similar to Brainology's. These approaches also teach children about brain research that shows how they can affect their own learning and emphasizes the importance of effort, persistence, and motivation—rather than innate ability—in academic, career, and relationship success. Regardless of the program used, everyone benefits from a growth mindset approach.

#### **#5. Giftedness - If you're smart, you learn quickly and easily, right?**

Wrong. This is another destructive myth about advanced students. From a fixed mindset perspective, if you have to work hard at something, or you learn it slowly, you aren't good at it, and aren't very smart. We've encountered too many parents and teachers who say about an academic high-achiever, "She's not really bright, she just works hard."

From a growth mindset perspective, however, giftedness requires effort and commitment over time. Thoughtfulness (which can be slow) is a good thing. The way to Carnegie Hall isn't 'Be born talented,' but rather, 'Practice, practice, practice!' It's the child who learns how to invest the necessary effort over time who becomes smart. As best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell writes, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."

#### **#6. Giftedness – Failure is fortuitous???**

Another way that the mindset approach is having an impact on gifted education concerns attitudes toward perfection and failure. People with a fixed mindset feel judged and evaluated all the time. If they don't do well on a test, they conclude they aren't very good at whatever was tested. And, if they believe that being smart is a stable and permanent condition, then they can't afford to be less than perfect, because that indicates they're in the 'not-so-smart' category.

From a growth mindset, however, failures are learning opportunities, chances for a person to see what she doesn't know yet, or what requires more work. Instead of focusing on high grades, teachers and parents with a growth mindset are helping children learn how to accept setbacks, and even welcome them. Instead of being judgmental about poor performance, their attitude is, 'Let's talk. This is a great chance to figure out how to move forward.' As Carol Dweck writes, "People in a growth mindset don't just seek challenge, they thrive on it." (Mindset, p. 21)

#### **#7. Giftedness - Do advanced learners have better coping skills?**

When adversity strikes or life's challenges mount, the ability to move forward becomes especially important. Whether problems are large-scale like Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath, or more

personal like the death of a family pet, even very smart kids can have problems coping. Contrary to a common misconception, those with advanced abilities must learn, like everyone else, how to get past the worst of things, manage their feelings, and regain a sense of calm and stability.

Parents and teachers can help children cope with troubling times by putting challenges into a growth mindset framework. That means perceiving the situation as a problem to solve, one step at a time, rather than as an insurmountable hurdle. It means providing a safe, dependable environment, engaging in active listening and open communication, and answering kids' questions honestly, while paying careful attention to their age and maturity.

During and after times of trouble, adults can foster children's resilience by modeling good coping skills, offering reassurance, and helping kids take meaningful, appropriate action. Any child who observes the adults in his life coping well, who learns how to manage his worries, or who contributes even in very small ways to solving the problems of others, will be more resilient the next time adversity strikes. (For more on this, including specific strategies for helping children with coping and resilience, see <http://raisingsmarterkids.wordpress.com/2012/11/04/helping-children-cope-with-challenging-times/> )

#### **#8. Giftedness - Do kids who are labeled as 'gifted' have more potential than others?**

The final myth about giftedness that we address here is the belief that some children are destined for success (and others are not), and that this potential can be quantified with something like an IQ test. The mindset findings demolish this myth by showing there's too much open to development over time, and to many immeasurable variables like motivation and effort. They prove that no one can predict a child's future success—or failures. As Dweck wrote in *Mindset*, "An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone's ability, let alone their potential to succeed in the future." (p. 29)

As the field of gifted education absorbs the findings on mindsets, it is reverberating with change. More teachers and parents are implementing mindset-informed applications and advocating for them. It's a time of excitement, controversy, and conflict, and we're observing a major paradigm shift in progress. It appears to us that as the dust settles, not only will exceptionally capable students be a lot more likely to have their learning needs well met, but all children will have increased opportunities to develop their gifts and talents.

For more about mindset research being applied to gifted education:

Carol Dweck, keynote speaker at the 2010 National Association for Gifted Children conference: <http://parentingforhighpotential.com/2012/07/16/its-a-mindset-national-parenting-gifted-children-week/>

Carol Dweck has written about the applications of her research to understandings of talent development and gifted education. She wrote the foreword to *The Development of Giftedness and Talent*, edited by Frances Degen Horowitz, Rena Subotnik, and Dona Matthews (American Psychology Association Press, 2009); and a chapter in the *Routledge International Companion to*

Gifted Education, edited by Tom Balchin, Barry Hymer, and Dona Matthews (2009), and an article in Scientific American called "The Secret to Raising Smarter Kids":

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-secret-to-raising-smart-kids>

Duke University's Talent Identification Program: <http://www.tip.duke.edu/node/888>

Signe Whitson, writing in Psychology Today: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/passive-aggressive-diaries/201112/fostering-growth-mindset-7-ways-nurture-your-gifted-child>

More on our website: <http://www.raising smarterkids.net/>

And our blogs: <http://raising smarterkids.wordpress.com/> <http://donamatthews.wordpress.com>  
<http://jffoster.wordpress.com/>

*Dona Matthews, PhD, is a psycho-educational consultant in Toronto. Her practice includes graduate teaching, writing, counseling, and conducting research on optimal human development. She was founding Director of the Center for Gifted Studies and Education at Hunter College, City University of New York. Along with dozens of articles, book chapters, and conference presentations, she is co-author of Being Smart about Gifted Education (Great Potential Press, 2009); The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span (APA Publications, 2009); and The International Companion to Gifted Education (RoutledgeFalmer, 2009). For more information, go to <http://donamatthews.wordpress.com/> or <http://www.raising smarterkids.net/>*



*Joanne Foster, EdD, is co-author of the award-winning Being Smart about Gifted Education, 2nd Edition (2009). She teaches educational psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Her writings on gifted-related issues continue to be published extensively, and she presents at conferences across North America. Her work reflects over 30 years of experience and expertise as an educator, teacher trainer, and consultant in the field of gifted education and high-level development. In addition to completing another book with Dr. Matthews, current projects include ABCs of Being Smart (a series of featured on-line articles for the National Association for Gifted Children's journal Parenting for High Potential), and a book on helping children overcome procrastination. For more information, go to <http://www.raising smarterkids.net> or <http://jffoster.wordpress.com>*

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