

Mindset: Powerful insights from Carol Dweck
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TEACHERS (AND PARENTS):
WHAT MAKES A GREAT TEACHER (OR PARENT)?

Many educators think that lowering their standards will give students success experiences, boost their self-esteem, and raise their achievement. It comes from the same philosophy as the overpraising of students' intelligence. Well, it doesn't work. Lowering standards just leads to poorly educated students who feel entitled to easy work and lavish praise.

For thirty-five years, Sheila Schwartz taught aspiring English teachers. She tried to set high standards, especially since they were going to pass on their knowledge to generations of children. But they became indignant. "One student, whose writing was full of grammatical mistakes and misspellings," she says, "marched into my office with her husband from West Point—in a dress uniform, his chest covered with ribbons—because her feelings had been hurt by my insistence on correct spelling."

Another student was asked to summarize the theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee's novel about a southern lawyer fighting prejudice and (unsuccessfully) defending a black man accused of murder. The student insisted the theme was that "all people are basically nice." When Schwartz questioned that conclusion, the student left the class and reported her to the dean. Schwartz was reprimanded for having standards that were too high. Why, Schwartz asks, should the low standards of these future teachers be honored above the needs of the children they will one day teach?

On the other hand, simply raising standards in our schools, without giving students the means of reaching them, is a recipe for disaster. It just pushes the poorly prepared or poorly motivated students into failure and out of school.

Is there a way to set standards high *and* have students reach them?

In chapter 3, we saw in the work of Falko Rheinberg that teachers with the growth mindset brought many low achievers up into the high-achieving range. We saw in the growth-minded teaching of Jaime Escalante that inner-city high school students could learn college calculus, and in the growth-minded teaching of Marva Collins that inner-city

grade school children could read Shakespeare. In this chapter, we'll see more. We'll see *how* growth-oriented teaching unleashes children's minds.

I'll focus on three great teachers, two who worked with students who are considered "disadvantaged" and one who worked with students considered supertalented. What do these great teachers have in common?

Great Teachers

The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning.

Marva Collins taught Chicago children who had been judged and discarded. For many, her classroom was their last stop. One boy had been in and out of thirteen schools in four years. One stabbed children with pencils and had been thrown out of a mental health center. One eight-year-old would remove the blade from the pencil sharpener and cut up his classmates' coats, hats, gloves, and scarves. One child referred to killing himself in almost every sentence. One hit another student with a hammer on his first day. These children hadn't learned much in school, but everyone knew it was their own fault. Everyone but Collins.

When *60 Minutes* did a segment on Collins's classroom, Morley Safer tried his best to get a child to say he didn't like the school. "It's so hard here. There's no recess. There's no gym. They work you all day. You have only forty minutes for lunch. Why do you like it? It's just too hard." But the student replied, "That's why I like it, because it makes your brains bigger."

Chicago Sun-Times writer Zay Smith interviewed one of the children: "We do hard things here. They fill your brain."

As Collins looks back on how she got started, she says, "I have always been fascinated with learning, with the *process* of discovering something new, and it was exciting to share in the discoveries made by my . . . students." On the first day of school, she always promised her students—all students—that they would learn. She forged a contract with them.

"I know most of you can't spell your name. You don't know the alphabet, you don't know how to read, you don't know homonyms or how to syllabicate. I promise you that you will. None of you has ever failed.

School may have failed you. Well, goodbye to failure, children. Welcome to success. You will read hard books in here and understand what you read. You will write every day. . . . But you must help me to help you. If you don't give anything, don't expect anything. Success is not coming to you, you must come to it."

Her joy in her students' learning was enormous. As they changed from children who arrived with "toughened faces and glassed-over eyes" to children who were beginning to brim with enthusiasm, she told them, "I don't know what St. Peter has planned for me, but you children are giving me my heaven on earth."

Rafe Esquith teaches Los Angeles second graders from poor areas plagued with crime. Many live with people who have drug, alcohol, and emotional problems. Every day he tells his students that he is no smarter than they are—just more experienced. He constantly makes them see how much they have grown intellectually—how assignments that were once hard have become easier because of their practice and discipline.

Unlike Collins's school or Esquith's school, the Juilliard School of music accepts only the most talented students in the world. You would think the idea would be, *You're all talented, now let's get down to learning.* But if anything, the idea of talent and genius looms even larger there. In fact, many teachers mentally weeded out the students they weren't going to bother with. Except for Dorothy DeLay, the wondrous violin teacher of Itzhak Perlman, Midori, and Sarah Chang.

DeLay's husband always teased her about her "midwestern" belief that anything is possible. "Here is the empty prairie—let's build a city." That's exactly why she loved teaching. For her, teaching was about watching something grow before her very eyes. And the challenge was to figure out how to make it happen. If students didn't play in tune, it was because they hadn't learned how.

Her mentor and fellow teacher at Juilliard, Ivan Galamian, would say, "Oh, he has no ear. Don't waste your time." But she would insist on experimenting with different ways of changing that. (*How can I do it?*) And she usually found a way. As more and more students wanted a part of this mindset and as she "wasted" more and more of her time on these efforts, Galamian tried to get the president of Juilliard to fire her.

It's interesting. Both DeLay and Galamian valued talent, but Galamian believed that talent was inborn and DeLay believed that it was a quality that could be acquired. "I think it's too easy for a teacher to say, 'Oh this child wasn't born with it, so I won't waste my time.' Too many teachers hide their own lack of ability behind that statement."

DeLay gave her all to every one of her students. Itzhak Perlman was her student and so was his wife, Toby, who says that very few teachers get even a fraction of an Itzhak Perlman in a lifetime. "She got the whole thing, but I don't believe she gave him more than she gave me . . . and I believe I am just one of many, many such people." Once DeLay was asked, about another student, why she gave so much time to a pupil who showed so little promise. "I think she has something special. . . . It's in her person. There is some kind of dignity." If DeLay could get her to put it into her playing, that student would be a special violinist.

High Standards and a Nurturing Atmosphere

Great teachers set high standards for all their students, not just the ones who are already achieving. Marva Collins set extremely high standards, right from the start. She introduced words and concepts that were, at first, way above what her students could grasp. Yet she established on Day One an atmosphere of genuine affection and concern as she promised students they would produce: "I'm gonna love you . . . I love you already, and I'm going to love you even when you don't love yourself," she said to the boy who wouldn't try.

Do teachers have to love all of their students? No, but they have to care about every single student.

Teachers with the fixed mindset create an atmosphere of judging. These teachers look at students' beginning performance and decide who's smart and who's dumb. Then they give up on the "dumb" ones. "They're not *my* responsibility."

These teachers don't believe in improvement, so they don't try to create it. Remember the fixed-mindset teachers in chapter 3 who said:

"According to my experience students' achievement mostly remains constant in the course of a year."

"As a teacher I have no influence on students' intellectual ability."

This is how stereotypes work. Stereotypes tell teachers which groups are bright and which groups are not. So teachers with the fixed mindset know which students to give up on before they've even met them.

More on High Standards and a Nurturing Atmosphere

When Benjamin Bloom studied his 120 world-class concert pianists, sculptors, swimmers, tennis players, mathematicians, and research neurologists, he found something fascinating. For most of them, their first teachers were incredibly warm and accepting. Not that they set low standards. Not at all, but they created an atmosphere of trust, not judgment. It was, "I'm going to teach you," not "I'm going to judge your talent."

As you look at what Collins and Esquith demanded of their students—all their students—it's almost shocking. When Collins expanded her school to include young children, she required that every four-year-old who started in September be reading by Christmas. And they all were. The three- and four-year-olds used a vocabulary book titled *Vocabulary for the High School Student*. The seven-year-olds were reading *The Wall Street Journal*. For older children, a discussion of Plato's *Republic* led to discussions of de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Machiavelli, and the Chicago city council. Her reading list for the late-grade-school children included *The Complete Plays of Anton Chekhov*, *Physics Through Experiment*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. Oh, and always Shakespeare. Even the boys who picked their teeth with switchblades, she says, loved Shakespeare and always begged for more.

Yet Collins maintained an extremely nurturing atmosphere. A very strict and disciplined one, but a loving one. Realizing that her students were coming from teachers who made a career of telling them what was wrong with them, she quickly made known her complete commitment to them as her students and as people.

Esquith bemoans the lowering of standards. Recently, he tells us, his school celebrated reading scores that were twenty points below the national average. Why? Because they were a point or two higher than the

year before. “Maybe it’s important to look for the good and be optimistic,” he says, “but delusion is not the answer. Those who celebrate failure will not be around to help today’s students celebrate their jobs flipping burgers. . . . Someone has to tell children if they are behind, and lay out a plan of attack to help them catch up.”

All of his fifth graders master a reading list that includes *Of Mice and Men*, *Native Son*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *A Separate Peace*. Every one of his sixth graders passes an algebra final that would reduce most eighth and ninth graders to tears. But again, all is achieved in an atmosphere of affection and deep personal commitment to every student.

“Challenge and nurture” describes DeLay’s approach, too. One of her former students expresses it this way: “That is part of Miss DeLay’s genius—to put people in the frame of mind where they can do their best. . . . Very few teachers can actually get you to your ultimate potential. Miss DeLay has that gift. She challenges you at the same time that you feel you are being nurtured.”

Hard Work and More Hard Work

But are challenge and love enough? Not quite. All great teachers teach students *how* to reach the high standards. Collins and Esquith didn’t hand their students a reading list and wish them *bon voyage*. Collins’s students read and discussed every line of *Macbeth* in class. Esquith spent hours planning what chapters they would read in class. “I know which child will handle the challenge of the most difficult paragraphs, and carefully plan a passage for the shy youngster . . . who will begin his journey as a good reader. Nothing is left to chance. . . . It takes enormous energy, but to be in a room with young minds who hang on every word of a classic book and beg for more if I stop makes all the planning worthwhile.”

What are they teaching the students en route? To love learning. To eventually learn and think for themselves. And to work hard on the fundamentals. Esquith’s class often met before school, after school, and on school vacations to master the fundamentals of English and math, especially as the work got harder. His motto: “There are no shortcuts.” Collins

echoes that idea as she tells her class, “There is no magic here. Mrs. Collins is no miracle worker. I do not walk on water, I do not part the sea. I just love children and work harder than a lot of people, and so will you.”

DeLay expected a lot from her students, but she, too, guided them there. Most students are intimidated by the idea of talent, and it keeps them in a fixed mindset. But DeLay demystified talent. One student was sure he couldn’t play a piece as fast as Itzhak Perlman. So she didn’t let him see the metronome until he had achieved it. “I know so surely that if he had been handling that metronome, as he approached that number he would have said to himself, I can never do this as fast as Itzhak Perlman, and he would have stopped himself.”

Another student was intimidated by the beautiful sound made by talented violinists. “We were working on my sound, and there was this one note I played, and Miss DeLay stopped me and said, ‘Now *that* is a beautiful sound.’” She then explained how every note has to have a beautiful beginning, middle, and end, leading into the next note. And he thought, “Wow! If I can do it there, I can do it everywhere.” Suddenly the beautiful sound of Perlman made sense and was not just an overwhelming concept.

When students don’t know how to do something and others do, the gap seems unbridgeable. Some educators try to reassure their students that they’re just fine as they are. Growth-minded teachers tell students the truth and then give them the tools to close the gap. As Marva Collins said to a boy who was clowning around in class, “You are in sixth grade and your reading score is 1.1. I don’t hide your scores in a folder. I tell them to you so you know what you have to do. Now your clowning days are over.” Then they got down to work.

Students Who Don’t Care

What about students who won’t work, who don’t care to learn? Here is a shortened version of an interaction between Collins and Gary, a student who refused to work, ripped up his homework assignments, and would not participate in class. Collins is trying to get him to go to the blackboard to do some problems:

COLLINS: Sweetheart, what are you going to do? Use your life or throw it away?

GARY: I'm not gonna do any damn work.

COLLINS: I am not going to give up on you. I am not going to let you give up on yourself. If you sit there leaning against this wall all day, you are going to end up leaning on something or someone all your life. And all that brilliance bottled up inside you will go to waste.

At that, Gary agreed to go to the board, but then refused to address the work there. After a while Collins said:

"If you do not want to participate, go to the telephone and tell your mother, 'Mother, in this school we have to learn, and Mrs. Collins says I can't fool around, so will you please pick me up.'"

Gary started writing. Eventually, Gary became an eager participant and an avid writer. Later that year, the class was discussing Macbeth and how his misguided thinking led him to commit murder. "It's sort of like Socrates says, isn't it, Miss Collins?" Gary piped up. "Macbeth should have known that 'Straight thinking leads to straight living.'" For a class assignment, he wrote, "Somnus, god of sleep, please awaken us. While we sleep, ignorance takes over the world. . . . Take your spell off us. We don't have long before ignorance makes a coup d'état of the world."

When teachers are judging them, students will sabotage the teacher by not trying. But when students understand that school is for them—a way for them to grow their minds—they do not insist on sabotaging themselves.

In my work, I have seen tough guys shed tears when they realize they can become smarter. It's common for students to turn off to school and adopt an air of indifference, but we make a mistake if we think any student stops caring.

Growth-Minded Teachers: Who Are These People?

How can growth-minded teachers be so selfless, devoting untold hours to the worst students? Are they just saints? Is it reasonable to expect that everyone can become a saint? The answer is that they're not entirely self-

less. They love to learn. And teaching is a wonderful way to learn. About people and how they tick. About what you teach. About yourself. And about life.

Fixed-minded teachers often think of themselves as finished products. Their role is simply to impart their knowledge. But doesn't that get boring year after year? Standing before yet another crowd of faces and imparting. Now, that's hard.

Seymour Sarason was a professor of mine when I was in graduate school. He was a wonderful educator, and he always told us to question assumptions. "There's an assumption," he said, "that schools are for students' learning. Well, why aren't they just as much for teachers' learning?" I never forgot that. In all of my teaching, I think about what *I* find fascinating and what *I* would love to learn more about. I use my teaching to grow, and that makes me, even after all these years, a fresh and eager teacher.

One of Marva Collins's first mentors taught her the same thing—that, above all, a good teacher is one who continues to learn along with the students. And she let her students know that right up front: "Sometimes I don't like other grown-ups very much because they think they know everything. I don't know everything. I can learn all the time."

It's been said that Dorothy DeLay was an extraordinary teacher because she was not interested in teaching. She was interested in learning.

So, are great teachers born or made? Can anyone be a Collins, Esquith, or DeLay? It starts with the growth mindset—about yourself and about children. Not just lip service to the idea that all children can learn, but a deep desire to reach in and ignite the mind of every child. Michael Lewis, in *The New York Times*, tells of a coach who did this for him. "I had a new taste for . . . extra work . . . and it didn't take long to figure out how much better my life could be if I applied this new zeal acquired on a baseball field to the rest of it. It was as if this baseball coach had reached inside me, found a rusty switch marked Turn On Before Attempting to Use and flipped it."

Coaches are teachers, too, but their students' successes and failures are played out in front of crowds, published in the newspapers, and writ-

ten into the record books. Their jobs rest on producing winners. Let's look closely at three legendary coaches to see their mindsets in action.

COACHES: WINNING THROUGH MINDSET

Everyone who knows me well laughs when I say someone is complicated. "What do you think of so-and-so?" "Oh, he's complicated." It's usually not a compliment. It means that so-and-so may be capable of great charm, warmth, and generosity, but there's an undercurrent of ego that can erupt at any time. You never really know when you can trust him.

The fixed mindset makes people complicated. It makes them worried about their fixed traits and creates the need to document them, sometimes at your expense. And it makes them judgmental.

The Fixed-Mindset Coach in Action

Bobby Knight, the famous and controversial college basketball coach, is complicated. He could be unbelievably kind. One time he passed up an important and lucrative opportunity to be a sportscaster, because a former player of his had been in a bad accident. Knight rushed to his side and saw him through the ordeal.

He could be extremely gracious. After the basketball team he coached won the Olympic gold medal, he insisted that the team pay homage first and foremost to Coach Henry Iba. Iba had never been given proper respect for his Olympic accomplishments, and in whatever way he could, Knight wanted to make up for it. He had the team carry Coach Iba around the floor on their shoulders.

Knight cared greatly about his players' academic records. He wanted them to get an education, and he had a firm rule against missing classes or tutoring sessions.

But he could also be cruel, and this cruelty came from the fixed mindset. John Feinstein, author of *Season on the Brink*, a book about Knight and his team, tells us: "Knight was incapable of accepting failure. Every defeat was personal; *his* team lost, a team *he* had selected and