

Coalition School for Social Change: Helping Students Build Effort



A Case Study on the 2013–14 Academic and Personal Behaviors Pilot

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Table of Contents

AN INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL BEHAVIORS..... i

MATERIALS CITED 1

INTRODUCTION: CASEY AND AMARI 1

CHANGES IN CLASSROOM LANGUAGE AND FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS..... 1

INTRODUCING A GROWTH-MINDSET APPROACH TO STUDENTS 3

REFLECTING ON EFFORT IN CLASS..... 3

BACKGROUND ON THE PILOT TEAM 6

APPENDIX A: EFFORT RUBRIC..... 7

APPENDIX B: EFFORT REFLECTION TOOL..... 8

An Introduction to Academic and Personal Behaviors

According to a growing body of research spanning more than four decades, students' beliefs about whether effort leads to success have a dramatic influence on their success in school. In some sense, this notion of "growth mindset" runs contrary to the messages that are implicitly communicated to students through grades and test scores. These often send the message that intelligence can be measured in fixed numbers by which a student may be labeled, for example, a "Level One" or a "Level Four." In fact, "the most motivated and resilient students are *not* the ones who think they have a lot of fixed or innate intelligence," according to Carol Dweck, a leading researcher in the study of growth mindset. "Instead, the most motivated and resilient students are the ones who believe that their abilities can be developed through their effort and learning."¹

In the 2013–14 school year, four New York City middle schools and six New York City high schools took part in the Academic and Personal Behaviors Pilot. Led by the NYC Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness in partnership with Eskolta School Research and Design, Inc., this project asked schools to reshape how they give feedback to students in order to support the development of growth mindsets and thereby promote persistence.

The project launched in October with a presentation by Dr. David Yeager of the University of Texas at Austin, a leader in the field, sharing the latest research highlighting the successes of growth-mindset interventions in increasing student motivation. Teachers participating in the pilot had the opportunity to attend a series of monthly development seminars, in which they heard from scholars and practitioners about mindset theory and practice. Teachers in this case study used various resources and ideas from David Yeager and from Mindset Works, an organization cofounded by Carol Dweck (see Materials Cited on p. 1).

Schools in the pilot also received support from a team at Eskolta or from a facilitator at the Department of Education, who in turn received coaching from Eskolta. In a series of in-school sessions held over the course of the year, these facilitators supported teachers in an inquiry process as they designed, reviewed, and refined their implementation of growth-mindset practices based on their own experience and data on the impact on students. By the end of the 2013–14 school year, participating teachers made plans with their facilitators and their principals to share their work and learning with their colleagues in order to encourage broader adoption of growth-mindset language and practices in the 2014–15 year.

This case study offers examples and key insights from pilot work as it was carried out in practice. Coalition School for Social Change, on which this case study is based, is a high school located in East Harlem that enrolls around 350 students, in grades nine through twelve. The student body consists of 11 percent English Language Learners (ELL) and 27 percent students with special needs. The full student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Low attendance and Regents passing rates have been ongoing challenges at the school, where the four-year graduation rate has hovered between 40 and 50 percent. Student names have been changed to protect privacy.

¹ Dweck, C., "Boosting Achievement with Messages that Motivate," *Education Canada*, Vol. 47(2) (2007).

Materials Cited

During the pilot, John Sullivan, Randi Albert, and Sara Powers, the teachers on whom this study is based, developed their own resources and used materials from Mindset Works' online EducatorKit (www.mindsetworks.com). Materials cited in this study include:

- *Effort Rubric* (see Appendix A)
- *Effort Reflection Tool* (see Appendix B)
- Mindset Works' Mindsets & Motivation resource: *Effective Effort Rubric*
- Mindset Works' Mindsets & Motivation course activity: *The Malleable Mind: You Can Grow Your Intelligence*

Introduction: Casey and Amari

As a freshman at Coalition School for Social Change in the fall of 2013, Casey was facing challenges coming from all angles. Academically, he was performing far below standard. He had significant emotional learning and speech disabilities that made it hard for him to engage in the classroom. He rarely spoke a word in class.

Ten months later, Sara Powers, his ninth-grade English teacher remarked, "He's one of those people you look at and say, 'This is success.'" She elaborated, "When we started, his expressive language in writing and speaking was nonexistent. He wouldn't even make eye contact. But over the year he has responded to the encouragement and discussion that the mindset program has made us aware of. He has started to do the work. He was first just copying, but now his own original language is coming in. You can ask him a question and he will answer."

Amari, a student in Sara's Honors English class, made strides as well. While she had always been a hard worker, at the beginning of the year, Sara explained, "When she felt deeply challenged, she would stop asking for help and look for a way out of the situation to get out of this uncomfortable place." By the end of the year, this had changed. "She has more self-knowledge about how she responds and gets overwhelmed," Sara found. "She knows to ask for help. She'll try and work to the best of her ability."

Casey's and Amari's stories are not unique. During the 2013–14 year, three teachers at Coalition, English Language Arts (ELA) teacher Sara Powers, Principal John Sullivan, and Special Education (SPED) teacher Randi Albert, who co-teaches with both Sara and John, introduced new practices into their classrooms to help build a growth mindset (the perspective that intelligence can grow through effort), as opposed to a fixed mindset (the view that intelligence is essentially static) in their students. This study highlights what they did and how they helped students like Casey and Amari to change.

Changes in Classroom Language and Feedback to Students

In October of 2013, the three teachers began to deliberately shift the language they used with students. They were intent on addressing a common challenge for many students: low effort and motivation. They found that students would often finish an assignment simply to "get it done" with little worry about gaining a deep understanding of material or mastering the skill in question.

Indeed, in a survey at the beginning of the year, three quarters of the 49 students who participated in the pilot in John's, Randi's, and Sara's classes indicated that, to varying degrees, they believed intelligence is something you can do little to change. This kind of thinking can make it hard to feel motivated; after all, if you think your potential is limited, why bother trying to surpass that imaginary intelligence level?

However, a second problem was also of concern: students like Amari, who did think they could achieve but lost their motivation when work became challenging. Sara noted, "Some students get into AP classes and then are really unhappy with their grades once they get there. They aren't used to being challenged and having to really put effort in." A systematic way of recognizing hard work could help students embrace the challenge of advanced courses, rather than succumb to frustration when they do not receive the high grades they are accustomed to.

The team focused in particular on a study that investigated the effect of critical feedback alone in comparison to critical feedback coupled with messages expressing high expectations and a belief in students' abilities to meet those expectations. Invoking high standards and confidence in students' abilities made a significant difference in students' motivation. In short, students felt not that they were being personally judged by feedback but instead that they were being personally supported by it.

When introducing a new task in her class, Sara began to take this approach with phrases like "I know you can do this; now I'm challenging you to do it at this higher level." Another focus was to frame tests in a way that de-emphasized associating one's performance at a particular moment with a fixed trait: "This test is not measuring who you are, just what you've learned so far." John noted the changes he made to written feedback on assignments to give more specific, strategy-based feedback, moving away from the "Good job!" type of comment in favor of "The quote you used helps identify x."

Over the fall, the team found that this was proving particularly effective in dealing with behavior issues. Rather than addressing the misbehavior when confronting a student who was acting out, the teacher would ask the student to "put effort into focusing." Changes were beginning to show in certain students. "They seem to be responding," John reflected at the time. "They're less brittle about getting feedback."

The three teachers agreed that the effort to express these growth-mindset ideas in their conversations made them increasingly aware of the language they used in all areas of teaching, making them choose language more thoughtfully as a consequence. Promoting a growth-mindset approach also meant reigning in language that contributes to fixed mindsets, even when it sounds positive. The classic example? Calling students "smart." While said with the best intentions, the phrase communicates that intelligence is a trait you have, not something you are building. As Randi

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noted, it had also become a platitude: “They’ve heard it a million times: ‘Yeah, you’re going to say I’m smart; I’ve got the potential.’ They don’t believe it, and the ones that do don’t get how it translates. When you use effort language, it sends the message that it’s a process, that you’re not finished learning.” As the teachers developed the habit of using this language repeatedly, they found that they became comfortable delivering these messages in a natural way. Allowing time to integrate the language into their classroom interactions and observe its effects had given them confidence in continuing the practice.

Introducing a Growth-Mindset Approach to Students

John, Randi, and Sara introduced their classes to growth-mindset theory in an explicit way in early January. Using Mindset Works articles and materials, they taught a mini-lesson on the brain that highlighted evidence that humans continue to generate new neurons—even as adults—by working on difficult tasks and using effective study methods. Explicitly teaching students about the science behind growth mindset was something the team felt was valuable during the rest of the pilot. The theoretical foundation put the team’s other practices into context for students and helped them see why there was value in working on their mindsets. It made the claim that students can improve their learning with effort a credible one and helped them see why metacognition matters.

Reflecting on Effort in Class

Having provided students with this framing, the team felt ready to introduce a rubric for students to assess their own effort. John, Randi, and Sara developed a rubric for students to reflect on the effort they were putting into their work and to be reminded of its importance. For inspiration, the group looked at an “effective effort” rubric developed by Mindset Works, narrowing down the seven areas it outlined to the four they felt represented significant leverage points for their students: *Asking Questions*, *Perseverance*, *Seeking and Applying Feedback*, and *Going Beyond Minimum Requirements* (see Appendix A). They decided they would both grade students and have students grade themselves using these categories.

Working with Eskolta, the team also created a reflection tool alongside the rubric that would push students to articulate their ideas about their performance and capture shifting attitudes (see Appendix B). It asked students to rate themselves and explain in words how much effort they put into the class, then describe what part of class was most difficult, and finally, identify the most valuable mistake they had made.

Through the implementation of these two tools, the team hoped to see more growth-oriented thinking about learning and evidence that students made a greater effort to improve.

In February, students in each of their ninth-grade English classes and Sara’s Honors English class rated themselves on the four rubric criteria and filled out the reflection sheet, thinking about English class the previous semester. The teachers then collected these and reviewed responses. In order to norm their use of the tool, the teachers selected two students from each class, independently scored their responses using the effort rubric, and then compared their scores, discussing examples of behavior they felt justified the ratings. Once the three felt they had reached a shared understanding of the categories and what kinds of behaviors merited each score, they compared their scores to students’ own self-assessments. About a third of the students’ assessments seemed to accurately match the teachers’ assessments, while more than a third gave themselves a higher rating than their teachers did.

For example, a student named Rowan had given himself 3s and 4s in every area—one to two points higher than his teachers' evaluation. Rowan was a student who had demonstrated significant ability in the past but was disorganized; he lost assignments and did not keep track of deadlines. "Rowan will have a mature conversation compared to what he actually does. He seems to think that the conversation is enough," Sara remarked. While he was receptive to feedback and would apply suggestions given on his essays, he would not attempt to complete any additional work. John noted, "*Going Beyond* is a real target for him. There's a definite disconnect; he means to go beyond, but he doesn't really."

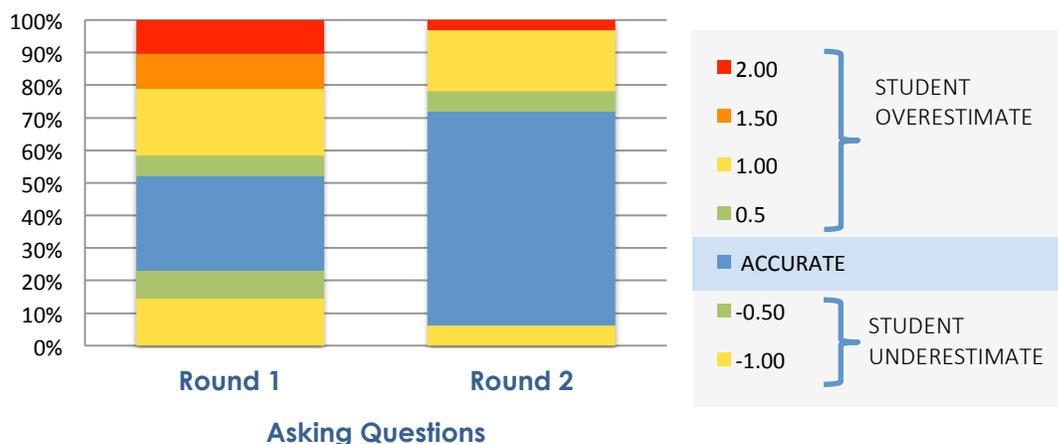
Casey, the student with learning disabilities and problems interacting in class mentioned in the introduction, had also overestimated his performance. He gave himself the highest score, a 4, on *Perseverance*, described in the rubric as "You kept trying when the task was hard. You had stamina to work until the task was completed," while his teachers gave him a 1: "You did not stick with the task when you had difficulty and you did not ask for support." The difference was substantial, and many other students had done the same. What might be going on? The teachers noted that students could be confusing effort with perseverance: "They're thinking, 'I tried; it was hard,' but they're not getting the 'stick through it, apply strategies, seek support' piece," remarked John.

The team looked to students' reflections for more insight. A few students demonstrated a high level of metacognitive awareness: "Honestly, I think I didn't put enough effort into my work to get the grade I needed." "I had a hard time volunteering because I don't like to be singled out." "During last semester, the most valuable mistake I had was not adding enough information, as in facts and quotes from passages. From this mistake I learned my writing of my paragraphs needs enough evidence." Many, however, gave short, vague answers: "I put in enough effort." "Nothing in class is difficult." "None." Others, like Rowan, fell somewhere in the middle: "I put a lot of effort into classwork but on essays and projects, homework it's about a 3 [out of 4]." Prompted to give his most valuable mistake, he wrote, "I think it might be the essays."

The group agreed that areas like these in which teacher and student assessments diverged would be an ideal entry point for differentiated support to students. In the coming months, they also focused on helping students to reflect more closely on the challenges they were encountering.

As spring came, the team had students self-assess again. To help focus their reflections, they asked students to reflect on their effort on one particular assignment. This focus allowed students to remember and evaluate specific behaviors rather than general feelings. "Using a specific task made it easier" for students to focus their thinking, Randi observed. "Students could very clearly look and see, 'well, what did I do?'—as opposed to looking at their whole effort across a semester." The teachers also met with students one-on-one in April to discuss their self-assessment on the rubric and to give them feedback on their performance.

This time around, student-teacher alignment on rubric ratings was noticeably greater. For example, the blue area in Figure 1 shows that while about 30 percent of students' self-assessments on *Asking Questions* matched their teachers' in the first round, this increased to 65 percent in the second round.

Figure 1. Student "Overconfidence" Over Time

Furthermore, in this second set of reflections, students were more likely to explain their self-scoring with responses that addressed specific academic skills. For example, “I gave myself a three for my level of effort because I asked questions, gathered a lot of info, revised my essay.” “I read the story only to scan info. I should have read and gotten to understand it clearly.” They were also able to point to writing techniques and specific areas of the essay where they made their most valuable mistakes: “I added too much evidence and didn’t explain it.” “When Miss Albert checked it, I noticed a lot of grammar errors. I learned to double-check.” Sara commented on this change: “There was more buy-in into the experience of reflecting on their effort and on their process.”

As they looked back over the work during the pilot, the group agreed an important lesson was to link student self-assessment to a specific project. Allowing time for students to experience growth mindset practices on an ongoing basis also seemed to build trust in the process. Seeing the change in her students over the year, Sara noted, “I think there was a movement from putting down what they thought we wanted to hear to actually being more honest. That’s a nice thing to see—that there’s some ownership, that, ‘Oh, I’m doing this for myself and not just for the teacher.’”

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Background on the Pilot Team

The pilot team at Coalition consisted of two teachers, Randi Albert, who teaches Special Education, and Sara Powers, who teaches ninth-grade English, along with the school’s principal, John Sullivan. Both teachers are leaders within the school, Randi as a SPED team leader and United Federation of Teachers chapter leader, and Sara as an ELA team leader and literacy coach. John, who became principal in 2011, has worked to tackle the multiple challenges Coalition faces in raising student achievement and graduation rates. A uniquely close-knit pilot team, the three had a strong relationship, facilitated by the organization of teaching roles. Sara and John teach different sections of the same course, with Randi as Special Education co-teacher during each section. This structure meant that the team engaged in course planning together, which contributed to a strong and integrated approach to work during the pilot, as contact inside and outside of class permitted frequent opportunities to share experiences and think through the project as a unified team.

The team at Coalition engages in several practices that support peer learning and development of their teaching practices. The three met regularly to plan classes and reflect on their experiences with new approaches or lessons and they opened their classes for other teachers to observe. Prior to entering the 2013–14 Academic and Personal Behaviors Pilot, the school grading policy was revised to recognize students’ efforts to complete assignments throughout the course of a project—not just at the end. Both lead teachers held weekly one-on-one conferences with students to give targeted skill-based feedback using course rubrics and regularly discuss students’ next steps for improving their work.

Academic and Behavioral Effort Rubric

Name: _____

Class: _____

Measure of Effort	4	3	2	1
Asking Questions	You asked specific questions to make connections and push your thinking and asked for help as needed.	You asked questions to make connections and clarify your thinking and asked for help.	You asked few questions to make connections and sometimes asked for help.	You did not ask questions to make connections or ask for help.
Perseverance	You kept trying when the task was hard. You had stamina to work until the task was completed.	You kept trying when the task was hard. You asked for support, you asked questions to help you focus and move forward.	You almost stopped when the task became difficult. You needed to be prompted to use supports. When prompted you may have asked follow-up questions.	You did not stick with the task when you had difficulty and you did not ask for support.
Seeking and Applying Feedback	You frequently sought feedback during the task and applied it confidently, thoroughly, and thoughtfully. You asked for help up until you completed the task.	You acknowledged feedback during the task and applied most of it. You attempted to use feedback to make corrections. You asked follow-up questions when you got stuck.	You accepted feedback but were unable to apply it or only applied a few of the easier things. You did not ask for help and assumed you were done when you applied the feedback.	You were unable to accept feedback and didn't apply it.
Going Beyond the Minimum Requirements	You challenged yourself by extending far beyond the minimum requirements of the task.	You completed the task fully, going beyond the minimum requirements.	You completed the minimum requirements of the task.	You completed less than the minimum requirements of the task.

Project Effort Reflection

Name: _____

Date: _____

Think about the task *Argument Essay: Berry Gordy*, which you have just completed in class. Answer the following questions honestly.

1. On a scale of 1 to 4 how much effort did you put into this project? (1 being the least amount of effort and 4 being the most)

__1

__2

__3

__4

2. Based on the rating you have given yourself above, explain the level of effort you put into the task.

3. Which part(s) of the task were most difficult? Explain why.

4. What was your most valuable mistake during this task and what did you learn from it?