

Spring 2018

# Growth Mindset Instruction In A Traditional Literature Curriculum

Lea Corcoran  
*Hamline University*

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GROWTH MINDSET INSTRUCTION IN A TRADITIONAL LITERATURE  
CURRICULUM

By

Lea Corcoran

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2018

Capstone Project Facilitator: Julianne Scullen  
Content Expert: Kathleen Eikens

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To my beautiful daughter who has taught me what it means to persevere since the day she was born. Thank you for your understanding when I was working on this project. Your resilience, ability to work through adversity, and general enthusiasm for life has given me the motivation to complete this research, and to teach others what perseverance truly means. Thank you to my husband and family for the encouragement and support you gave me to accept this challenge and continue until completion.

“With ordinary talent and extraordinary perseverance,  
all things are attainable.”  
- Thomas Fowell Buxton

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

There is a struggle in education. It is a battle between the measurable and assessing a depth of communication and understanding. Standardized testing has been the “go to” method of the ages to determine academic achievement. With the increased focus on testing in recent years, certain populations have experienced increased pressure to improve scores, especially the struggling students and their educators. The increased testing has also impacted college bound and high achieving students and their families. The “almighty A,” which is a top letter grade for a course, is the ultimate goal for students and parents, as getting into prestigious schools is often how success is measured.

At the school where I teach, mental health is an increasing concern, as children must navigate the pressures and high stakes related to academic performance at the same time as they are working through their early adolescence. With the pressure of academic achievement becoming more prevalent in lower grades of younger children, students are becoming focused on success and its value earlier in their lives. When the societal focus seems to be on scores, as educators we struggle to teach students that a grade of an ‘A’ is only as good as new knowledge gained that can be flexibly used across life experiences. With this in mind, the central question driving my project is, “*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*”

Many experts agree that how students approach learning, in terms of both accomplishments and failures, can directly impact future motivation, confidence, and

performance. The belief that attaining a positive growth mindset can assist students on their academic and professional journeys has led to the development of programs meant to expose students to mindset skills at earlier ages. These programs have been implemented with varying levels of commitment and success (Orosz, Peter-Szarka, Bothe, Toth-Kiraly, & Berger, 2017).

As a middle school teacher, I have been exposed to programs focusing on developing a growth mindset, and the research that shows a need to teach students how to move forward from mistakes and failures in a manner that builds on new knowledge. While teaching self-conscious and anxious pre-teens, I have witnessed first hand how managing day-to-day experiences can determine a positive perception and ultimate learning. Although my school has implemented a program that has engaged students of varying mentalities, I have recently wondered if the concepts could be more connected to the various subject areas by becoming an integral part of the day-to-day curriculum.

In this chapter, I will discuss the experiences that have led me to research how a curriculum inclusive of growth mindset concepts can support personal development. First, I will discuss my own journey to becoming a middle school ELA teacher and how this has led me to research this topic. Next, I will present the context of the school where I teach and the programs currently in use. Finally, I will share the rationale for why the topic is worth researching. Together, these structures and experiences have led to my interest in creating a growth mindset supplemental curriculum for use as part of middle school literature instruction.

### **Mindset Journey**

If someone had told me 30 years ago that I would be teaching middle school, I never would have believed it. I was fifteen and planning on a professional dancing

career; performing whenever I could, my only other interest was getting out of school as quickly as possible so that my life could start. The thought of college was far from my mind, as a dancer's career is short-lived, and I did not want to waste a second longer than I had to in school. I had experienced few disappointments, and the word failure was not in my vocabulary. Fast-forward a few years and, after a few jobs as a performer and under the encouragement of my parents, I did enter college as a dance performance major. I had started teaching dance classes for private businesses, public schools, and universities, and I truly enjoyed the process and creative outlet. I had started to feel that when my body could no longer dance, I might enjoy teaching. Throughout the years, I had held several community expert positions with different school districts, so I knew that obtaining a dance license was an option. A series of injuries throughout the years had left me feeling like it was time to change my focus. When the injuries started piling up, I was not prepared to handle these obstacles. My mindset had always been one of, "work hard to be the best, and you will be," without ever experiencing the same emotional growth that kids typically went through on their journey to adulthood. The realization that sometimes it takes more than hard work was difficult for me to accept. It took a great deal of time to learn the skills necessary to move forward during difficult times.

When I enrolled in education classes, I decided to focus on elementary education and language arts. I had always loved reading and made relevant connections between literature and the performing arts. At the time, I hoped to continue working in arts areas; but, ultimately, teaching kindergarten or first grade was my goal. I student taught in an urban kindergarten classroom and truly enjoyed my time there. In my first teaching position, I felt nowhere near the same level of connectedness I had experienced in the

Kindergarten classroom. At the end of that year my position was cut, and I found myself feeling relieved. I decided to look in other districts, as the suburban community where I was working did not feel like the right fit. Coming to terms with my “failure” to make this work was emotionally draining.

I soon found a job in the urban district where I had student taught. I was unsure of my decision to take the job because the position was a drastic change from my earlier vision: a high school, reading intervention teacher. High school. Not at all what my plan had been and I was apprehensive because I lacked experience. This was one of the first times in my life when I did not feel confident that I could succeed. Since I had started to work on adding a reading license to my resume, this was a good fit. To my surprise, I enjoyed the position, and my entire mindset about teaching changed while I was there. By my second year at this school, I was also teaching advanced dance electives and working as the building literacy coach, and I was quite happy. Unfortunately, after my third year, there was an extreme budget crisis. On the day that I was informed that I would not be returning due to a budgetary reduction, my principal told me that I had, “taught myself out of a position.” As our reading scores had increased significantly, reading intervention was no longer considered a necessary course and was eliminated. I was devastated. For weeks I was in a fog. How had my life come to this? I had worked so hard! Eventually, I was transferred to another school where I would teach sixth grade ELA. Middle school was the last place I had ever thought I would be, or wanted to be, and I was dumbfounded. I did not want to transfer to a new school, but I reluctantly started over again.

Working at this new school was difficult, and I found it extremely challenging to be an effective educator. Violence in the building was a common theme, and reading

proficiency levels were abysmally low. The students were mostly from impoverished backgrounds, and school was just another place that they were required to go. Teaching actual curriculum was difficult, and my knowledge of reading development and intervention became a valuable tool. Although I knew there was a bigger problem at this school than simply teaching academic skills, I had a difficult time figuring out the root of the problem with so many other distractions. The existing culture of the school had teachers on the defensive, as the students truly “ran” the school. The kids all expressed and demonstrated that they felt like they were failures. This was something that I could empathize with, and I found it difficult to help them work through their struggles in such an unstable environment. The stress of working in this environment impacted me physically and emotionally; I left this position to find a healthier fit.

Now, two years later, I find myself teaching sixth grade ELA at an affluent, private school, and instructing students in another new experience with exposure to new ideas. Academic achievement is praised and student involvement in activities, academic and otherwise, is the way of life. Teaching in this environment is a true joy, as I feel as though I am doing what I was always meant to do. Surprisingly, I now find myself feeling like sixth grade is where I was always meant to be. I do not think I could be this happy in this type of position without going through all of the struggles that I have in the last several years. Without perseverance, I could not appreciate the journey. A quote that now represents my mindset is from the novel *Esperanza Rising* written by Pam Munoz Ryan: “There is no rose without thorns” (Ryan, 2002, p. 14).

### **Middle School Mindset**

In difficult situations I had often told myself, “change your mindset,” but I really had no standard for what that meant. I knew it was a state of mind that had to do with

making the decision to either accept and work through challenges or wallow in self-pity. The school that I started teaching at in the fall of 2016 is part of a program that helps students in fifth and sixth grade understand the concept of perseverance. As part of the program, growth mindset techniques are taught to help students reflect and make choices. Before I even had my first day in my classroom, I attended a two-day training workshop on how to teach these concepts and how the program at our school would look. I connected with everything presented, simply because, as an adult, I had to learn how to develop a growth mindset. How would my journey have been different, had I understood the concepts at a younger age, and been able to apply them to my own challenges?

As I listened in that seminar, I could not help but think of the sixth grade students at my previous school. How could these ideas about mindset have helped them navigate both life and school? Would their perception of their own abilities have been different? Instead of acting out in violence, could they have found other methods to work through their frustrations?

It was during my first week with students at this school that I realized that the emotional needs of my new kids were the same as those at my previous school. The student populations could not have been more drastically different, yet both groups of sixth graders were struggling with being able to work through challenges and focus on how to change their situation for the better. Regardless of superficial differences, there was an obvious, common theme emerging. Similarities in the reactions to difficult circumstances by students in both settings were undeniable. Interestingly enough, when I accepted the private school position, I was not expecting the students to struggle as they did with persevering through adversary.

As my own experiences have shown me, not all students will naturally develop the growth mindset necessary to deal with the pressures of life; even our most successful students can struggle. My personal journey has led me to a passion for teaching students how to develop a growth mindset and actually apply the skills in their daily lives.

### **Perseverance in the Private School**

In my first class at Hamline University, an incredible professor gave us an invaluable piece of advice: get to know each student as an individual. Although this is something that I have always used as my education motto and guide, this bit of advice has recently become more meaningful to me. As a pilot school in a program aimed at teaching students different mindset concepts and providing them with a means for managing difficulties on a road to success, one of the major activities my current school created and participates in is called a Sparks Fair. As part of this exhibit, students create a project to present to their classmates, school, and families that is focused on something that motivates them and brings them joy. As a teacher, during this process you learn more about your students than you could have ever imagined. The insight into why each child reacts the way they do in different situations becomes evident in a manner that is more than just a conversation or an interest survey. It is an experience. Understanding their “sparks” is the beginning of the journey for these kids into their own understanding of how to move forward from challenges and be successful.

Although the program is an excellent starting point, it is currently a separate set of lessons in addition to existing curriculum. Middle school teachers meet and discuss who will teach which activities in relation to their subject; however, in sixth grade, most of the lessons are taught in religion classes. Concepts are taught with strong participation, yet the activities still feel like an addition to the subject, rather than an integral, curriculum

component. How will students learn to apply these skills in all situations, if they are not exposed to the experiences as an integral part of different subjects regularly?

### **Current Context and Rationale for the Research**

The school I currently teach at is a large, Catholic, private school instructing children from preschool to eighth grade. The students in this school are very focused on the grades they receive, but as a teacher I want them to learn from the process. Often, many of our parents focus on grades, and they place a great deal of importance on what these grades represent. Rather than thinking about the improvements that their children have made, parents often become concerned. These anxieties are then passed on to their children in the form of pressure to be one of the best students. When children receive a grade that is not a top mark, their reactions usually include blaming their performance on someone or something, trying to get extra credit, crying, or worrying over what their parents' reaction will be. As an educator, this can be difficult, because we want our students to focus on what they did learn, own it, and determine how to problem solve to do better the next time. The decision to offer a program teaching perseverance was borne from these difficult situations to help students understand how to keep improving and handle obstacles, all while learning to take personal responsibility for their education.

As I looked at the needs of every individual student last school year, I determined that in order to truly facilitate the development of a growth mindset for these children, I would have to actively engage them in regular, growth mindset practice. Rather than just plastering the walls with posters of alternative language to deal with setbacks, I would need to craft a curriculum that weaves the growth mindset components into everyday learning. As a literature teacher, I have the opportunity to show kids how to look at growth mindset qualities in the text we read, and connect the experiences to their own



lives. I want to answer the question, “*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*”

Why teach growth mindset? Understanding weaknesses can often be as important as understanding strengths. In my opinion, which is based on my own experiences, it is through struggles that we either learn how to move forward or learn to avoid situations that may be challenging. In Carol Dweck’s book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, she discusses the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset, and how the possession of either impacts individual views of obstacles and success (2008a). Dweck states that, “As parents, teachers, and coaches, our mission is developing people’s potential” (2008a, p. 222). By showing students how to use adversity to learn and grow, we have the opportunity to help children recognize their true potential.

### **Summary**

My own experiences of dealing with adversity throughout my formative years and my career have led me to recognize the importance of a growth mindset. I want to facilitate the opportunity for my students to understand the benefits of a growth mindset, as well. By creating a curriculum that is inclusive of carefully crafted activities and opportunities for self-reflection, I hope to provide my students with the opportunity to benefit from growth mindset practices.

### **Chapter Two Preview**

In chapter two, I will present and discuss the research that has been done on teaching growth mindset concepts. First, I will share the common terms necessary for understanding different mindsets. I will then share information on how attaining a growth mindset can influence perseverance, resilience, motivation, and achievement.

Adolescent development and its impact on these traits will also be presented. Finally, I will also discuss the research findings of growth mindset interventions that have been conducted, and share the potential benefits for students determined by these studies.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

“It is through effort that people build their abilities and realize their potential” (Dweck, 2008b, p. 4). The word “effort” can imply different meanings to people of all ages and backgrounds. Some people may see effort as the key to achieving success, where others simply see it as only necessary when working on something out of their skill set. Teaching students how to engage in growth mindset practices can help them better understand what is not only meant by “effort,” but also help them to reflect on their own levels of effort and engagement in all areas of life. The central question that this chapter will address is, *“Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?”*

All one needs to do is login to Pinterest, or any other education based site, and search “growth mindset” to have their search feed flooded with colorful pictures of laminated posters to hang in any classroom. Adorable drawings of children adorn the placards supporting positive, mindset statements, and the bright colors can be coordinated to match any classroom theme. Variations for secondary classrooms include pictures of the brain that have been segmented into a grayscale side representing fixed mindset and potentially restrictive behaviors, while the other colorful half is highlighted with self-affirming statements and better ways to approach problems. Can helping students reach their potential be as simple as surrounding children with these statements? The quantity

of research that has been published about the impacts of developing a growth mindset demonstrates that it is a much more complex and influential topic than classroom decorations may suggest. Although simple signs promoting a healthy mindset are excellent additions to a classroom community in which children are encouraged to look at success and failure as a means for personal growth, a deeper understanding of mindset must be presented in a way that encourages personal reflection on a regular basis, and not just when students look at a beautifully crafted bulletin board.

Acquiring and nurturing a growth mindset can be difficult for many children, as well as for adults. As a culture, since the 1990s, we have developed a “praise” mentality that has led to potentially harmful results, by applauding ability rather than the process in order to help children maintain a positive self-esteem (Dweck, 2008b). Carol Dweck, a leader in growth mindset research, states that, “Praise is intricately connected to how students view their intelligence” (2007b, p. 1), which inadvertently promotes a fixed mindset that intelligence cannot be grown or developed. A movement that supports praising effort has since taken hold and led to further complications as administrators, educators, and parents struggle to determine the best means to grade and assess effort in addition to the product. In 2016, Dweck added that there is more to praise than just praising effort, because the outcomes of learning and progress are just as important (p. 2). She argues, “if students persevere with ineffective strategies, they may end up feeling particularly inadequate,” (Dweck, 2016, p. 2), which can happen when children are praised on effort only. The goal to help children reach their potential has not changed, but the means of facilitating this process is the focus of much research that continues to develop.

When considering student mindsets, there are several related themes that must be addressed, the first being perseverance and resilience. The impacts of perseverance and resilience on student learning will be discussed, as well as how students can develop deeper levels of perseverance and resilience. As this theme is further investigated, the role that developing a growth mindset can play in strengthening perseverance and resilience will also be presented.

Another important theme that will influence the understanding of the central question of this project is the connections between motivation, achievement, and different mindsets. All people have different levels of motivation depending on their anticipated outcomes of the situation. Based on my own experiences in the classroom, when it comes to education, just as in other areas of life, motivation levels are unique. In creating a curriculum meant to help students achieve and grow, it is important to learn more about the connections between motivation and achievement. Can developing a growth mindset impact motivation levels and academic achievement? This chapter will review this question and the related theories.

Adolescent development is another theme that will be explored in this chapter. One of the topics that will be considered is how adolescent development impacts perseverance, resilience, motivation, and achievement. Driving this examination will be the question of how a growth mindset might help adolescents obtain or further expand these qualities within themselves.

The final piece that will be reviewed is the studies that have been done on teaching growth mindset concepts as both classroom interventions and lessons. The successes of different interventions will be shared, as well as the studies that were not as

successful. The information is intended to determine if the intervention fits the need in today's classrooms, specifically when working with middle school students.

In order to investigate and ultimately answer the question, “*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*” a thorough study of existing literature on the topic is necessary. This chapter will begin by presenting the common terms for understanding mindsets. Next, information on how obtaining a growth mindset can influence perseverance, resilience, motivation, and achievement, with a specific focus on growth mindset in adolescents will be described. Finally, I will share research findings of several growth mindset interventions and studies; including the potential benefits for students that these studies found.

### **Growth Mindset**

In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck wrote, “When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world” (2008a, p. 15). Growth mindset refers to a mental perception that personal learning and intelligence can be changed through behavior. This section will begin by defining both fixed and growth mindsets as determined through various studies, as well as define what has been called a “false growth mindset” (Dweck, 2008a, p. 214). The next portion will explore the benefits of developing a growth mindset, with a specific focus on adolescents.

**Definitions.** According to Dweck (2008a), people possess one of two mindsets: a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. She states that her “research has shown that the view you adopt of yourself profoundly shapes your life” (2008a, p. 6). These mindsets are often referred to as implicit theories of intelligence (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck,

2007, p. 247; Yaeger & Dweck, 2012, p. 303). In order to more fully understand what this statement means, a definition of both mindsets must be presented.

A “fixed mindset” is one in which a person believes that intelligence and talent are finite and cannot be changed. They believe a person is born with a certain amount of each which cannot be affected by any force or level of effort (Dweck, 2010). The fixed mindset is also referred to as an “entity theory” of intelligence or personality (Yaeger & Dweck, 2012, p. 303). According to Dweck, students with a fixed mindset believe that “if you have ability, everything should come naturally” (2010, p. 1). Additionally, students with this mindset avoid challenges that involve effort and struggle to deal with setbacks they meet (Dweck, 2010, p. 2).

A “growth mindset” is categorized as one that focuses on the malleability of intelligence and talent. Dweck (2010) stated that people who possess a growth mindset believe that intelligence can develop and grow. With this understanding, students are more willing to attempt challenging tasks, move forward from disappointment, and appreciate the effort necessary for success (Dweck, 2010). Yeager and Dweck (2012) also refer to growth mindset as an “incremental theory” of intelligence (p. 303). Building off of Dweck’s research, Erik Laursen (2015) added that these people also “see education, experience, and practice as opportunities to increase their mastery” (p. 19). Students with a growth mindset are focused on learning, rather than if they see themselves as good or bad at a certain subject or task.

The term “false growth mindset” has also been used as misunderstandings and manipulations of growth mindset have developed. Dweck states that certain interpretations have focused on calling what people like about themselves a growth mindset, focusing on effort without a measure of growth or change when things are not

working, and praising and supporting kids without teaching them the skills needed to grow and reach their goals (2008a, pp. 214-217).

**Growth Mindset Benefits.** As the term growth mindset has become a buzzword in classrooms and districts throughout the country, research into the role mindsets play in academic success or failure has continued. In “Leveraging Mindsets to Promote Academic Achievement: Policy Recommendations,” the authors stated that in regards to growth mindset, “fostering these mindsets can improve students’ motivation; raise grades; and reduce racial, gender, and social class gaps” (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015, p. 721). Rattan et al. also added “academic mindsets are powerful when implemented correctly” (2015, p. 721). In their plea to policy makers, the authors acknowledge and recognize that mindset instruction will not solve all of the problems in education; however, given the benefits academic mindsets provide students, mindset instruction should be considered in future educational decisions (Rattan et al., 2015).

Based on a study conducted by Lisa Blackwell, Kali Trzesniewski, and Carol Dweck (2007) with over 400 seventh graders, Dweck states that as a result of teaching students about growth mindsets, students demonstrate “increased motivation, better grades, and higher achievement test scores” (Dweck, 2007a, p. 9). The students who demonstrated a fixed mindset did not experience the same results: the students showed less resilience and motivation and received lower grades in the following two years (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). This study directly supports the findings of Rattan et al., in both similarity of benefits and disadvantages. Dweck again references the study conducted by Blackwell et al. (2007) stating that they also found that teachers, who were not aware of the two separate groups, singled out the students who received growth mindset instruction as “showing clear changes in their motivation,” and that these



students were showing more engagement and effort on assignments (Dweck, 2008b, p. 4).

In a study developed by Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, and Gross (2014), middle school students completed four surveys throughout middle school concerning whether they believed intelligence and emotions could change. They found that student grades were determined by individual beliefs that intelligence could be increased, and the students who felt intelligence was malleable were also more likely to take advanced classes (Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014, p. 232). The results of this study were similar to those of Rattan et al. and Blackwell et al. in that beliefs about intelligence influenced effort and the willingness to accept challenges.

**Growth Mindset Summary.** Although growth mindsets can be beneficial in multiple situations, such as in careers, competitive sports, relationships, and parenting (Dweck, 2008a), the focus of this investigation is the role growth mindset plays in learning, motivation, and achievement. The benefits of developing a growth mindset either prior to or during adolescents include increased motivation (Rattan et al., 2015), better grades, and higher test scores (Blackwell et al., 2007).

### **Perseverance, Resilience, and the Growth Mindset**

Although similar in nature, perseverance and resilience refer to different qualities; however, both are key advantages to developing a growth mindset. The following section will identify working definitions of both perseverance and resilience. The connections between the development of these qualities and growth mindset will also be explored.

**Perseverance.** Perseverance is the ability to recognize challenges and struggles, but continue to work towards a goal, regardless of difficulties. Developing this quality is

important because it can impact motivation, self-esteem, and achievement (Laursen, 2015). Perseverance, also often referred to as “grit,” is one component of a growth mindset because it requires the learner to work through challenges towards a positive outcome (Dweck, 2008a). Erik Laursen (2015, p. 20) stated that “Duckworth and her colleagues found that grit-the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals-contributes significantly to successful outcomes” (as cited in Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

**Resilience.** In “Mindsets That Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed” (2012), authors David Yeager and Carol Dweck define resilience as “any behavioral, attributional, or emotional response to an academic or social challenge that is positive and beneficial for development” (p. 303). This word has been interpreted many ways. In a study published in *Educational Psychology* by Donohoe, Topping, and Hannah, the authors recognized the ever-evolving definition as it relates to teaching and learning:

The definition of resilience however has shifted somewhat in the past 50 years and is still uncertain. When it was first introduced, the focus was on individuals who had not only survived but also thrive in the face of adversity or trauma.

Today, there is a growing interest in resiliency in the sense of pupils who can deal with lesser challenges in a positive manner (2012, p. 644).

The common theme between various definitions is that those who possess resiliency are able to deal with adversity in a way that leads to positive outcomes.

**Growth Mindset Connections.** In regards to how these traits relate to the development of a growth mindset, research has been conducted in different situations that establish a direct link. In their research, Yeager and Dweck found that, “students’

mindsets can be changed and that doing so can promote resilience” (2012, p. 303). Other researchers have built off of these and similar findings to develop new theories of how a growth mindset can impact perseverance and resiliency.

Erik Laursen (2015) states that in a study conducted by Farrington et al. (2012) at the University of Chicago found that “students’ mindsets and perseverance are directly associated with grades” (p. 21). Laursen (2015) also notes that perseverance and mindset influence engagement, attendance, finishing assignments, and learning from mistakes and failure. He concludes that students who possess both developmental skills earn higher grades than students who do not attain both qualities (Laursen, 2015, p. 21).

In research designed by Yaeger and Dweck (2012), they found that students who change their mindset to a growth mindset also gain resilience (p. 303). They state that if students can be shown and understand that intelligence can be developed through growth mindset practices over time by increasing effort, they become more resilient in challenging academic situations (Yaeger & Dweck, 2012, p. 306). In addition, Yaeger and Dweck also argue that if addressing student resilience is not considered when increasing rigor, then “improvements may be less effective than hoped” (2012, p. 306).

According to these studies, the common theme they share about the connections between growth mindset, perseverance, and resilience is that students must understand and fully adopt a growth mindset in order to gain the most in terms of perseverance, resilience, motivation, and achievement.

### **Motivation, Achievement, and Adolescent Development**

When considering the benefits of a middle school, literature curriculum imbedded with growth mindset concepts, attention needs to be given to adolescent motivation, achievement, and development. Adolescence can be a time when children struggle with

motivation, and both parents and educators are constantly looking for new information to help children develop motivation.

The connection between motivation, achievement, and adolescent development has been researched from many different perspectives. In terms of adolescent brain development, Luciana (2013) states that brain research has shown that children entering adolescents undergo significant brain changes and development. These changes can directly impact other aspects of development, which can influence academic success, social development, motivation, and self-esteem (Luciana, 2013). According to Allison Ryan (2001), “adolescence marks the beginning of a downward trend in motivation and achievement” (p. 1135), but that recent studies show that understanding the context of these changes is a key piece to decreasing the decline. Additionally, Paul Pintrich (2003) states that along with age and maturity factors, there are, “school and classroom contextual factors that seem to be related to this general decline” (p. 680). These studies call attention to the many different factors that influence middle school students’ motivation and achievement.

Because of the need to address this decline in motivation, research has been conducted and has shown a direct link between motivation and achievement. In this section, information regarding this connection will be explored through scholarly research. A person’s mindset can directly impact their motivation and, ultimately, individual success (Dweck, 2008a). The second part of this section will discuss the research that shows specifically how mindset can influence adolescent motivation and achievement.

**Motivation-Achievement Connection.** Pintrich found that student motivation becomes more differentiated as students age, and that students’ understandings and

perceptions of ability, intelligence, and effort also become more defined (2003). Based on previous research performed by Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele (1998), Pintritch also concludes that over the course of middle school years, student motivation becomes less adaptable (2003). These findings support the theory that as motivation in general decreases, the motivation to achieve is also reduced.

Froiland and Oros further investigated the motivation and achievement connection in 2014. They studied the impact of intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and reading achievement between fifth through eighth graders across the United States. They found a positive connection between intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement that ultimately enhanced literacy development (Froiland & Oros, 2014, p. 127). Students with a more extrinsic motivation were less motivated and achieved less than the intrinsically motivated learners (Froiland & Oros, 2014).

There are different catalysts for motivation that also impact achievement. Pintritch states that student behavior and motivation are driven by self-efficacy beliefs, personal goals and interests, value systems, support systems, and contextual factors (2003, p. 671). Ryan adds that since peer groups are an important factor in adolescent development, that “peers have an important influence on adolescent achievement beliefs and behaviors” (2001, p. 1135).

**Peer Group Influence on Motivation and Achievement.** School provides the social environment that adolescents interpret and respond to in different ways. In her study, Ryan found that students tended to associate with other students that shared the same beliefs about school and similar academic characteristics (2001, p. 1146).

Specifically, Ryan determined that:

Although on average students showed a decrease in achievement from sixth to

seventh grade, when students were members of a peer group that consisted of high achievers, their level of achievement showed less of a decline. When students spent time with low-achieving students, their level of achievement showed a greater decline (2001, p. 1146).

Ryan found that at a time when students are forming stronger opinions about effort and intelligence, peer groups directly impact student motivation and achievement (2001). Additionally, a student's sense of belonging is highly influential in both academic motivation and achievement (Ryan, 2001).

In "Motivation and Education: The Self-Determination Perspective," Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Richard Ryan (1991) note that school is the main source of socialization for students during their formative, first two decades. This socialization, with both peers and adults, helps to shape their beliefs about their abilities and future success (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). These authors assert that within the social context of school, there are, "factors that nurture intrinsic motivation and promote internalization, leading to the desired educational outcomes" (Deci et al., 1991, p. 325). This connects with the 2001 findings by Allison Ryan in that the social context in which students are educated can directly impact individual motivation style and achievement.

In another study, Ryan and Patrick find that the classroom social environment directly impacts adolescent motivation (2001, p. 454). They also recommend that in order to more fully understand this aspect of adolescent development, more information needs to be gathered as to how the, "social aspects of the classroom environment can support or undermined students' motivation, engagement, and learning" (Ryan & Patrick, 2001, p. 457).

**Growth Mindset Connections to Motivation and Achievement.** “The psychology of the student is key to academic achievement,” meaning that student’s perception of intelligence and effort directly influences an individual’s achievement. (Rattan et al., 2015, 724). Building off of the motivation-achievement connection and theories of psychological influence, researchers have studied the impact growth mindset beliefs and interventions play in student motivation and achievement.

Dweck states that recent studies have “shown that teaching students a growth mindset results in increased motivation, better grades, and higher achievement test scores” (2007a, p.9). In regards to her research with Blackwell et al. (2007), Dweck adds that based on their study of growth mindset interventions with seventh grade math students, they found that “the growth-mind-set message appeared to unleash students’ motivation” (2007b, p. 38). Students who received the growth mindset intervention made significant gains, whereas students who only received study skill instruction continued to experience declining grades (Blackwell et al., 2007). Additionally, Rattan et al. assert that since students with a growth mindset are motivated to learn and develop their abilities, they are more likely to engage in greater effort and pursue challenges (2015, p. 722). Together, these studies reveal the need to examine the potential benefits in the area of motivation when it comes to teaching growth mindset concepts. Many studies on the impact of growth mindset instruction have been completed in math and science courses. The lack of ELA focused studies is part of the motivation to answer the guiding question of this project. *Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*

Along the same line of the findings by Froiland and Oros, and expanding intrinsic motivation to include growth mindset instruction, Blackwell et al. (2007) obtained similar results with seventh grade math students. They state that the students who believed that intelligence could grow were more motivated to set higher learning goals, and they also put forth more effort, responded better to difficulties by using alternative strategies, and achieved higher math marks (Blackwell et al., 2007, p. 258). Blackwell et al. add that, “the fact that promoting an incremental theory seemed to have the effect of generating increased motivation in the classroom again supporting the idea that students’ theory of intelligence is a key factor in their achievement and motivation (2007, p. 258). The connection between growth mindset, motivation, and achievement demonstrates that the individual belief that the brain and intelligence could be developed, motivated students to achieve.

Further supporting the connection between motivation, achievement, and growth mindsets, Romero et al. found that when students believed intelligence could be developed, they “earned higher grades and were more likely to move to advanced math courses” (2014, p. 227). They also state that “students’ theories about the malleability of attributes-whether intelligence and emotions can be changed” (Romero et al., 2014, p. 232) predict future academic achievement and emotional functioning. Romero et al. argue that the cognitive changes that adolescents go through make this the perfect time to instruct students on growth mindset and influence future motivation and achievement (2014, p. 232).

**Summary of Motivation, Achievement, and Mindset.** According to the research, motivation can be impacted by many factors including, but not limited to, personal beliefs of effort, intelligence, and achievement. When students believe that they



can achieve, they are more likely to work hard, stay motivated, and persevere through difficulties (Pintrich, 2003). During adolescents, students are also motivated by social structures, and they often affiliate with students that share similar beliefs and skill sets (Ryan, 2001). When growth mindset instruction is given to adolescent students, both motivation and achievement have been shown to improve across subject areas (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2008b; Rattan et al., 2015). In moving forward, in order to develop a growth mindset inclusive curriculum, the considerations and benefits noted in these findings are essential understandings to determine the types of mindset activities to develop and include in a curriculum.

### **Mindset Interventions**

Growth mindset concepts taught in classroom settings have recently been an area of greater focus. Schools and educators have implemented various programs to help their students through this crucial development phase based on research by numerous experts, including at the school where this project will be implemented. The support for growth mindset intervention comes from the belief that students who attain this mindset “believe they have the ability to get smarter with effort” (Pekel, 2016, p. 7). Much of the research done in this area has been done on a relatively small scale, and the question as to whether or not this approach can be implemented on a larger scale is continually being investigated (Yaeger, et al., 2016; Andersen & Nielsen, 2016; Paunesku, et al., 2015). This sections seeks to further answer the guiding question of *“Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?”* by presenting various mindset development interventions and programs that have been introduced. Research supporting mindset inclusive instruction will be explored, including the varying levels of success.

The benefits of these types of programs will be outlined, with the specific goal of demonstrating a need for mindset inclusive instruction.

**Mindset Development in the Classroom.** The body of research into the success of growth mindset interventions continues to grow as more and more questions arise about the benefits of incremental theories of intelligence. Dr. Kent Pekel (2016) presents a valid argument for why the U. S. needs a new approach to student motivation. Pekel argues that “low motivation that many students have to work hard and succeed in school” (2016, p. 17) is one potential reason that student performance has not increased significantly in the last several decades. Furthermore, Pekel states that there have been relatively few serious attempts on the national level, through policy or other means, to “strengthen academic motivation” (2016, p. 17).

Pekel’s views (2016) are in line with the research compiled by Paunesku et al., which claims that, “no major reform has prioritized students’ psychological experience in school motivation to succeed, despite the fact that it is ultimately students themselves who must capitalize on learning opportunities” (2015, pp. 784-785). Paunesku et al. also agree that although mind set interventions have shown promise and influence, none “have been tested in ways that are potentially scalable” (2015, p. 785), primarily because they have focused on only one context at a time.

In their research conducted in 2016, researchers Schmidt, Shumow, and Kackar-Cam investigated the affects of growth mindset interventions with seventh and ninth grade science students. They followed the students for six weeks through a random study of mindsets, and then monitored the day-to-day classroom experience. Prior to the study, they note that the students had all “experienced steady declines in their perceptions of control, skill, learning and interest” (Schmidt, Shumov, & Kackar-Cam, 2017, p. 600)

during the year. Through their study they found that the mindset instruction and intervention was “effective in eliminating and in some cases, reversing these declines for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, but not for 7<sup>th</sup> graders” (Schmidt et al., 2017, p. 600). Based on similar findings, Orosz, Peter-Szarka, Bothe, Toth-Kiraly, and Berger acknowledge that this raises new questions in regards to teacher delivery, optimum times and ages for intervention, and how the design may be interpreted differently between different ages (2017).

In another study, researchers presented both their successes and difficulties as they attempted a mindset intervention with students that already had good grades (Orosz, Peter-Szarka, Bothe, Toth-Kiraly, & Berger, 2017). They found that among the students in the study, there were no intrinsic or extrinsic motivation changes (Orosz et al., 2017). Orosz et al. also state that “mindset beliefs are temporarily malleable and in given circumstances, they can change back to their pre-intervention state” (2017, p. 1). One of the reasons the researchers propose that may have caused the difference is that implementation was performed by teachers who only received a four hour, mindset training (Orosz et al., 2017). Orosz et al. also speculate that since all of the students involved in the study were relatively high achieving students, the participants had likely experienced less failure, therefore allowing less room for growth (2017). As the study posed new questions, it also demonstrates the need for in-depth training and a more complete picture of student beliefs before beginning a mindset intervention program (Orosz et al., 2017). Based on the finding that mindset beliefs can revert back to a pre-intervention state when the practice is discontinued, one can theorize that mindset instruction should be an ongoing practice, rather than only for a limited number of lessons (Orosz et al., 2017).

In another investigation created by Schmidt, Shumow, and Kackar-Cam (2015), the researchers set out to explore teacher effects on mindset intervention outcomes in seventh grade classrooms. What they found was that the differences in teacher effects impacted student mindset beliefs, learning goals, and beliefs about achievement, and were sustained by the students for several months after the experiment (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar-Cam, 2015, p. 17). They also state that “the teacher whose students had better outcomes placed more emphasis on mastery goals, growth mindset, conceptual development, and the use of learning strategies in her daily interactions with students than the other teacher did (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 17). This study supports the theory that regular practice of growth mindset concepts will show greater gains than occasional interventions. Schmidt et al. (2015) also argue that “program developers may want to design and study ways to impact teachers’ practices in order to maximize and sustain program impact” (2015, p. 17). These findings are similar to those in the Orosz et al. study, in that questions remain about how teachers own mindsets might impact the intervention outcomes. This study shares another connection to the Orosz et al. research by demonstrating that the regular practice of mindset concepts encourages greater gains (Schmidt et al., 2015).

**Benefits Supporting the Need for Mindset Inclusive Instruction.** Although research supports the potential benefits of developing educational structures incorporating growth mindset instruction, policy has not been established. Rattan et al. state that even though academic mindsets play a critical role in achievement, “policymakers have not taken full advantage of cost-effective and well-validated mindset interventions” (2015, p. 721). In addition, they add “although academic mindsets will not answer all of the challenges facing education, they reliably benefit students and therefore

merit greater attention from policymakers” (Rattan et al., 2015, p. 721). Considering all of the research completed in this area and the evidence of benefits, this should be an area taken into consideration when developing new policies.

Increased academic performance is one of the benefits found by Rattan et al. and also by other researchers. Referencing her work with Blackwell et al. (2007), Dweck notes that students who understood and engaged in the messages of growth mindset outperformed students in the control group who received excellent study skill instruction but no mindset instruction; regardless of the age difference (2007a, p. 10). The benefits of the mindset intervention went beyond the benefits of the other intervention that also was designed to help students improve (Blackwell et al., 2007).

Another benefit of growth mindset instruction stated by Dweck is that students who develop a growth mindset respond to obstacles and challenges by remaining engaged and trying to problem solve using strategies and resources (2010, p. 16). Laursen further supports this theory by adding, “students are more likely to stick with challenging tasks and assignments when they believe that their effort is a determining factor in their growth” (2015, p. 23). When students are not only able to persevere through challenges, but to also learn from the experience by calling upon strategies, they have the opportunity to grow their intelligence. This can ultimately lead to increased motivation and achievement.

Perseverance and resilience are also potential gains for students when they receive growth mindset instruction. When adolescent learners are taught the skills to becoming more resilient, they must also be taught the mindset concepts in order to fully apply their knowledge (Blackwell et al., 2007). By being taught growth mindset concepts, students develop perseverance and resiliency in conjunction with their academic development

(Yaeger & Dweck, 2012). Yaeger and Dweck make the claim that “mindsets can be changed and that doing so can promote resilience” (2012, p. 303).

### **Chapter Summary**

Growth mindsets include beliefs that intelligence can be developed (Dweck, 2008a; Dweck, 2010), that perseverance and resiliency can change over time (Dweck, 2010; Laursen, 2015), and that effort is just as important as and an integral component of the desired outcome (Yaeger & Dweck, 2012). Motivation and achievement are also impacted by an individual’s mindset, as well as contextual factors and social influences (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2007a; Romero et al., 2014).

As supported by this literature review, numerous studies have shown that when students receive growth mindset instruction, resilience, motivation, and achievement all improve. These conclusions have been shown across age groups and socioeconomic groups; however, most research has been done with controlled contexts and voluntary completion. As investigations move forward, the focus will be on determining if the same gains can be replicated through design thinking in a larger scale intervention (Paunesku et al., 2015).

*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*

Based on this literature review, even with only small interventions, student growth in academic achievement and perseverance can be expected. The chapter three project proposal and the chapter four conclusions will build off of these findings.

### **Chapter Three Preview**

In Chapter three, the context for developing a middle school, literature curriculum that is inclusive of growth mindset concepts will be presented and analyzed. The student

population and school setting will be examined more closely in order to establish what the specific needs of a growth mindset intervention are. The subject area, middle school literature, will also be discussed so that potential methods of instruction can be presented with a focus on reading and analyzing texts. Finally, the plan for the program and the goals will be laid out and explained in detail.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Growth mindset is the belief that “your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through efforts, your strategies, and help from others” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). Research has shown that students who develop a growth mindset perform better in school and have more resilience than those who do not have this mindset (Dweck, 2007a; Dweck, 2010; Laursen, 2015; Rattan et al., 2015).

To answer the question, “*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*” a supplemental curriculum was developed and implemented with careful consideration of the research, needs, and context. According to Rattan et al. (2015), fostering a growth mindset in students can increase both motivation and grades. This directly correlates with what Blackwell et al. also found in their research: as a result of teaching students about growth mindsets, students achieved better grades and test scores, and developed increased motivation (2017). Furthermore, Laursen found that students who are introduced to growth mindset interventions see education as an opportunity to gain experiences, grow, and focus on learning (2015). These findings, along with others, supported this project and the development of a growth mindset curriculum based on the potential benefits for all students.

In this chapter, I will present the major components and goals of this project, all of which directly impacted both the development and success of the curriculum. I will



begin by briefly describing the project relating to the guiding question: “*Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?*” The next elements that will be discussed are the participants and the context of where this project was implemented. A detailed description of the culture and students that received the instruction will be presented, with specific attention to the various needs of the population. Next, I will present the curriculum elements that were already in place, and the methods I used to develop the supplemental curriculum. How this growth mindset curriculum for middle school literature classes was assessed will be briefly outlined. Finally, an explanation of how this growth mindset intervention was implemented in middle school literature classes will be presented.

### **Growth Mindset Curriculum Project**

The intended goal of this project was to expose students to practices that research has shown to increase motivation and achievement. I created a supplemental curriculum that can be used in a middle school literature or reading class and can be used with any fiction text. The curriculum I developed consists of activities that are based on ELA standards and encourage critical thinking.

### **Participants**

As noted in Chapter 1, this project was developed for a large, Catholic, private school instructing children from preschool to eighth grade. The students that received this growth mindset instruction were sixth graders. Of the students in these classes, approximately 10-20 students received AST instruction, Academic Support Team, to support them with reading, math, and study skills throughout the year. The school is predominantly white, and there is one student of color in the sixth grade. No students in

the middle school receive free or reduced lunch; however, about 10-20% receive some form of partial, tuition assistance. Although the student population is made up primarily of neighborhood families, there are students that commute from other cities and counties.

All students in middle school take Math, Science, Health, Social Studies, Literature, English, Religion, Physical Education, Computer, and Art. By choice, students can also participate in choir or band. These classes are held during a school wide study hall twice a week. Band students take one additional lesson per week. This lesson is attended during a different class period each week, in order to avoid students repeatedly missing the same class. Academic extracurricular activities are well attended and supported including; Math Masters, History Day, Geography Bee, Robotics, Rubik's Cube Mastery, Computer Coding, the school's literary magazine, and Crunch, which is after school academic support. Athletics are also well attended, with the majority of the student body competing in at least one athletic season during the school year.

### **School Environment Context**

Overall, the school that this curriculum was developed for is a healthy, positive, and safe environment where students are presented with numerous opportunities to be successful. Families are extremely involved in the school's programs and fundraising. There is a strong sense of community, and students and families remain connected and committed to the school long after the students have graduated.

There are several different belief systems impacting day-to-day instruction in this school that must be considered when any lessons or units are written. These belief systems include those of the administration, teachers, parents, and students.

**Faculty Philosophies.** The first sets of beliefs that impact instruction are those held by the administration and teachers. The primary goal is to make sure that every

student receives the instruction they need, by meeting him or her where they are academically. The teachers at this school are extremely driven and engage frequently in meetings, workshops, and other educational opportunities to become informed in different methods. By choice, teachers often work throughout the summer at school to prepare and support one another. Careful documentation of student growth is gathered on a regular basis and this information is used to drive instruction. The faculty's ultimate goal for the academic curriculum is that each student progresses academically at a cognitively and developmentally appropriate level.

In addition to helping children reach their goals academically, the school's mission is that each child also receives guidance in how to be grateful, respectful, and caring. Since this is a parochial school, there is a certain moral code that the children learn and must apply in a multitude of situations. Making sure that each child is learning not only how to treat others with respect, but to also treat their own person with respect is extremely important. Curriculum has recently been adopted, the REACH program, that is geared towards helping the students learn to persevere when facing challenges. This program was added based on student needs observed by parents, teachers and administrators. Although instructors of different subjects teach each of these lessons, the lessons are stand-alone lessons that make some course content connections. It is important to the administration, board, and teachers that all children have the life skills to be successful now and in the future, in any aspect of life. This program was added to the school curriculum to support this goal.

**Parent Philosophies.** The parents of students at this school are extremely involved in their children's school experience. Although there are many different beliefs held by parents of varied backgrounds, a common theme amongst them is academic

success. Many children are under a great deal of pressure from their families or their own perceived expectations to earn top marks, which can often cause anxiety, animosity, and classroom breakdowns. One goal for their children that is shared by many parents is to make sure that their child not only does well in their current classes, but that they are accepted into their chosen high school. As a general rule, the parents of children at this school believe in their child's potential and expect them to meet this potential.

**Student Philosophies.** The students at this school range from extremely driven to safely adequate, academically. With a common belief held by many students that they will disappoint their parents if they do not earn high grades, many students are often unable to handle disappointments, mistakes, and failures. Like most schools, there are also numerous students who are extremely bright, but do not challenge themselves because they do not want to fail. For these students, putting forth just enough effort to succeed is satisfactory, rather than take a risk that could lower their grades. Although there are examples of intrinsic motivation held by students, these kids are often still influenced by their parents' expectations. All of the students participate in the REACH program perseverance lessons; however, most students only minimally or do not apply the strategies to their classes and life situations.

**Summary.** Different philosophies play a large role in the academic climate at this school. Based on the school context, faculty, and family expectations, and supported by the research presented in chapter two, a more extensive growth mindset intervention could help students navigate the pressures and challenges that they are dealing with on a daily basis. Academic rigor is high at this school. In order to meet the school's mission and vision, this must be maintained while students develop new strategies to deal with challenges and adversity.

## **Curriculum Foundation**

The supplemental curriculum that was created was designed to support the school's existing, literature curriculum. The existing curriculum includes a series of novels that are read by entire classes and literature circles. The novels are of varying levels, and I have the flexibility to use what I feel is appropriate for each student or class. All of the novels that I have selected share perseverance as a common theme. Not all students read the same novels; however, because the novels share similar messages, group discussions are still possible, as well as group projects and activities. In the past, the instruction of these classes has been a traditional literature class format, in that students read, share through in-class discussions, complete projects, and take quizzes and tests. In addition to required reading units, each student also selects, reads, and completes a project on novel of their choice, every month

The supplemental curriculum was intended to take the existing materials to the next level by having students make connections between texts and to their own lives, challenge critical thinking skills, and help students to increase effort and achievement on end of the unit tests and projects. The supplemental curriculum also helped students to recognize growth and fixed mindsets in others, reflect on how different mindsets impact outcomes and goals, make personal connections, and to develop their own growth mindset.

## **Curriculum Methods**

The curriculum activities were designed to work with any fiction text. The materials created for this project included activities for class novels, literature circles, and reading projects. These activities were based on best practices, the research gathered in the literature review, and student needs.

**Curriculum Model.** This school uses a backwards design model to guide curriculum development. Administrators and teachers look at the academic standards and student data to determine where they would like the students to be at the end of a lesson, unit, or the year. Lessons are then developed to meet these goals. In this school context, it is important to maintain appropriate and balanced levels of rigor in all lessons. The text sets selected by the teachers have been chosen because of each book's ability to guide the students to the end goal.

The design of this supplemental curriculum took the current traditional model and changed it to a more student driven model. One intention of this curriculum was to guide students to develop the mindset skills that will help them face challenges, take academic risks, improve critical thinking skills, and deal with disappointment. As shown by Rattan et al. (2015), students who apply a growth mindset demonstrate increased academic achievement. Dweck also found that students who utilize growth mindsets not only improve academically, but they are more able to stay engaged and face obstacles (2010). This supplemental curriculum was created to help increase student engagement and achievement by delivering the current reading curriculum while including growth mindset concepts.

**Design.** To create the general format for this curriculum, I took the existing curriculum and expanded upon it by adding activities geared towards helping the students develop a growth mindset. Based on the short-term findings of Orosz et al. (2017) that showed when growth mindset interventions stop, the students often revert back to their previous attitudes, each reading assignment and daily activity included growth mindset focused tasks. Furthermore, Schmidt et al. conclude that regular practice of growth mindset concepts will produce greater gains than occasional interventions (2015).

Because of these findings, the intent was to make using a growth mindset a habit rather than a sporadic practice. Although this project was completed in an 8-10 week time frame, the curriculum components can be modified and expanded upon to be used for an entire school year; therefore, reinforcing the thinking behaviors for a longer time period. Students received instruction through quick writes, weekly reflections, surveys, discussions, and critical thinking activities in both homework and classroom reading. Students investigated how different mindsets impact the characters, conflicts, themes, and plots in the novels they read. Students also reflected upon how the mindsets demonstrated in class readings related to their own lives.

**Assessment.** The supplemental curriculum includes components that allow students to be assessed in a variety of ways in order to provide different types of information. In addition to the discussion and writing prompts that are part of the curriculum, daily work was monitored for attitude changes, growth, and topic understanding. These basic assessments helped to guide instruction by helping to determine what activities should be repeated, what the next task should be, and whether or not the activities were helping students to think critically.

**Summary.** This project is a curriculum enhancement of the current, literature text set and model that has been used in the past. The lesson activities were developed based on research supporting growth mindset interventions and the school's existing backwards design methods. Growth mindset instruction was included in every class. Regular formative and summative assessments were created to drive the instruction.

### **Implementation**

The curriculum consists of three categories: class openers, working with texts, and exit activities. The class openers created are based on both personal evaluations and

responses to text, and the goal was to quickly engage students in higher order thinking. The next category I created was a variety of activities that involve critically analyzing texts and making connections to different mindsets while supporting engagement and rigor. The third category developed was daily closing activities intended to help students reflect upon their experiences and the content covered.

**Class Openers.** Each day when students entered the class, there was an established routine that included an engagement activity. With the new curriculum enhancements focused on developing a growth mindset, this routine included quick writes that were focused on motivation, effort, disappointments, challenges, and mindset, and were based on their own lives and on the characters that they read about in class. Openers also included problem solving tasks, pair shares, and whole group discussions.

**Working with Text.** Within the reading lessons, students analyzed characters, themes, actions, and plots for different mindsets. The students considered how mindsets impacted each of these elements, how the story or situation might have been different if the characters had used different mindsets, and how the mindsets of the characters developed over time. Deeper into the units, students not only analyzed texts for different mindsets and outcomes, but they also connected these mindsets and situations to their own lives, to lives of people they know, or current events. Some of the activities and discussion topics that were included are:

- Identifying quotes that represent fixed and growth mindsets and discussing how this impacted the character or story
- Analyzing how figurative language reveals mindsets and what we learn about the characters



- Evaluating how mindsets impact the conflicts; both internal and external
- Interpreting character thoughts, actions, and quotes
- Discussing what role mindsets play in understanding theme
- Predicting how the story might have changed had the mindsets of those involved been different
- Exploring how characters' mindsets change or develop over time and whether or not the changes are positive or negative
- Comparing and contrasting the impacts of mindsets in two or more texts
- Analyzing how character attitudes and reactions connect to each student's personal life
- Generate solutions for in-text problems and discuss the different options

These activities and topics, as well as many more, can be completed in different ways.

Some were completed through various discussion formats. Others were writing tasks and projects. Students also worked together to complete assignments, activities, and projects; such as creating a character mindset grid, a theme map, or a mindset journey timeline.

All of these activities had to remain at a level that met learning standards and included a level of rigor that appropriately challenged students and supported the school's mission and vision.

**Closing Activities.** The primary goal of the closing activities was to give students the opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes, effort, and performance. The closing activities also provided additional practice and reinforced new learning. One way the students did this was through exit tickets that they completed independently.

Informal surveys of the class were also included, as well as an end of the week journal entries.

### **Chapter Summary**

For this project, I created a series of growth mindset activities that are focused on literature and reading. These activities support ELA standards and the rigor expected at this school. This supplemental curriculum was embedded in the current literature curriculum, which was created using a backwards design method in order to meet student needs and academic goals. The culture of the school is one of appropriate rigor and family involvement, which impacted instruction. All parties involved have the best interests of the students as their main focus; however, they often possess different perspectives on how to best help the children. The students navigate a great deal of pressure to perform and could benefit from growth mindset interventions as demonstrated through research performed by Yaeger and Dweck. They found that mindsets can be changed and that doing this can promote resilience (2012). Students learned and practiced growth mindset in the context of their literature curriculum by analyzing characters, conflicts, plot, and themes. The primary objectives of the curriculum were to help students learn how to handle disappointments, maintain effort when completing tasks, challenge themselves intellectually, and develop perseverance in difficult situations by teaching growth mindset concepts that are imbedded in literature lessons.

### **Chapter Four Preview**

In chapter four, I will present and analyze the project designed to answer the guiding question, *“Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?”* This chapter will also share how the curriculum was implemented and

evaluate its overall successes. Finally, I will define the benefits discovered, as well as the potential problems or setbacks, in regards to the guiding question.

## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusions

#### Introduction

The development of this project was borne out of my desire to do two things. First, I wanted to find a way to connect our school's current perseverance and growth mindset curriculum to the content area I currently teach. My second goal was to merge the two programs while appropriately challenging every child. As an ELA teacher, I am constantly trying to engage my students in a meaningful mastery of the standards. One way to make learning more relevant for each child is to help them connect the material to their own lives. With this in mind, I researched the implications that attaining a growth mindset has on academic growth and emotional development. After considering this topic from several different angles, I narrowed down the essential question of this project: *"Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?"*

In this final chapter, I will share the reflective conclusions of completing the research and project development. I will present the new learning gained from a personal perspective, as well as the possible new learning for students and other educators. I will also reflect upon the research and how it influenced the project components. The implications, limitations, and successes of the curriculum will be shared, and how this work may encourage additional research or projects. Finally, I will close by discussing the potential benefits for teachers, students, and the profession.

## **Learnings**

Even though I spent the 2016-2017 school year immersed in training for our school's perseverance and growth mindset curriculum, when I began this project in 2018, I felt that I was still very much a newbie when discussing this area of study. Our training shared multiple perspectives on the benefits; however, I still felt as though there was something missing from the program in order for students to receive these benefits. Through the research process, my depth of knowledge grew in unexpected ways.

As an adult, my introduction to the concept of growth mindset was both exhilarating and an awakening into my own growth. Everything I learned connected with my own experiences, and I often wondered how my life might have been different if I had been reflective when it came to my own mindset. Because of this, working through the research was exciting. I often found myself having eye opening revelations as I learned about the existing research, and I immediately made the connections to my own life. This was my first time working through research where I felt the information was entirely relevant to my own life as a teacher and parent, and I also found that it could be relevant for my students in the same ways.

The learning continued as I began to develop the supplemental curriculum. As ideas came to me, I was able to personally work through the activities just as I asked my students to do. This not only helped me to model critical thinking, but it also allowed me to consider how to challenge my students in appropriate ways. Even when I was not working through a new mindset lesson that I designed, I found myself teaching differently. My own focus on teaching became more connected to the material and my students. This was a connection that I was not expecting; however, I feel as though developing this project has changed me as an educator. I do not believe that I will ever

be able to consider a piece of text for my students again, without considering the story's subject matter and characters through a growth mindset lens.

### **Literature Review**

As I began the process of creating the literature review in the summer of 2017, I felt overwhelmed. I knew what I wanted to research; however, I had trouble focusing my project topic. I floundered for a few weeks, reading everything on growth mindset instruction and middle school students that I could find. It was during the research process that specific pieces of information began to resonate with me. These bits of research became the foundation for the goals of my project.

The research of Carol Dweck was my initial focus, and as I moved forward, I found that her work had the biggest influence on the development of this curriculum project. Although she has conducted studies with numerous other experts that I have referenced in this project, it was information that she shared in her book, *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, that I found the most motivating in terms of what I could do to help my students to be more successful. In this book, Dweck shared that her “research has shown that the view you adopt of yourself profoundly shapes your life” (2008a, p. 6). I found this small statement to be the one that I kept coming back to as I developed this curriculum. I want my students to have every opportunity possible for success, and based on Dweck's work, a person's mindset can be a key component in an individual's success (2008a).

Another piece of information that I found both inspiring and motivating was from the study conducted by Orosz et al., which found that although mindset concepts can be developed over time, if the instruction is stopped, people often revert back to the mindset they had before the growth mindset instruction was introduced (2017). As I created this

curriculum, I did so with this understanding in mind. I focused on making sure that within the curriculum there were multiple ways to continue the mindset discussion in class everyday. Based on this research, I also wanted students to potentially develop thinking habits that would encourage future growth.

When I consider the research reviewed for this project on a whole, the common theme of supporting the development of a growth mindset to help increase achievement shaped how I chose the activities and ideas to teach. It also helped me to reflect upon my own practices in both instruction and in my own life. This theme was an essential element to creating a supplemental curriculum that would answer the question *“Can growth mindset concepts be embedded into a middle school literature curriculum and instruction, while maintaining rigor and alignment with ELA standards?”*

### **Creation of the Activities**

All of the activities and graphic organizers in this supplemental curriculum were created using PowerPoint, which is a very user-friendly tool when it comes to formatting different projects. By starting with a blank page, creators can use text boxes, shapes, any fonts on their computer, personal images, and a variety of built-in formatting techniques to design organizers that fit a specific need. Using this format also makes differentiation easier because changes can be made quickly that do not disrupt the overall format of the item. Each activity in this project was created as a separate PowerPoint, saved as a PDF, and merged into one document using the online program PDF Merge.

### **Implications**

Initially, my hopes for this project were that I would be able to connect my content subject area in a meaningful way to the content in the REACH program that our school currently uses. As I began the creation process, I soon found that this project

could in fact change the way I teach, as well as be helpful for other teachers in my building. With this in mind, my focus began to reach beyond activities for my own classroom, and I started to think about how this curriculum could be a solid resource for the rest of the instructors in my building.

Something that I first realized back in my days as a public school teacher was that the need to increase engagement and achievement in our classrooms drives all decisions in curriculum development. Based on my research and my experience with creating and delivering this curriculum, I can see that growth mindset concepts should be considered when units are being written, standards are being evaluated, and during everything in between. The research I discovered pushes the idea that growth mindset instruction needs to be considered throughout the process. Determining the true success of connecting these concepts to content standards and curriculum development could be beneficial to the academic growth and emotional development of all students.

### **Limitations**

As I began working with my students, I was aware of the exposure to growth mindset instruction that my current sixth graders had experienced in fifth grade. Even with this information, I found that many of the students had not made personal connections to the previous instruction, and therefore did not see the value in working with the concepts. This was an obstacle that was much larger than I had expected. I had to slow down, reteach, and evaluate my students' understanding and connection to the material before moving forward.

Because this project was developed for students with some previous exposure to the topic of growth mindset, I believe that this creates one limitation of the supplemental activities. Prior to working with the activities as part of a literature unit, students will



need to be taught the concepts. Students will also need to have practiced and discussed the different ideas and understandings in order to participate in the activities as part of a unit.

Another limitation that presented itself was that of the role student buy-in plays in participation. The activities support the current ELA standards, so students are actively making connections to the topics with the text, by analyzing character development, plot impacts, and themes. However, if students are not taught to apply the growth mindset concepts to their own lives in a way in which they can experience the benefits, they will not achieve the same level of connection and understanding when applying the concepts to different texts.

Because of these limitations, the successful implementation of embedding the concepts into literature units may not make the same meaningful impact for all as intended. It becomes the educator's responsibility to model the practices, discuss the personal connections with students, and guide students to develop their own mindset so that the curriculum can support deeper growth mindset development.

### **Future Research and Projects**

As I worked through the current research, I found a great deal of material that focused on the subjects of math and science, as well as growth mindset instruction that was delivered as an "add-on" activity, rather than as an integral part of the content curriculum. I found that two other types of studies were not addressed a great deal: connecting growth mindset to content areas and studies completed with middle school, ELA students.

Because I was originally motivated by a feeling of disconnect between the program in place at my school and my own area of instruction, my initial hope was to

find research that positively supported my specific needs. I wanted to see how mindset instruction became a true part of the curriculum, and how that impacted the development of student growth mindsets. I believe that this area should be further explored so that educators can learn more about the role this may play in helping every student reach their true potential.

I had also hoped to find studies related to growth mindset concepts with ELA students. Although the research with math and science students in middle and secondary settings was impressive, these subject areas are taught quite differently than middle school literature. It may be easier to collect usable data in math and science; however, due to the human connections students can make through literature, I believe that more researchers could learn about the benefits of growth mindset instruction by working with other subject areas.

When I consider the possibility of future projects, I think that there are several possibilities. I personally would like to explore creating novel specific units that could dig deeper into the particular events, themes and connections in a story. Another interesting project would be to develop a progressive program. A curriculum that builds off of previous instruction and articulates from year to year would be a way to connect to the research of Orosz et. al. which found that in order for students to maintain and continue to grow their growth mindset, instruction needs to be consistently given (2017). Connecting these two ideas would also be another type of exploration that could be a huge benefit to many students.

### **Future of the Supplemental Curriculum**

This project has motivated me to want to share the ideas within my own school, as well as my community. My hope is to continue to develop new activities, as well as to

modify or grow the current lessons. I believe that by sharing with other educators who share the same goals, this type of instruction could become an integral part of multiple subject areas.

I am currently part of a Google group of middle school ELA teachers in the Twin Cities. Throughout this project, I have discussed my work with a few of these educators, and have found that many are quite interested in learning more. I intend to share this completed work with this community of teachers, with the hopes that they will be motivated to learn more about growth mindset instruction, and begin to find ways to incorporate intentional mindset lessons into their own classroom activities.

Although I created this project for use with my sixth grade ELA classes, I will be working to extend the same mindset focused concepts into my eighth grade literature classes next year. I believe that one of the wonderful things about growth mindset instruction is that it can be easily embedded into instruction through discussion, writing, and analysis. My goal is to help students reach their full potential, and I will use this project as a foundation for future instruction with students in my other classes.

### **Professional Benefits**

Creating this project has revealed several benefits for educators, some of which I did not expect when I first began envisioning the curriculum. The benefits reach beyond the lesson activities for everyone involved.

First, I found that when I included growth mindset into our regular lessons, the students' critical thinking skills were challenged, and in fact, improved. This is a wonderful benefit for educators in that the students were more engaged with the material, and therefore were able to understand more of the content. Furthermore, the students were better able to apply the new learning in different situations than they were able to do

prior to the addition of this curriculum. As educators, we all work towards maximum learning for every student. I believe that embedding growth mindset instruction into regular units is a unique way to help students to become more successful.

I believe that the most meaningful benefit of adding this supplemental curriculum to an existing unit was the ability to grow professionally. As I described earlier, I found that I was learning about myself as both an educator and a person as I taught each of the new activities. I found methods to engage and challenge my students in ways that I had not considered before. I also found my own thinking about the different subject matters challenged. I would not have seen this growth had I not been thinking about my own mindset differently. Anytime that we, as educators, can develop new skills or become inspired to try new ways of approaching a topic an exciting moment for teachers. I believe that an educator's personal growth, which can ultimately encourage a student's personal growth, is an immeasurable benefit.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers go to school everyday with the daunting job of helping to build the next generation of critical thinkers, community members, and leaders. As we facilitate learning, we must also emphasize the role that our personal mindset plays in our success. By including growth mindset in our lessons, we encourage students to learn how to problem solve, think deeply, and persevere through trials and errors. We, as teachers, have the opportunity to help students develop the tools to be successful in multiple situations. The research shared as part of this project demonstrates the positive role that obtaining a growth mindset can play and how it can impact student achievement. As student expectations increase, it is our task to help them to develop the life skills that will allow them to use their academic skills productively. Growth mindset instruction is one

way to guide students on their journey to success by supporting the development of the necessary skill set.

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