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Implementing Growth Mindset Learning in the Special Education
English Language Arts Classroom

by

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

Hamline University

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Abstract

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The capstone question investigated in this project was, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* It catalogues one teacher's formation of an English Language Arts growth mindset curriculum intended for use in small group, special education ELA classrooms. The curriculum was designed by the author with the objective of developing a growth mindset in the guiding audience. Described herein is the proposed use of the curriculum as well as measurements of effectiveness and future implications on a teacher's career, classroom development, and educational progress of her socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

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CHAPTER ONE

Growth Mindset and the Vital Role It Plays

Foundation

As a special education teacher, I have seen that each child develops at a rate unique to them; there are numerous factors influencing the educational development of a child. A child is influenced by their IQ, their personal values, their home life, socioeconomic status in which they live, their individual decisions, and among other things, their willingness to try. While one child may have the desire to try something until they have mastered it, the next child may give up with very little effort. This is indicative of their individual mindset. Coined over thirty years ago by Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck, a growth mindset is the belief one holds as to whether skills and abilities can be increased and strengthened through effort and practice, versus a fixed mindset, which is the belief that intelligence and skills are unchangeable (2006). If one is to overcome influencing external factors, they must first be able to control what goes on in their own mind.

Students at my middle school spend time in the classroom learning mathematics, English, social studies, electives, and so forth. There is continuous evidence, described by Dweck (2006), that one major determining factor between classroom success and failure is mindset. My desire is to help students establish a healthy growth mindset – that Dweck (2006) defined as “the belief that a person’s most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work-brains and talent are just the starting point” (p. 4) - that will take them not only through their brief time in the educational setting, but into the post-educational world as well. This leaves me to wonder, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*

As an adult I realize now more than ever the importance of a growth mindset to carry us through our own lives and see the dire need to encourage mindset growth within my own classroom. Throughout Chapter One I share my personal journey to a growth mindset, the vital role it has played in my life, and my background as a special education teacher that has led me to the desire to teach a growth mindset.

My Dad. I was raised in a typical upper-middle class American family. Born in 1984 and raised in suburbia-rural Minnesota, we lived in a blue Rambler with a white front porch, adorned with white, outdoor wicker furniture, a small version of the American flag standing in a flowerpot, and gardens lining the front walk, all on five acres. Although the household held my mom, dad, brother and sister, this section is focused mainly on my dad and passion for horseback riding and competing.

My dad and I butted heads for many of my adolescent years, probably because we are so much alike. Despite the relatively tumultuous relationship with my dad in my younger years, there is great appreciation for the person he helped me become, and in turn, as a special education teacher, the learning and stories that influence the four walls in which instruction takes place.

My dad fought an uphill battle for the majority of his younger life. His home life was dreadful, he was physically and emotionally abused as a child. Only recently has he begun to share more of the stories filled with hurt, betrayal, and rejection that shaped his childhood. He was also severely dyslexic and was told in high school to never attempt college because he would never make it through the rigorous academic requirements. He remembers having to work for hours on top of hours to accomplish the same task that his friends and peers were able to accomplish in one. His learning disability coupled with his home life factors would have stopped

others in their tracks. Yet he overcame. He had grit. Grit is defined as “firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger” (Merriam-Webster's, n.d.). No one was going to tell him that he was not good enough, smart enough, or capable enough. My dad had an incredible desire to overcome, and despite all the odds stacked against him, he did.

Not only did my dad graduate college, but he was top in the nation with his professional engineering license. He now holds multiple international patents and has owned his own company for over 35 years. My dad's natural tenacity and stubbornness to quit took him much farther than he *should* have gone. He did not take no for an answer, and in fact used doubting people as a driving force to overcome the odds stacked against him. My dad has come in to talk to my students with learning disabilities and they are always inspired by what he overcame to become what he is today.

I have had conversations in the past asking my dad about what gave him the desire to overcome his disability to achieve his goals. He has always told me that it was simply that he did not like being told by someone else what he could or could not do. He wanted to set his own limitations. He wanted to create a successful life because deep down he knew he was deserving of one. He knew that he was capable of creating his own success if he worked hard enough. And he was. He had an incredible growth mindset long before it was a buzzword.

In 2019 my dad still struggles with dyslexia. I have seen him sitting at his desk having to go over blueprints multiple times for clarification. It has been a lifelong struggle that he chose to conquer instead of letting it conquer him. My dad could have chosen to throw in the towel any time in the last seventy years but chose to persevere.

Dyslexia is not my father's only challenge. In 2018 he was diagnosed with stage four melanoma. There was no doubt in my mind that he would fight the battle that needed to be

fought. As it stands right now, he is two months away from being cleared from treatment. Despite the sickness, exhaustion, and emotional strain, he knew there was only one way through. He chooses to remember that he is not there . . . YET. While I was not consciously aware of his influence on my own mindset throughout my life, looking back it is evident the impact was significant.

The lifelong hobby. Horses were my life growing up; I lived for them. In 1988, at four years old my dad must have gotten tired of having a sore back from giving horseback rides on his hands and knees across the living room floor, he caved and bought me my first horse. There was one stipulation: he would never feed or water it. The line was drawn. If something was wanted that badly, I was going to have to work for it. Outside of very cold weather or unsafe conditions for a child, he never had to.

Jump forward to 1994 and me as a pre-teen with an intense desire to compete on horseback, a member of the local 4-H chapter named The Cloverbuds. There was no prior knowledge about leads or diagonals, proper form, etc., and contrary to my upbringing, many of the kids that were competing were raised in horse families, giving them an advantage. Despite the odds, the desire to compete and win was strong. As a young child the knowledge that the only way to reach that goal was to learn, apply knowledge, and work as hard as possible had already been engrained. Practice took hours and hours a day, reading to learn and fill in the gaps, followed by riding to master my craft. Soon there were blue ribbons lining my walls. Hard work had produced faster times and greater horsemanship than many of my peers. My dad continued to support my passion and provided me the opportunity to work with amazing trainers. World champions, a Prix St. George silver medalist, and he even took me across the country to attend a week-long training program with a sixteen-time world champion. I did not realize it at the time,

but it was ingraining the knowledge that in order to create the best chance for success, we needed to learn the correct way to do something, and then work to create our own version. He was instilling a growth mindset of “I can’t, YET.” As noted by Dweck, people who believe that qualities can be refined and developed aren’t as negatively influenced by failures (2006). A knocked barrel or low point accumulation became an indicator that there were things to improve on rather than a blow to the ego that some of my fellow horseback riders felt. It provided the overwhelming desire to continuously build my skill set and expand my show base.

Age and experience brought larger show circuits and the reality that adulthood was upon me. In 2003 at the age of 19 years old I was engaged to a wonderful man who supported my dreams and passions, so naturally a career as a horse trainer sprouted. Being a trainer is not for the faint of heart. I was often faced with the challenge to self-educate when coming across unfamiliar issues. Ultimately, after a few years of training, the pregnancy of my first child, and the reality of my mortality setting in, my training career made its final lap around the arena and the decision to complete my degree in special education that had been started so long ago was made.

The lessons learned through my life as a child of an unstoppable man and as a horse woman are invaluable. There is no “I cannot” switch. There is only a one way, “if it has to be done it has to be done so we better find a way,” switch. If that resolve were not there, I would never have finished my degree while raising three kids as a stay at home mom, or quite frankly survived being a first-year teacher in a level three, self-contained emotional behavior disorder setting. Now, in 2019, as a fifth-year special education teacher with an insatiable desire to instill life changing mindset qualities into the minds of middle school students with learning disabilities, the knowledge that many of my students have not had someone to continuously

encourage them to persevere is evident. My students deserve an opportunity to believe in themselves, just as all of us do.

My current setting. My current work is in a community of low socioeconomic status and generational poverty; there is a desperate need to guide my students in the development of a growth mindset. My students often come in with the acceptance that they will work minimum wage jobs for life and will not attend college, and they are generally okay with that. In March 2019, my first hour class and I were having a discussion about when it is okay to quit something. Half of my class responded with, “when it is too hard, or you do not know what to do.” The general attitude is that if something is too hard, it is okay to quit. Aside from student work ethic disparities, the community view of schools is unsupportive at best. As of October 2019, the community has not voted in favor of a referendum in thirty-eight years. These barriers combined create a preset barrier to the students’ education before they even step in the door. At such an impressionable age, if something has little value at home, the front door of the school will not be a magic threshold. Often my students come to school with a predetermined attitude that education is a waste of time. This is often amplified in students with difficulties learning, which is the population of students with whom I work.

My work is primarily with students with Specific Learning Disabilities and Other Health Disabilities, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Throughout my career I have witnessed students with IQs just points off the normal range and average processing skills be outperformed by students with IQs close to those of Developmental Cognitive Delay students and processing rates in the low range. As case managers we have a habit of calling those students “work horses.” These students have every excuse to quit, to throw in the towel and tell themselves that it is just too hard; but they do not. They truck along until they get it and find

pride in their successes and joy in accomplishments. If a student's development of a growth mindset can increase the chances for their success, I believe we need to explore the option of directly teaching growth mindset skills. Special education teachers impart numerous skills to guide our students towards success in life, math, reading, comprehension, but if we are not at least attempting to remove the barriers between our students and their greatest possible outcome, are we really doing our best? I believe, based on my personal experience and time spent as a special education teacher, that to include growth mindset skills in our curriculum would be in the best interest of our students. Taking this belief into full consideration, my capstone project is built around developing reading and writing skills, while also developing a growth mindset skills.

Rationale for capstone project. Grit (Duckworth, 2016), growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), and self-advocacy (Aspis, 2010) are words that hold much meaning to those in the world of education. For those of us with a "can do" attitude who were raised by encouraging parents with high expectations, this most likely would have developed naturally as we grew. On the other hand, children and students raised in environments stifling to the development of a healthy self-worth, mental health, and a growth mindset may not experience a naturally developing growth mindset.

The desire for my capstone project is to design a curriculum around the specific reading, writing, comprehension, and mindset needs of my students. Working in an area of low socioeconomic status with low expectations greatly increases my awareness to the vital need of a growth mindset within a student. According to Education Week Journalist Evie Blad (2016), "Mindset is an important part of how socioeconomic disparities get replicated from generation to generations. . . . Structural barriers get in the way of people being able to succeed, and they

reinforce mindsets that tell [students] they can't succeed” (p. 15). My students are living in a small community with a median household income rate of \$36,739, forty-seven percent receive free or reduced lunches, and twenty-seven percent of the student population receives special education services (Minnesota Report Card, 2019). Furthermore, working with my current demographic of special education students that have been specifically told that they not only have a disability, but that they need extra support to achieve academic success, makes the desire to create and implement a growth mindset instruction feel as though it is a top priority. If my currently under-achieving students are not taught the importance of mindset and the link to achievement it offers, the chance they have to create a better life for themselves is bleak.

Summary. I hope to answer the question: *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* In chapter one I described how my experiences as a youth and equestrian impacted my personal mindset beliefs. I shared my enthusiasm in the implementation of growth mindset instruction and the importance I believe that it bears. In Chapter Two, a literature review provides an extensive summary of the following related topics; mindsets, factors that influence individual mindsets, external factors that influence mindsets, growth mindset benefits, and brain neuroplasticity and its support of growth mindsets. The investigation of growth mindset is broader and includes strategies to encourage a growth mindset. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the district and student body, share plans for curriculum implementation, and provide a curriculum timeline. In Chapter Four, I summarize what I have designed as my curriculum, and describe my future curriculum implementation plans.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

According to psychologist Robert Sternberg (as cited in Dweck, 2006) deliberate engagement is a greater influencing factor in developing expertise than prior ability. This means that the ability to achieve and learn beyond expectations is set within a person's own boundaries--within their willingness to try and push beyond discomfort. To teach and encourage the development of the skills to do so is to help students develop a growth mindset. Ideally, if a true growth mindset is culminated within a student, the academic consequences create an optimal learning environment within one's own mind (Dweck, 2006). If there is merit to this claim, one begs to question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* Throughout the following literature review and curriculum, the relationship between academic achievement and growth mindset is established.

The concept of a growth mindset is almost everywhere. Classroom walls, Twitter, Pinterest, or any search engine produces vibrant visuals, exciting classroom implementation suggestions, or catchy, uplifting verbiage to integrate into classrooms. With such a positive following and growing popularity, any educator has to wonder at what the attention is all about? Is teaching a growth mindset as simple as new classroom decor and a can-do attitude? According to published research and data, heartfelt quotes and colorful signs, as fun and well-meaning as they are, are merely the tip of the iceberg. To develop a true growth mindset within a student takes deliberate instruction.

As described by Dweck (2006), about thirty years ago parents and schools made the decision that the most important thing for a child to have was self-esteem. Self-esteem was

ingrained by praising talents and intelligence, rather than praising effective effort. This created a mediocre mindset within these individuals who, in turn, craved reassurance at every corner and experienced difficulty accepting constructive criticism. Although unaware of the consequences, the outcome noted by Dweck (2008) was that teachers and parents were inadvertently labeling and aiding in the development of a fixed mindset in students and children. Dweck continued on to note that the outcome of a fixed mindset is students labeled positively did not want to move forward for fear of losing that label, and students negatively labeled were afraid of proving the negative label as accurate (Dweck, 2008).

To thoroughly answer the question: *How can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*, multiple factors must be considered. The first point of interest presented in this literature review is an overview of mindsets. Growth, fixed, and false growth mindsets are introduced, as well as the academic implications within each. By exploring an overview of mindsets, the parallel linking a growth mindset instruction to the intended outcome is drawn.

Another important theme that is investigated are the roles of resilience, grit, and self-advocacy within the development of a growth mindset. Students vary in their resilience, grit, and self-advocacy. When developing a curriculum meant to encourage growth mindset, it is important to understand the role of resilience, grit, and self-advocacy.

Next, the effects of a growth mindset on external factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity are presented. There are numerous external factors unique to every individual that influence their prior mindset and willingness to adopt a new mindset. Three of these factors are investigated as they could affect the design of the curriculum for this project.

Following external factors, information is presented regarding the benefits of mindset instruction in the classroom. This is presented by taking into consideration multiple case studies theorizing the effectiveness of growth mindset instruction. The information gathered helps determine whether a direct growth mindset instruction is beneficial in the academic setting, as well as help develop a solid rationale that could convince others to follow this lead.

The last section of this chapter examined whether the brain is capable of change beyond maturity. Once thought to be incapable of change beyond a certain point, modern research indicated just the opposite. This literature review presented research to support the claim that the brain is able to continuously change through time and circumstances and is able to mold with a growth mindset curriculum.

Overview of Mindsets

The body of research on the success of growth mindsets is based on the foundation of growth, fixed, and false mindsets. The concept of a growth mindset was brought to attention over thirty years ago, when Dweck (2006) noticed differences in students' outlooks and resulting achievement. According to Dweck (2006), to have a growth mindset is to believe one is capable of continuous intellectual and academic development, to believe in the ability of achieving more. This should not be confused with the belief that skills and abilities are already attained, but that those abilities can be *developed*. Through her research and resulting theories, Dweck (2006) discovered that teaching students' growth mindset resulted in increased motivation and better academic achievement. Dweck (2006) stated, "You have a choice. Mindsets are just beliefs. They're powerful beliefs, but they're just something in your mind, and you can change your mind" (p. 16). Taking Dweck's research into consideration, chapter two briefly examines growth, fixed, and false growth mindsets.

Growth mindset. As noted by Evie Blad (2006) in *Education Week*, a growth mindset is the personal belief that skills and academic abilities can be developed through consistent effort. When a student has a growth mindset, the belief is held that abilities are not a limited amount; students with a growth mindset are often encouraged by challenging work and enjoy the chance to learn. Not only encouraged by the belief that continuous development is in place, individuals with a growth mindset also view failure from a different lens.

To view a failure from that of a growth mindset-oriented student is to view potential at its finest. A student with a growth mindset has the understanding that intelligence can be cultivated and that a failure is little more than an opportunity to grow. If a student has a true growth mindset, failure is seen as an opportunity to learn and grow, nor does a challenge deter a growth mindset student because they feel equipped to face it (Dweck, 2006). This is, of course, contrary to a student with a fixed mindset.

Fixed mindset. Dweck (2006) described how generations of people praised children's intelligence and ability to grasp a task with minimal effort, or to be inherently good at something. While good intentions were in place, the effectiveness of this method had detrimental responses. Dweck noted that students who are praised simply for being good at something often feel discouraged when something does not come naturally, rather than recognizing the need to work for success. This created a fixed mindset.

In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort . . . from the point of view of the fixed mindset, effort is only for people with deficiencies. (Dweck, 2006, p. 29)

For a student following the thought process of intelligence having set limitations, facing a failure means the limitations are too great to compete with peers. As noted by Dweck (2006), a fixed mindset carries the belief that one assessment holds a permanent measure. This belief creates the urgency to instantly and perfectly succeed. A fixed mindset is not the only ineffective mindset one can have. Following the lines of a fixed mindset is a false growth mindset.

False growth mindset. According to Dweck (2008), one may also develop a false growth mindset. A false growth mindset is the belief that the qualities of a growth mindset are in place, when in actuality, the qualities have yet to be developed. A false growth mindset can be cultivated by praising effort only, regardless of success, rather than acknowledging the process of learning and celebrating success yielding efforts.

The development of a false growth mindset is destructive to a student and academic progress. As noted by Dweck (2006), when students are praised on ineffective effort, it places the responsibility of success on the student, which can lead to feelings of failure if goals are not met. Due to the fact that a false growth mindset can result in the student feeling incapable of achievement, it is critical that a false growth mindset is not developed. In the research conducted on praise, it has been noted as imperative to praise not only the process, but the outcome as well.

Summary. Within growth and fixed mindsets there are beliefs and behavioral patterns individuals hold. An individual with a growth mindset will view a challenge as an opportunity to grow and intelligence as something to be developed. The academic benefit of a growth mindset is the knowledge that intelligence is not a fixed trait and can be developed through time and effort. An individual with a fixed mindset is under the impression that intelligence is a fixed trait. The academic disadvantage to having a fixed mindset is the belief that your intelligence is an unchangeable and fixed trait. Students with a fixed mindset are often afraid to try after a failure

and therefore experience a stunted educational development. An individual with a false growth mindset will believe the qualities of a growth mindset are intact when in fact, the necessary qualities are missing. Individuals with a false growth mindset risk feeling like a failure when success is not reached. Within mindsets are respective traits conducive to the development of a growth mindset and to the posed question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*. Resilience, grit, and self-advocacy are three of those important traits.

Factors that Influence Growth Mindset: Resilience, Grit and Self-advocacy

In the review of the research literature for this capstone, three factors were identified that also influence growth mindset. These factors are resilience, grit, and self-advocacy. While they are often easy to observe but more difficult to define, this section focuses on these essential traits, educational strategies to develop each skill, and the connection between the development of these attributes and a growth mindset.

Resilience: A factor that influences growth mindset. Resilience is described by psychologist and popular science author Angela Duckworth (2016) as having the skills and determination to adapt and persevere despite challenges. A resilient person is one who will continue onward when difficulties or challenges come his or her way. There are many ways to guide the development of resilience in a student; in this section we will discuss three potential avenues.

One important step towards developing resilience is to increase positive self-talk. *Psychology Today* author John-Manuel Andriote (2018) claimed that resilient people are able to not only endure difficult situations but find both the positives and negatives within the circumstance. When a child develops the ability to practice appropriate self-talk, they are more

likely to regulate their emotions. Through self-talk students are better able to boost their confidence, increase optimism, and reduce stress. Duckworth (2016) noted that with practice and direction you can learn to modify your inner monologue which will alter your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Through self-talk, individuals are better equipped to manage the challenges they face throughout their daily lives.

While self-talk is an important aspect of resilience, it is not, however, independent. Another element to encourage the growth of resilience in students is to teach social and emotional skills. The development of social/emotional skills support students in the development of a vast array of positive means, educational development being just one. As noted by Understood.org author Alexis Clark, it is through social emotional learning that the ability to apply the skills necessary for emotional regulation, goal attainment, relational skills, and decision-making skills is developed (2019).

According to psychologist Daniel Goleman, social and emotional learning guides individuals towards success during life's challenges and aids in academic development (n.d.). While social and emotional learning is an essential piece to developing resilience, social emotional skills advocate, Jessica Lovins noted that social-emotional skills are not inborn but formed through childhood and developed through our lives with the ability to continuously evolve. Therefore, in order for children to learn and witness social-emotional learning, it must begin with adults (2018). Through adult instruction and modeling, our students can greater grasp appropriate social and emotional development and reap the benefits both academically and socially. Social and emotional skills can be developed in several ways. The first technique discussed is modeling intentional social skills.

As noted by Harvard Graduate School of Education author Grace Tatter, social and emotional skills are needed throughout the day; intentionally identifying and creating opportunities to practice social emotional learning within the day is advantageous (2019). Being intentional can take form through role playing within the classroom. When students are involved in role play, they are able to practice appropriate responses in a non-threatening environment with the added benefit of an adult coach to guide student responses.

A second way to integrate social and emotional learning in the classroom setting is by creating a warm environment. Students will engage when they know they are safe and cared for as an individual. By creating a warm environment, students are provided the benefit of feeling heard, will be more willing to express their emotions, and can be better prepared to learn (Tatter, 2019).

A third skill essential to the development of resilience is establishing that failure is a part of life. Dweck described that failure is often transformed from the action failing, to an identity as a failure (2006). When a student feels as though they identify as a failure their self-esteem is reduced and willingness to try depleted. Through direct instruction to increase awareness that failure is a part of life, students are more inclined to pick themselves up and try again. Dweck (2006) proclaimed that regardless of having a growth mindset, failure can still be painful but does not define you. Failure is an issue to be managed and learned from.

Students who are unable to withstand the stressors of failure will be less willing to put in increased effort to improve and therefore will accomplish less than they are truly capable of. *The Growth Mindset Playbook* and *The Growth Mindset Coach* authors Brock and Hundley (2016) stated, “productive failure is the idea that mistakes and setbacks can be transitioned into valuable learning opportunities . . . knowing how to fail is a valuable skill” (p. 156). By teaching that

failure is to be expected and is a part of life, educators are allowing their students the benefit of resilience training. While resilience is an important element to growth mindset development, grit is another essential skills to be developed.

Grit: A factor that influences growth mindset. One great way to develop grit is to increase effort. According to psychologist and popular science author Angela Duckworth (2016), the effects of effort are invaluable. Without effort, skills are worth little more than unmet potential. The premise of this capstone project is that explicit growth mindset and grit instruction can support my students in increasing effort, as without effort skills will fail to develop.

One effective way to increase grit would be to praise effective effort, rather than the outcome. When students are encouraged within the process of learning, they will be more willing to grow through the process. According to Carol Dweck, praising students for effective effort increased the desire to complete challenging tasks (2006). By praising effective effort, there is an increase in the likelihood that a student will develop a growth mindset and view challenges as an opportunity to grow and intelligence as a changeable factor.

A second factor to increasing grit is to pursue passions. Duckworth (2016) noted that people are more satisfied and perform better when doing things that are personally rewarding; that students should be encouraged to find a passion and mature in that area. Duckworth (2016) continued on to say that when people mature it is through life's lesson that adaptations, new thoughts, and new actions become habits (Duckworth, 2016). Through pursuing passions, students are able to develop grit through maturity in a chosen area. This grit will transcend into other areas of life and create a catalyst of development in grit.

Developing grit offers numerous educational benefits through understanding that skill is a minimal factor in success without effort, that effective effort is an avenue to success, and that

finding your passion is an essential part to developing grit. Each of these elements are valuable independently but when placed together can create an avenue towards success. For the reasons stated, teaching grit is applicable to the educational setting. A third valuable asset for students to develop is self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy: A factor that influences growth mindset. There are traits necessary to ensure informed self-advocacy skills. Self-advocacy specialist Eileen Tait-Acker (2016) claimed, “this journey of self-education is an ongoing process, as individual needs change over time. There are three parts to becoming an effective self-advocate: knowing yourself, knowing your needs, and knowing how to get what you need” (p. 1).

A foundation within self-advocacy is knowing personal needs. All students are unique in abilities and learning preferences. Duckworth (2016) noted that although we don’t often directly consider the strategies that we are dependent on for success, expressing them aids in the process of greater development. Knowing personal needs can be as simple as recognizing the need for additional time or knowing learning preferences. As cited in Duckworth, education consultants Bena Kallick and Allison Zmuda note that students should engage in the process of thinking about their thinking, making note of their work habits, their individual persistence, and consider previous methods that were successful for them (2016). When students are aware of and able to advocate for personal needs, the ability to successfully access an education is increased.

The third skill within self-advocacy is articulating needs. To be able to articulate specific needs, students once again need to have developed social emotional skills. Brock and Hundley wrote that caring for your emotional needs is every bit as important of caring for your physical needs (2016). As presented earlier in this literature review, two ways social emotional skills can be cultivated is through role play and creating a warm environment.

Summary. Resilience applies to the educational setting as it provides a solid base from which to develop and grow. Within the essential skill of resilience are the abilities to practice positive self-talk, develop healthy social and emotional skills, and understand that failure is a part of life. Through the development of these skills, students will be greater equipped to manage their personal and academic lives. Grit is also fundamental in the educational setting in that to persevere, students must practice continuous effort when faced with a challenge. We can encourage the development of grit through praising effective and increased effort and encouraging our students to follow passionate topics. Through an increase in grit students have a higher chance at greater accomplishment. Self-advocacy is another essential skill as it not only increases student self-awareness but also allows students to articulate their needs. To be self-advocates, students require the skills of knowing themselves and their needs and knowing how to advocate for those needs. These are essential skills in self-advocacy for the sake of providing specific learning needs to the individual learner. For the reasons presented in this literature review, teaching resilience, grit, and self-advocacy are vital components to consider when answering the overlying question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* To fully understand growth mindset and accurately answer the guiding question, we must also consider factors not within our control.

External Factors Influencing Growth Mindset

As encountered in this literature review, there are external factors beyond the control of an individual or teacher that influence a student's likelihood of possessing a growth mindset. Three factors identified in this literature review are socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity.

The following section identifies each factor, the challenges within, and determines if these factors are insurmountable.

Growth mindset instruction has the ability to guide development regardless of numerous external factors. Carol Dweck and her colleagues Geoffrey Cohen and Gregory Walton state that there are psychological repercussions to adversity, and those repercussions hold academic consequences (2014). Each individual student faces circumstances unique to their lives, most of which educators cannot control. However, numerous studies have indicated a strong correlation between growth mindset instruction and increased academic achievement regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity.

Socioeconomic status. As reported by Dweck, and contributing researchers Susana Claro and David Paunesku, one of the greatest predictors of academic achievement is socioeconomic status (2016). Students living in poverty face several factors that their wealthier peers do not. Students living in low-income households are often unable to access essential educational and personal needs. Claro, et. al. stated that economically adverse circumstances reduce academic achievement with higher stress levels, less access to proper healthcare and nutritious foods, and limited access to appropriate educational resources (2016). When basic needs are not met, students are often left facing negative personal and academic consequences. National Education Association author Mary Ellen Flannery noted that students from a lower socioeconomic status have a greater likelihood of possessing a fixed mindset, and the poorest students are two times as likely to hold a fixed mindset (2016). This is not, however, a life sentence.

Claro et. al. (2016) explained that numerous studies have presented that students show greater achievement when holding the understanding that intellectual abilities are not stagnant,

but advanceable. The belief in the ability to develop intellectual abilities is at the core of growth mindset instruction. While socioeconomic status is one barrier to the development of a growth mindset, it is not the only one. Male and female students also differ in their predisposal to a growth mindset.

Mindset and gender. According to Carol Dweck (as cited by Miracle, 2015) in the Stanford article, *Understanding a Mindset for Success*, written for The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, fixed mindset conditioning can contribute to gender inequalities. In her research, she found that parents and teachers alike often gave more process praise to boys than to girls, thereby reinforcing not only a growth mindset among the boys, but a fixed mindset among the girls. However, through instruction, girls were often able to develop a growth mindset through intentional verbiage, such as “easy is boring,” and “hard is worthwhile and interesting.” While a fixed mindset may have been initially culminated, redirection attempts were often successful (Dweck, 2008). This was not the only study to reveal the effects of growth mindset instruction.

One year-long study reported by Stanford University and conducted by psychologist Catherine Good (2003), provided 138 students with a computer skills mentor and subsequent instruction in growth mindset instruction, drug awareness intervention, or a combined message. They were also provided coaching advising them that their challenges were related to being in a middle school. Conclusive evidence revealed that female participants in the growth mindset intervention group scored as well as their male classmates on standardized math tests. The female participants in the control group who learned about the perils of drug use lagged behind their male peers. It was also revealed that although both male and female participants in the intervention group improved, females scores improved the most.

While growth mindset is an influential factor regardless of gender, there are other external influencing factors to consider.

Mindset and ethnicity. Mindset instruction has been shown to be influential regardless of ethnicity. MindsetWorks (2017) reported on one study conducted at Stuart Hobson Middle School, when a small, diverse school comprised of 87% African American students and 13% Caucasian students, saw drastic academic improvements after growth mindset instruction implementation. Post school-wide growth mindset instruction, Stuart Hobson Middle School's academic growth was 86% in comparison to the district average of 55%. Lexile ranges also increased 216 points for sixth graders, 417 points for seventh graders, and 150 points for eighth graders (Mindset Works, 2017, pp. 8-9). This was significant evidence of the effectiveness of growth mindset instruction.

Another study conducted by Carol Dweck and colleagues Lisa Blackwell and Kali Trzesniewski (2007), was conducted in inner New York city. The study divided ethnically diverse seventh grade students into two groups, one group received instruction on growth mindset and the other group on the stages of memory. Three times the number of students in the growth mindset group increased in grades, effort, and motivation versus those in the stages of memory group. Furthermore, those receiving instruction on the stages of memory continued to show declining grades.

Summary. There are numerous external factors related to predisposal to a growth mindset and the overarching question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* Included in this literature review were socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity. Although this literature review only highlighted a couple of case studies that revealed the influence of growth mindset instruction on

minorities, the evidence presented a positive correlation between growth mindset instruction and academic improvement.

Growth Mindset Benefits

Although the role of student attitudes and beliefs in education has been studied for many years, interest has recently increased in the role of mindsets as a key factor in academic success. Academic mindsets revealed a high correlation with academic engagement and success in both secondary and postsecondary education. As reported by Jason Snipes and Loan Tran in their 2017 growth mindset study, recent evidence, which included several randomized controlled trials, offered that low-cost, short-term interventions targeting academic mindsets can lead to substantial improvements in academic achievement.

Also reported by Snipes, et. al. (2017), one 2003 experimental study provided seventh grade students with two, ninety-minute growth mindset sessions. Sessions were provided to the experiment group once at the beginning of the year and once in the middle, as well as weekly emails to convey growth mindset messages. Students were also asked to participate in designing a webpage to convey the messages taught by their mentor. While the experiment group learned about growth mindset and reiterated the message, a control group was taught on the perils of drug use. The results revealed a positive correlation between mindset instruction and educational outcome when the students participating in the experiment group scored far higher than those in the control group on standardized tests.

Another study conducted by Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck (2007) included ninety-nine students with differing socioeconomic statuses, genders, and ethnicities. The study revealed a promising connection between growth mindset instruction and academic gains. Initially, the subjects averaged in the 35th percentile nationally on their sixth-grade standardized math tests.

The students were given questionnaires regarding theories of intelligence, learning and performance goals, beliefs about effort, and attributions and strategies in response to failure to gather baseline data. Each group of students was then given eight, twenty-five-minute interventions during their randomly assigned advisory classes. Students in the control group received instruction in the physiology of the brain, study skills, and anti-stereotypic thinking. Students in the experimental group were taught that intelligence is malleable and can be developed. The results presented by Blackwell, et al. (2007) again displayed a positive correlation between the experimental groups' achievement when the experimental group scored significantly higher on the items that tested the growth mindset content than did the control group. Furthermore, 27% of the students in the experimental group were noted by their teachers to show a positive motivational change, while only 9% of the control group students were noted as such.

Growth mindset benefits summary. As presented in the aforementioned case studies, despite numerous influencing factors, growth mindset instruction is a potent variable in academic advancement. Through growth mindset instruction students were shown to increase on academic and emotional scales. To accurately answer the guiding question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*, growth mindset benefits must be examined. Beyond factors and benefits, the brains' ability to change must also be considered.

Brain Neuroplasticity and its Support of Growth Mindset

Another question investigated in this review of the research literature regarding the implementation of growth mindset instruction is if the human brain is capable of change beyond maturity or not, and the answer is yes. Researcher at Nanyang Technological University, Betsy

Ng, provides support for the answer to the previous question by saying that the brain has the capability to reorganize and continuously develop throughout our lifespan (2018). Human brains are not left in a stagnant state, but rather are able to change with time and circumstances due to its “plastic” nature. Harvard Department of Neurology authors Amedi, Fregni, Pascual-Leone, and Merabet (2005) stated,

the word “plastic” itself is derived from the Greek word *plastos*, which means molded...we should think of the nervous system as a continuously changing structure of which plasticity is an integral property and the obligatory consequence of each sensory input, motor act, association, reward signal, action plan, or awareness. (p. 1).

With the ability to continually change and grow, the opportunities for educational advancements are seemingly endless.

According to Dweck, there is new scientific evidence that people have the ability to continuously learn and develop at a greater extent than ever thought possible (2006). The human brain was once thought incapable of great change beyond maturity; in recent years and studies, that theory is being proven inaccurate. Two major conclusions are used to support the capacity of the brain to change.

One conclusion by Harvard and St. Johns-Hopkins trained neuroscientist and neurologist Dr. Majid Fotuhi stated that new research indicates an incredible ability to develop new neurons and increase the neurological strength and maturity within weeks or months (2015). Not only is the brain able to create new neurological connections, but also strengthen those connections through continual use.

The brain has an amazing ability to mold and change throughout life; therefore, the idea of a fixed mindset is, in itself, inaccurate. As reported in *Psychology Today*, author and public

health advocate Christopher Bergland stated that through neuroplasticity the ability to retrain your thoughts and reinvent yourself is possible (2017).

The second conclusion, as supported by Amedi, et. al., (2005) stated,

Plasticity is an intrinsic property of the human brain and represents evolution's invention to enable the nervous system to escape the restrictions of its own genome and thus adapt to environmental pressures, physiologic changes, and experiences . . . Plasticity is the mechanism for development and learning . . . (p. 377)

When a growth mindset curriculum is introduced, a new and important cycle begins.

Amedi, et. al. stated that behavior will change the connections in your brain which will then lead to behavioral alterations (2005). When students learn new behaviors, new neurological connections are created, which support the continued support of behavior modifications, and so forth continues the cycle. Therefore, direct, consistent instruction in growth mindset can aid in the development of specific behaviors to begin that cycle.

Life is an ongoing journey in which the brain is constantly reacting to and changing from. According to Amedi, et al., brain plasticity is the natural state of the nervous system that continues throughout your lifespan (2005). As educators yearning to create life-altering positive changes within our students, understanding that students are capable of learning and integrating new habits within their lives through brain neuroplasticity is essential. If educators are to take advantage of the brain's plasticity in reaction to stimuli, a growth mindset instruction will prove to be a positive addition to instructional and personal development.

Summary. According to the research, the human brain is capable of continuous change and growth based on our circumstances and experiences through creation of new neural connections throughout the lifespan. When provided with a growth mindset curriculum, students

will be given new input to which their brain can remodel to create new neural pathways that are supportive of a growth mindset. This information was taken into consideration in answering the question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*

Chapter Summary

Growth mindsets include the belief that intelligence can be developed while a fixed mindset believes that intelligence is a fixed trait. An individual with a growth mindset believes that through effort intelligence can be developed and through challenges one grows while an individual with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence cannot be developed and is often unwilling to work through a challenge. A false growth mindset can be developed through praising ineffective work and can also have a negative effect on academic achievement through the student's subsequent belief that he or she is a failure when success is not reached (Dweck, 2006). Numerous studies indicating a healthy link between external factors and positive growth through growth mindset instruction were also presented.

Also presented in this literature review were several reviews supporting the development of growth mindset through resilience, grit, and self-advocacy instruction indicating a positive correlation between growth mindset instruction and academic and personal health.

This chapter concluded with a presentation of evidence supporting the capabilities of the human brain to develop and grow through differing variables. This supports the idea that a growth mindset instruction is influential in the academic setting.

How can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom? Based on this literature review, growth mindset instruction influences a student's educational advancement through the understanding that intelligence is not

a fixed trait but rather is able to be developed. Growth mindset instruction also influences a student's educational development through learning essential skills such as resilience, grit, self-advocacy, and a growth mindset and is supported by the brain's neural plastic capabilities. The chapter three project proposal and chapter four conclusions build upon these findings.

Chapter Three Preview

In Chapter Three, the methodology of developing a middle school, Special Education English Language Arts curriculum that is inclusive of growth mindset concepts is presented and analyzed. The student body and district needs were also examined to establish the specific needs of the community. The content area, Special Education English Language Arts, is discussed. The approaches to the curriculum are also presented. Finally, the plan for the curriculum and goals is presented and detailed.

CHAPTER THREE

Growth Mindset Curriculum

Introduction

To respond to the question, *how does direct instruction of growth mindset skills influence a student's educational development?*, a curriculum was developed with careful consideration of the specific student's needs and research obtained. Chapter Three begins with an explanation of the projected timeline with measurable steps to completion for this project. Next, I present an overview of the district and students in which I proposed to implement my growth mindset curriculum. The third matter of interest in chapter three is the curriculum foundation and model introduction. Chapter three concludes with curriculum specifics and implementation expectations.

Timeline

In spring of 2019, I developed Chapter One, which highlighted portions of my life that led me to the development of and desire to teach a growth mindset. In spring 2019, I also completed the research on growth mindset and influencing factors which shaped Chapter Two of my project. Summer 2019, I wrote a first draft of the growth mindset curriculum which connected growth mindset with *Touching Spirit Bear* (Ben Mikaelson). In fall 2019, I completed Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Three provided an overview of the targeted demographics and curriculum synopsis. Chapter Four, the final chapter, offered an overview of the curriculum writing process. A final draft of the guiding capstone was completed and submitted for approval in November 2019.

District Overview

In the small, rural district I work in there is a 47% free and reduced lunch population and a 27% special education population (Minnesota Report Card, 2019). The school is small with one building to house all kindergarten through senior students. The buildings have significant need of repairs, but as of October 2019, the community has not passed a referendum in thirty-eight years. Many community members seem disinterested in academic concerns or building conditions. For example, in winter, 2018, students were informed that they were no longer able to snowmobile to school after law enforcement deemed it unsafe and damaging to community property. This came on the heels of a failed referendum that resulted in \$1.2 million dollars in budget cuts. Parents and community members attended the resulting school board meeting to argue their children's rights to snowmobile to school, but every parent left when the budget discussion began. Not all community members, however, lack educational support. Local businesses often support teaching staff with freebies and tokens of appreciation. Additionally, between the 2018-2019 academic years, three million dollars were anonymously donated to the district.

The district-mission is *to educate, empower and engage all students to become caring and responsible citizens who will succeed in an ever-changing world*. The teachers, administration, and board members are highly committed to this mission statement both personally and professionally. District staff display their commitment in several ways. Teachers and administrators consistently remain conscious of opportunities to build relationships with students through teacher advisement period parties, positive conversations, and making efforts to know students individually. District staff is also committed to student success beyond high

school. In spring 2019, teachers and administrators donated \$10,000 to support ongoing, renewable student scholarships.

Student Overview

As communicated in Chapter One, this curriculum was developed with consideration of small group, special education middle school students in a small, rural, predominantly white, socioeconomically disadvantaged district. The students who will receive this instruction are seventh to ninth grade students with low to low average IQs. The student participants have specific learning discrepancies in the areas of reading, writing, and comprehension. All student participants are enrolled in a pull-out, small group special education English class for forty-six minutes daily on a year-round basis, taught by one teacher with no paraprofessional support. Participating students' reading levels vary from second to sixth grade abilities, and comprehension rates vary from twenty-five to seventy-five percent on average when presented with probes appropriate to their instructional level. The participants are generally federal setting level one or two students, meaning twenty to sixty percent of their day is within a special education setting. The remainder of their academic day is spent in the mainstream setting with non-disabled peers.

Curriculum Models

The design of this curriculum is to enrich special education classrooms with growth mindset directive. One identified challenge of this curriculum is to guide students towards the development of a growth mindset that will increase their abilities to face and overcome challenges, accept failure as not only a part of life but as a learning experience, take academic challenges, improve critical-thinking skills, and improve personal skills. As shown by Blad, (2016), students in a growth mindset believe their skills and strengths can be developed through

time and effort. Claro, Dweck, and Paunesku, (2016) also reported that students of varying circumstances benefit from growth mindset instruction. This curriculum was designed to increase academic achievement and development through growth mindset instruction.

This curriculum is guided by the Marzano Instructional Framework (2017). Marzano is based on a scale of one through four, with three as the curricular goal. Level three, application, as noted by Carbaugh, Marzano and Toth (2017), “engages students in previewing activities that require students to access prior knowledge as it relates to the new content” (p .12). Lessons are developed to achieve the rigor set within a level three; the ability to independently apply learning. Unit rubrics are aligned to state standards using this understanding.

To complete this project, I created a curriculum based on the book *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson. In addition to the standards-based objectives, I integrated growth mindset characteristics. Based on the findings of Amedi, et. al. (2005) concluding that brain circuitry is malleable and changes through time and circumstances, this curriculum is designed to be implemented daily to encourage continuous neurological development.

Scope and Sequence

There are seventy-one slides that make up this curriculum and I anticipate it taking thirty-five consecutive days to complete. The activities vary in depth and length. Each chapter grouping is broken into two sections. First, the students complete bell work followed by chapter unit vocabulary words. When vocabulary words are complete, the chapters associated with that grouping are read in class. Upon reading completion, students complete an exit ticket. This completes section one for that chapter grouping. Section two is implemented the day immediately following unit one and consists of bell work, growth mindset instruction, and an exit ticket. The slides are designed to be used in the order presented.

Each unit grouping shares the theme of growth mindset. Through the use of growth mindset and related skills, the main character develops throughout the story. Units also tie in to 7th grade Minnesota academic standards. Some lessons address one standard, others cover more.

Implementation

This curriculum is presented on PowerPoint slides through an overhead projector. This curriculum combines bell work, vocabulary instruction, comprehension activities, growth mindset learning, and exit tickets. This curriculum is broken down by chapter units with chapter length being the determining factor. Each chapter unit averages two days to complete and varies in length covering one to three chapters at a time. This stands true for each chapter unit except the final two units that I chose to combine based on previous class desires and needs. Day one of each unit consists of bell work, vocabulary instruction, reading time, and an exit ticket. Day two of each unit consists of bell work, growth mindset learning activities and/or reflection, and an exit ticket. The Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards to be addressed are within the curriculum are:

7.4.1.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (Minnesota Academic Standards, 2010, pg. 50)

7.4.6.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text, including those from diverse cultures. (Minnesota Academic Standards, 2010, pg. 50)

7.9.1.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-to-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. (Minnesota Academic Standards, 2010, pg. 67)

7.11.4.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 7 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

(Minnesota Academic Standards, 2010, pg. 74)

Bell work

Each day when entering the classroom, following the established routine, students engage with a *Touching Spirit Bear* or a growth mindset activity. These activities and prompts include writing responses focusing on the themes of overcoming challenges, responding to difficulties, motivation, growth mindset, and comprehension. Class openers can also include whole group discussion, problem solving prompts, group work, and building background knowledge for upcoming lessons.

Text comprehension

Within the daily text, students are encouraged to make connections between the literature and class opener activities. The students analyze how characters, circumstances, and plot are impacted by their mindsets. Students analyze how the story could differ with a contrasting mindset. Deeper into the text, students analyze characters' points of view, and analyze how the characters are influenced by their perspective. Some of the activities and prompts included are:

- Analyzing how growth mindset influences the decisions and emotional health of the characters
- Investigating how different perspectives can influence the characters' opinion of a circumstance
- Comparing and contrasting how growth mindsets influence character decisions
- Relating character use of self-advocacy and outcomes
- Evaluating character use of resilience

- Evaluating character use of grit
- Critiquing character use of problem-solving skills and analyze the different options a character could choose

These activities, topics, and many others are implemented in numerous manners. Some are completed through discussion, writing prompts, or projects. All activities were created with student-ability levels in mind, as well as academic rigor to encourage growth on ELA standards and benchmarks.

Exit tickets

Exit tickets are provided as a chance for students reflect on daily learning and vary in focus from comprehension to mindsets, resilience, grit, and self-advocacy. The exit tickets provide students the opportunity to practice and emphasize new learning. Exit tickets are to be completed independently and consists of written or verbal responses.

Project Validity

This project is to be evaluated after implementation to effectively answer the question; *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*

Student behavior and feedback, as well as colleague feedback are to determine the effectiveness of this curriculum. Conversations with colleagues reveal their opinion of this curriculum and the growth mindset learning embedded within. At the end of project implementation, I resolve to assess this projects' effectiveness through student observation. I expect to hear my students independently practice growth mindset skills. When a student is faced with an academic challenge, I expect to see perseverance and grit through trial and error. I also expect to hear my students identify and articulate their individual needs.

The curriculum was designed for small group, special education, middle school students. The lessons were based on four academic standards and growth mindset skill sets. Lessons were designed to be used in sequence and was guided by the Marzano Framework (2017). After exploring academic standards and choosing assessment goals, the lessons were created. Development of this curriculum took place in summer, 2019, and is examined in the next unit.

Summary

Differing opinions and viewpoints influence the academic climate at this school. With regard to the community, students, faculty, and supported by research conducted in chapter two, a growth mindset curriculum has the potential to help students navigate the development of a growth mindset and develop healthy solutions and coping mechanisms to daily stressors. This supplemental curriculum will help staff and students to meet the mission statement *to educate, empower and engage all students to become caring and responsible citizens who will succeed in an ever-changing world* while also helping answer the overlying question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*

Chapter Four

Conclusions

When this Capstone began, I posed the question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?* I chose to investigate this question because my time spent teaching special education students in a pull-out, English Language Arts setting, has shown me a lack of these skills within my student demographic. In Chapter One, I considered my experiences as a youth, young adult, and equestrian that developed in me the growth mindset I have today. These reflections pointed me to investigate the influence of growth mindset instruction on students who have not been modeled these skill sets. On the journey to answer my question, I was sure there would be relevant, pertinent information gained for my curriculum.

The literature review in Chapter Two formed the basis of which to write my curriculum. I gained knowledge of necessary skills to impart for a true growth mindset to be developed in my students. I did not, however, find guidance on how to implement or communicate the findings. Once I discovered this need, I chose to create a curriculum based on the young adult novel, *Touching Spirit Bear*, by Ben Mikaelson. *Touching Spirit Bear* is about a troubled young man who, after going through a series of circumstances, changes his mindset and life. I created a daily lesson plan with bell ringers, text integration, exit tickets, and group mindset discussions shaped by growth mindset topics. The curriculum was designed to be guided by the Marzano Instructional Framework (2017).

In Chapter Three, I identified the student and community demographics in which I work. I shared the timeline to project completion and shared the details surrounding my curriculum. Chapter Three also identified the curricular framework the project is guided by. Also presented

in Chapter Three were the major curricular goals with my curriculum and the manner of presentation.

In Chapter Four, I shared my reflections and understanding gained through this capstone process. These notes briefly impart my thoughts about the capstone as a student, curriculum author, and researcher. Next, I reviewed the main ideas from the literature review that helped shape the curriculum. The following section, Implications and Limitations, explored the potential modifications and curriculum setbacks that could occur upon implementation. Finally, in Future Applications, I discussed the future application of my curriculum.

Capstone From a Student Perspective

The capstone process for me was significant not only as an educator, but as an individual striving to improve my own growth mindset. This thesis, as well as the attached curriculum, represents an overview of the learning that I have engaged in throughout the process of completing my Master of Arts in Literacy Education at Hamline University.

Chapter One allowed me time to reflect on and appreciate the life circumstances that developed the person and educator that I am now. It required that I analyze previous life experiences and the influences held over my own mindset. The experiences within my life worked uniquely to create the driven individual that I am now. My family and lifelong obsession with horses and competing gave me the catapult to create a curriculum to steer my students in the direction of a growth mindset.

Chapter Two was one of the greatest mental challenges I have endured as an educator. The sheer wealth of information linked to the topic of growth mindset was overwhelming. Within the numerous sources were volumes of related information; deciding which pieces of information were relevant to my capstone and the order in which to present my material was a

time-consuming challenge. While Chapter Two was a significant challenge for me personally, it also led to a great sense of accomplishment once it was complete. The curriculum development was also a challenge for me, but for different reasons. The variation of student levels within the typical special education, pull-out instruction course is significant. I commonly have students in the age range of seventh to ninth grade, with second grade to seventh grade reading abilities. The challenge held within finding material that can appeal to the range of not only ages and genders but is accommodating to the discrepancies in reading abilities.

Influencing Sources in the Literature Review

As many people have written on growth mindset findings, there were sources significant to the development of the literature review and resulting understanding and conclusions associated with this capstone.

There were many valuable influencing sources throughout my capstone. An initial interest in brain neural plasticity is what led me to the pioneering enthusiasm in growth mindset and overall capstone theme. I found the research conducted by Amedi, Fregni, Pascual-Leone, and Merabet (2005) to be not only fascinating, but vital to the understanding of continuous brain plasticity and the ability to change throughout the lifespan. Amedi, et al. (2005) states, “The brain, as the source of human behavior, is by design molded by environmental changes and pressures, physiological modifications, and experiences” (p. 5). This statement provided me with the encouragement that a positive influence can be an altering factor in development and that the brain continuously changes through circumstances and instruction.

I also found the work by Carol Dweck imperative to the development of my capstone. Carol Dweck’s work surrounding growth mindset and academic achievement is pivotal not only in my own work, but to that of education itself. Dweck shared that there is increasing scientific

evidence to support the understanding of a greater scope of brain development and learning over the lifespan than ever thought possible (2016). With scientific evidence of brain neural plasticity, Dweck continues to explain that student mindsets are the automatic thoughts that guide their interpretation process. Thoughts that can be molded through consistent instruction. (2016).

Dweck's work was also supported by Angela Duckworth (2016), who helped explain why within my classroom I see a significant lack of effort and grit. Many of my students display the characteristics of a fixed mindset that can explain why they routinely answer written prompts with two to three-word responses or fail to try entirely.

Before completing my research for Chapter Two, I knew the basics of what mindsets were and understood that the human brain is capable of change beyond maturity. I have seen evidence of both in my own personal life when facing challenges and making choices to better myself. Beyond personal gains and beliefs, I wanted evidence prior to committing to curriculum development. Completing the research for this capstone built upon and solidified the understanding I held regarding these subjects.

Implications and Limitations of Results

There are several implications this research has on my special education students. The first implication of this research is that growth mindset instruction is an asset to instruction. When working with students of lower socioeconomic status and challenging home lives, factors that can influence future success are imperative to the development of the whole student.

There are also limitations within this curriculum, the first being that the student will only get out of it what they put in. If a student chooses to disengage during instruction rather than attempt to learn, no instruction or direction will be effective. The objective of this curriculum is to offer an engaging English Language Arts learning experience while integrating growth

mindset skills. Taking productive feedback from colleagues and reading my audience are important steps to tweaking my curriculum as it is implemented. This curriculum is not a finished product as it will surely change over time through the use of collected feedback.

I am excited to watch the implementation of this curriculum. As vital as social and emotional learning is, in my classroom experience, many students are not taught appropriate development and maintenance of such skills at home and therefore will benefit from direct social and emotional learning in the classroom. I am eager to see how the students respond to the lessons and time for creativity built within. My genuine hope is that my students, some with extremely challenging lives, gain skills that will transcend into development of imperative life skills.

Future Implications

This project was designed to be implemented into my fifth year teaching small group, special education English. I intend to use the PowerPoint slides and supplementing materials in the order presented, however, as each section is implemented, it will be imperative to note revisions and modifications that need to be made. I do anticipate challenges within the curriculum implementation but feel that they can be corrected through classroom and time management. Based on the success and feedback provided regarding the curriculum, I anticipate creating future novel curriculum following the theme of growth mindset.

The special education team I work with are always open to new opportunities and I anticipate this curriculum being widely accepted and implemented via sharing the PowerPoint I created. During our regular professional learning committee meetings, we often discuss the challenge and necessity of integrating growth mindset skills into our classrooms. I believe this

curriculum will provide an opportunity to encourage continued reading, writing, and comprehension growth while also encouraging the development of a growth mindset.

Summary. The capstone process was a challenge for me. This kind of writing and research was new learning for me and required numerous revisions to complete. Several influencing authors guided my literature and resulting curriculum. With an initial interest in brain neuroplasticity leading the charge, I found relevant contributing authors to follow in the field of neuroscience. I also found guidance in significant authors in the field of growth mindset. Based on the literature review, I believe the future implication of my research and curriculum will be growth mindset improvement in my socioeconomically disadvantaged students. I believe a limitation within my curriculum could be student buy in. A student only learns as much as they allow themselves to learn; I cannot force learning or growth on my students. I do believe this curriculum holds future implications within not only my classroom, but those of my colleagues. This curriculum is designed to be shared through PowerPoint to be implemented in other special education classrooms.

Throughout my time as an educator I have witnessed the necessity of impressing a growth mindset on the student demographic with whom I work. Many of my students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and lack the mindset to develop healthy coping skills, both socially and academically. As I look at the implementation of my project, I hold optimism that I have an answer to the question, *how can a growth mindset curriculum be successfully integrated in a special education English language arts classroom?*