



## Mindset matters

A Research in Practice Series title

Fiona Boylan

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# Introduction

Through research, practice and the formulation of theory, we now understand that there is more to learning than cognitive ability, curriculum and instruction (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Masters, 2014).

It is increasingly being acknowledged that there is a need for developing children's social-emotional skills so they may fulfil their social and community responsibilities as global citizens in the twenty-first century (DET, 2018; Masters, 2016). There is a strong relationship between social-emotional skills and positive life outcomes (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), and children need these skills 'to adapt to today's demanding, changing and unpredictable world' (OECD, 2015, p. 1). Social-emotional skills include habits and mindsets such as self-regulation, executive function, intrapersonal skills, a growth mindset and a sense of agency that supports resilience and productive action (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron & Osher, 2020).

Early childhood educators are well aware of this. However, many of them may not be familiar with mindset theory and how it can be used in everyday experiences in early childhood settings. Mindset plays a powerful role in self-regulation, learning, motivation and achievement, so applying mindset theory can assist educators in increasing children's agency in learning.

This book focuses on mindset theory and how it links to the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). The different sections break down the concepts of fixed and growth mindsets, explaining how educators can help children in their setting develop a growth mindset.

## A note on terminology

In this book, the term 'setting' covers a wide range of educational contexts, including family day care, preschool, kindergarten, long day care services and the early years of school. The term 'educators' refers to practitioners who work with children in prior-to-school settings, out-of-school-hours care as well as school settings.

# What is mindset?

Over decades of research on achievement and success, psychologist Carol Dweck has shown that mindset plays a significant role in learning, along with cognitive ability, curriculum and instruction (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1999; 2016). She identified two types of mindset that sit on either end of a continuum: a growth mindset and a fixed mindset.



Mindset plays a significant role in learning.

## Growth mindset

People can have a **growth mindset**, where they believe that their intelligence and abilities can change as a result of effort, perseverance and practice (Dweck, 2016). We might call these people 'glass half-full' learners, as they persist in the face of setbacks. They have a positive attitude towards learning and understand that the right sort of effort leads to growth in abilities.

Those with a growth mindset thrive on challenge, which leads to an increased interest in a task. They focus on learning goals and put effort into increasing their competence over time. They also demonstrate more resilience when it comes to getting over failures and setbacks (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

## Fixed mindset

People who have a **fixed mindset** believe that their intelligence and abilities don't change—these are fixed and an increased effort will not lead to improvement (Dweck, 2016). They focus on performance goals and are more interested in demonstrating their competence, so they often stick to doing what they can do well. They avoid challenging tasks as they worry about failure and not looking smart. They get upset by mistakes and give up sooner on hard tasks (Dweck, 1999).



## The mindset continuum

It is important to understand that people have different mindsets for different talents and abilities. No-one has a completely fixed or growth mindset. Instead, individuals sit on a mindset continuum (see Figure 1 on p. 4) and can be more growth mindset-oriented for some types of abilities and more fixed mindset-oriented for others, according to their self-beliefs.

We are not born with a certain mindset. It is developed through our experiences and the messages we receive from others. This is important for educators to know, as mindsets are developed from a young age and can be changed.

Mindsets play a significant role in motivation, self-regulation, achievement and interpersonal processes (Dweck, 1999). Self-regulation is also known by other terms, such as self-discipline, delay of gratification and impulse control (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Self-regulation is an integral part of mindset theory, as the learner's mindset can predict the use of self-regulation strategies (Dweck, 1999). A growth mindset requires an intrinsically motivated individual with good self-regulation skills (Dweck, 1999). Good self-regulators choose to set learning goals, monitor and assess their goal progress, which leads to more productive learning. They seek assistance when it is needed, persist, adjust strategies and set effective new goals when present ones are completed.



Mindset is developed through our experiences and the messages we receive from others.



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