

Fixing the Fixed Mindset: Promoting a Growth Mindset in Social Work Education

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Abstract

One of the aims of social work education is to facilitate learners to develop skills of critical thinking. Having a growth mindset opens greater possibilities to develop the skills and enhance commitment to lifelong learning. In contrast, students and educators who possess a fixed mindset focus on performance and less on learning. Furthermore, people with a fixed mindset tend to engage in defensive behaviours and respond negatively to feedback. This article explores the existing knowledge on both fixed mindset and growth mindset relevant to social work education and my reflection as a learner and educator. It also offers some possible ideas to increase self-awareness for social work learners, educators, and education providers.

Keywords: *Growth mindset; Fixed mindset; Social work education*

Introduction

This viewpoint presents an overview of the concept mindset, the importance of growth mindset in social work education, highlights the problems of unawareness of having a fixed mindset and offers some possible strategies in promoting a growth mindset. In discussing the topic, the first section provides a rationale with reference to the relevant literature on the concept and the significance of mindsets in social work education; arguments that mindsets can influence how learners and educators approach challenges, navigate their goals, and enhance motivation for deep learning. The next section offers my reflection on the topic being discussed based on my previous experience as a learner completing an undergraduate social work degree. I am currently studying towards a PhD in social work, I am a registered social worker, an educator and have recently completed a tertiary teaching qualification. This article finally explicates some ideas to promote growth mindsets and includes learning process in the assessment and evaluation of social work education, instead of being solely based on performance.

A brief literature review on the concept and significance in social work education

The concept

The concept of fixed and growth mindsets is far from being new in education, however, the application of the concept has not been thoroughly explored in the field of social work (Wolcott et al., 2021). Furthermore, research studies have indicated the positive impacts of promoting growth mindsets in other fields (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Lim et al., 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to stimulate discussions amongst social work learners and educators by reflecting on the influence of mindsets on their ability to integrate existing knowledge with new knowledge and taking deliberate actions for continued development.

The concept of mindset consists of our beliefs about how our intelligence, talent and characteristics influence the way we respond to challenges and therefore impact our goals. It is important to note that there are distinct perspectives that people hold about the rigidity or pliability of those personal attributes which, according to Dweck (2012), consists of two types: growth mindset and fixed mindset. Furthermore, Dweck (2016) argued that people with a growth mindset believe that their basic qualities can be developed through their motivation to learn. In contrast, those who adopt a fixed mindset believe they have an amount of intelligence that is fixed and cannot be significantly developed by learning from other people and/or their environment.

This concept is relevant to social work education because learning and teaching in social work education requires students and educators to function effectively in a constantly evolving, complex environment. Moreover, as found in Wolcott et al.'s (2021) review, some people thrive amid challenges while others struggle; the results were influenced by their motivation and attitude towards challenges. For example, in social work field work education, this concept can have implications for how learners respond to an assessment error, decide using limited information or manage a complication in crisis intervention. Understanding these influential factors is important because educators and learners can adjust teaching and learning environments to enhance their motivation, beliefs and behaviours that promote deeper

learning instead of performance alone; people who are performance-oriented often focused on outperforming others and avoid challenges to validate their basic personal traits. On the other hand, learning-oriented people are focused on the value of learning and developing new knowledge or skills rather than comparing themselves to others (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

Another important point to note is that people with a fixed mindset believe intelligence and personal characteristics are static and their good performance success comes from their basic personal traits, whereas people with a growth mindset believe these traits are pliable and can grow through learning from others (Dweck, 2016). Additionally, people's mindsets are situational and can change with age (Wolcott et al., 2021) and therefore have effects on how they respond to challenges over time. These findings were shown in Wolcott et al.'s (2021) systematic review from 24 articles. The study found that all commentaries and research studies suggested that the growth mindset approach had at least one benefit in various disciplines for learners, educators, and organisations. Growth mindset is associated with the ability to reflect on failure, take responsibility for gaps in knowledge, create collaborative and trusting relationship, and identify bias and stereotypes. The benefits of a growth mindset are discussed in the following section.

The benefits of a growth mindset

The most common results, such as in research studies conducted by Forsythe and Johnson (2017), Lim et al. (2020), and Wolcott et al. (2021), the benefits of a growth mindset for learners are to increase resilience, perseverance, enhance positive response to feedback, offer an openness to learning opportunity and consequently improve psychological well-being. The benefits for educators found in the research studies are mainly illustrated as a tool to support their professional development. For example, instead of being affected by imposter syndrome or feeling inadequate when receiving feedback, the educators maintain their self-esteem and can utilise feedback as a learning opportunity. The research studies mentioned above have also found the use of promoting growth mindsets to build a collaborative approach between learners and educators to create a trusting learning environment. The benefits for the education providers found in the studies are focusing on supporting safe environments for both learners and educators, normalising learning opportunities when faced by challenges, adopt feedback-seeking culture, and foster long-term professional relationships in the relevant industry.

On the contrary, an article by Yeager and Dweck (2020) discusses the controversies of growth mindset interventions in teaching and learning; nevertheless, the importance growth mindset in learning environments cannot be emphasised enough. Furthermore, in supervisor-supervisee settings, a research study conducted in Singapore by Lim et al. (2020) involving 368 undergraduate learners on whether having a fixed or a growth mindset influenced their assessment by work supervisors. The study found that learners with a growth mindset tended to receive more positive feedback from their supervisors in problem-solving and decision-making skills. This finding is consistent with the concept of a growth mindset, such as being more open to challenges and opportunities to learn in pursuit of mastery goals.

Another benefit of a growth mindset is the acceptance of feedback as an avenue for learning in contrast to reacting to feedback with defensiveness.

Preventing defensive behaviours

Regarding defensive behaviours, it is necessary to note that the type of mindset adopted by a person impacts on their attitude to challenges (Dweck, 2012), whether to face those challenges or to treat those challenges as threats. Forsythe and Johnson (2017) argued that defensive behaviours can occur when someone perceives a threat. Moreover, as the defensive person becomes more increasingly defensive and spend much energy to deflect the threat, they become less effective at accurately integrating their existing knowledge with the new information they receive (Dweck, 2016) as outlined in social learning by Bandura (1977, p. 288), “those who cease their coping efforts prematurely will retain their self-debilitating and defensive behaviour,” such behaviour can be a barrier to taking up new ideas or practices.

Reflection as a learner and educator

From the reviewed literature earlier, it is evident that research repeatedly confirms the benefits of growth mindsets on helping learners and educators be more receptive to feedback and supporting collaborative relationships between learners and educators. Moreover, a growth mindset has positive impacts on resiliency, perseverance and psychological well-being that foster safer learning environments. In this section, I share my reflection as a learner while studying towards an undergraduate social work degree at a polytechnic in New Zealand when most of the course was delivered face-to-face and there was little option for online learning. My reflection also includes my experience of utilising growth mindset in my current role as an educator teaching undergraduate social work programme through both face-to-face and online classes.

In my experience as a learner during my time studying towards an undergraduate degree through face-to-face classes, I found educators who measured students’ effort and learning offered more motivation in developing a growth mindset. For example, as a student I felt more connected with my study when my learning engagement was acknowledged as part of my success, instead of being solely measured in percentage or grading scale from a few summative assessments. The learning engagement included, but was not limited to, my attendance, participation in class discussions, ongoing reflection, and formative activities. Furthermore, educators who gave thorough feedback with recommendations for a better outcome and supported students to take risk motivated deep learning (Higgins & Fox, 2018) and had higher student success rates.

At the time I was studying towards a social work degree as well as working as a frontline social worker and I found it necessary for social work students to be engaged in their learning, discussions with their peers and formative activities if they were expected to graduate with beginner’s competencies (SWRB, 2021) and be ready to practice (Beddoe et al., 2018; Hay et al., 2012). I also often found the discussions with my peers more useful than the process of writing an individual summative assessment.

It was concerning to me that some learners and educators only focused on students getting good grades but not necessarily on preparing students towards competency standards as beginner practitioners. I wondered if the disengaged students understood what they were missing out on. This observation was consistent with a study conducted by Forsythe and Johnson (2017) on student attitudinal and behavioural responses to feedback, their mindset and defence mechanisms. The study involved 151 undergraduate students from diverse disciplines with majority of the students from social sciences. The results show that students with fixed mindsets may be overly concerned about their grades and less likely to challenge themselves. It is worth noting that, in the current world, where the complexity of social work cases evolves (O'Donoghue, 2015), the social work education system must evolve to meet the needs of the people we are serving.

As part of my reflection, I would like to suggest some ideas in fixing the fixed mindset for learners and educators consisting of enhancing feedback culture and promoting the concept of growth mindsets in social work education.

Enhancing feedback culture

Many research studies (such as Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Lim et al., 2020; Wolcott et al., 2021) measured participants' mindsets and evaluated the correlation with other variables such as grit, resilience, and defensive behaviour. Furthermore, the findings of those studies somehow often highlighted the benefits and strategies to promote a growth mindset at the learner, educator, and organisational levels. The strategies involve their attitude in giving and receiving feedback, and in placing more emphasis on effort and learning processes instead of solely on performance. I argue that these strategies can only work when all parties involved are willing to work together to encourage feedback culture and normalise feedback as an opportunity to learn and develop. For example, a feedback strategy that supports learners as active participants of the feedback process such as in setting their goals, assessment criteria and programme design would have more benefits rather than treating learners as passive recipients of feedback. I believe working in partnership among learners, educators, and education providers in developing these strategies will enhance learning quality more than one-way feedback addressed to learners.

Promoting growth mindset in social work education

I would like to highlight that, in promoting a growth mindset in social work education, the implementation of constructive approach is crucial. Furthermore, there are not many published articles in academic social work environment in relation to this concept. There is no doubt that traditions, customs and common-sense can have positive input to social work practice; however, those can also be barriers if not applied contextually and given opportunities to evolve. The good news is that one's mindset can change over time, which can give us the opportunity to create and increase self-awareness of our mindsets and promote a growth mindset.

More specifically, strategies may include creating assessments that include promoting a growth mindset, effort, learning process and goals focused on mastery (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017) in conjunction with grades. Moreover, educators need to increase appreciation of the learning process, convey constructive feedback to learners and respond accordingly to feedback.

Educators and education providers also need to focus on observable actions rather than static personality traits to encourage deep learning instead of surface learning (Higgins & Fox, 2018), be willing to learn about growth mindsets and actively creating safe learning environments for everyone involved including self-awareness of their own potential biases.

Conclusion

The growth mindset concept has been shown in many professional fields to help people manage educational challenges and enhance learning environments. This article identified an expanding interest in the growth mindset for education and the lack of available published resources in the application of the concept in social work field. I hope this reflection can stimulate further discussions and studies that extend our understanding of the benefits of a growth mindset for social work learners, educators, and education providers and for social work researchers to explore how active promotion such as teaching about and prioritising a growth mindset can support learners, educators, and education providers.

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