Growth Mindsets in Non-Traditional Elementary Education

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Research Questions
- In what ways do the students at University Primary School (UPS) demonstrate a growth mindset?
- How does the Reggio Emilia Approach (at UPS) encourage a growth mindset?

Introduction

Fixed Mindset
Believing qualities such as intelligence and skill are innate and unchanging. A fixed mindset associated with viewing mistakes and effort as a sign of weakness, as well as feeling threatened by peers with greater knowledge.

Growth Mindset
Believing qualities such as intelligence and skill can be developed and improved through effort. A growth mindset is associated with being comfortable making mistakes and learning from peers.

The Reggio Emilia Approach
A non-traditional teaching style inspired by the successful early childhood education of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The approach is based on the child-centric philosophy of Loris Malaguzzi.

University Primary School (UPS)
The University-affiliated lab elementary school that follows the Reggio Emilia Approach through project-based learning.

Objectives
- Investigate the overlap between the Reggio Emilia Approach and growth mindset education.
- Identify ways traditional classrooms could replicate the successes of UPS.

Methods
Observation in three classrooms:
- K-1 Classroom: 23 students
- 2-3 Classroom: 20 students
- 4-5 Classroom: 23 students
*Each classroom has 1 Head Teacher, 2 part-time Co-Teachers, and 1 Student Teacher

Results
UPS students demonstrate a growth mindset through:
- Feeling comfortable making mistakes and not knowing the answer
- Turning to their peers for inspiration, showing no signs of feeling threatened by their peers' successes
- Appreciating the value of effort

UPS encourages a growth mindset through:
- Editing with the Hundred Languages of Children
- Continuously challenging students through project-based learning
- Increasing autonomy through grade levels
- Familiarizing students with sharing ideas by
  (1) Framing the questions in terms of students' personal experiences
  (2) Increasing factual relevance of questions through the years
  (3) Providing low-stakes opportunities for collaboration through play

Inspiration for Traditional Classrooms
Encourage play among older students
Hands-on learning activities
Treat the classroom as a source of learning

Teacher: “It’s not easy, right?”
Student: “At first, but then it gets easier.”

Prioritization

Student A
- Showed resistance and lack of interest in drawing
- Teacher adapted activity to exclude the drawing portion, saying:
  “Everybody has different fortess.”

Student B
- Experienced anxiety and low confidence with writing
- Teachers provided more individual support during writing activities
- Encouraged her to work through her anxieties to complete the project

Different from Growth Mindset Education
- UPS did not insist that students grow all skills they are exposed to in the school day
- Writing is prioritized, other skills like drawing are used to complement essential skills

Conclusions
- The Reggio Emilia Approach (at UPS) raises student confidence and perseverance through autonomy, collaboration, and project-based learning.
- Overall, UPS appears to encourage growth mindsets in its students.
- This suggests that educators can promote growth mindsets in students without following every aspect of growth mindset education.

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