



How words can shape a classroom

What happens when a child struggles with a tricky math question? What happens when a child gets a bad grade on an English dictation? What goes through the child's mind in that moment? For most children, the first thought is to give up, to say to themselves, "I am not smart enough", "I never get good marks so I must not be smart", "I need to be quicker otherwise the teacher will think I am not smart." According to Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford University, these children possess a fixed mindset, a belief that being smart is related to innate ability. However, there are children who possess what she calls a growth mindset, who believe that in struggles and in failure, there is an opportunity to exert greater effort, to find new strategies, and to challenge themselves. What differentiates these children is the kind of feedback and praise that they receive from their parents and their teachers.

To highlight how feedback leads to fixed and growth mindsets, we organised a session on "Creating Growth Mindsets in the Classrooms" as part of our teacher training workshop. The focus of the session was on understanding how students view their own intelligence and how that impacts motivation and their love for learning. The workshop emphasised that praising the process and the strategies employed by the child creates growth mindsets, while praising the outcomes or marks obtained leads to the creation of growth mindsets.

The session had a huge impact on Rakhi ma'am, who teaches grade 1 at the Heritage School. According to Rakhi ma'am, "I was taken aback after the session and I began to think about the impact of my words in the classroom." After the workshop, Rakhi ma'am changed the way in which she gave feedback to her students, using phrases such as "We can all try to do it together" and "I trust you, you can do it, I know you can try."

Changing the words and phrases that she uses to deliver feedback has had a huge impact on Payal. By encouraging Payal to "take her performance to the next level" and reminding her to "continue to do better," Rakhi ma'am has observed that Payal has become far more confident of herself in the classroom. As Rakhi ma'am says, "Payal has become more settled in class. She listens carefully, wants to share her experiences with her classmates, and participates actively in the classroom." She has observed a similar change in Aryan and Alok.

By just changing the language of feedback, Rakhi ma'am has managed to change the culture of her classroom, and this change has been most visible in the ways the children talk to each other and compliment each other. During a classroom activity in February, Shubham began to narrate a story that he had read. As he finished his story, Vidhi, his classmate, got up to tell Rakhi ma'am that "Shubham was smart because he tried." The idea that someone is smart because they put in effort is the essence of the growth mindset. What is remarkable is that the language that Rakhi ma'am uses with her students has communicated this complex phenomenon to 6 year olds.

We also realised that children's views about intelligence are not only shaped in the classroom, but also in their homes. Thus, creating growth mindsets requires a consolidated effort from both teachers and parents. In January 2016, we organised a workshop for our parents at both the schools, highlighting the impact of their words on their children's achievement and motivation. One of our parents shared a poem with the other parents, 'Koshish karne waloon ki haar nahin hoti' (those who try, do not fail) by Harivansh Rai Bachchan, driving home the point far more succinctly. We hope to continue seeing students understand that intelligence is not about innate capacities or abilities, but about hard work and challenge.