

7 Shifting Academic Mindset in the Learning Partnership

Restoring Students' Natural Confidence as Learners

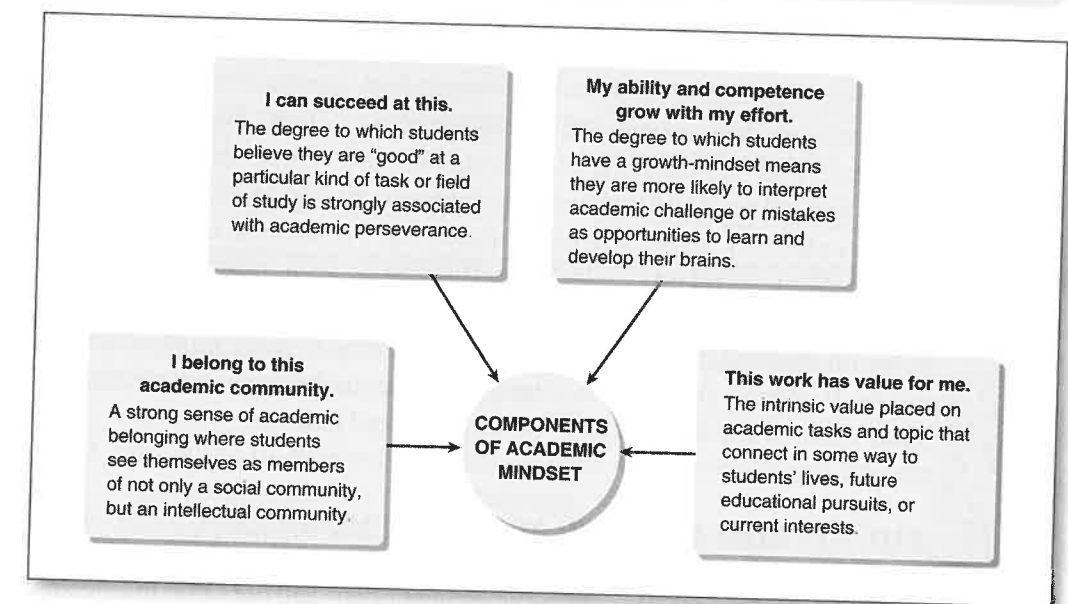
If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then and only then will I drop my defenses and hostility, and I will sing your praises and help you to make the desert bear fruit.

—Ralph Ellison

In the last chapter, we looked at the important role you play as an ally in a learning partnership and how to go about building your capacity to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with your students as they work to take over the reigns of their learning. The first step in helping them take greater ownership rests in giving them feedback and space for reflection. But you know what the old adage says: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” In a similar way, we can give our students all the right kinds of feedback and create processes to help them reflect on it, but if we cannot get them to take it to heart nothing will change. To get dependent learners to act on feedback or to be strategic, they have to first believe in themselves as learners.

As warm demanders, our job is to get students to recognize that putting forth the effort is worth the work. We do this by helping each student cultivate an academic mindset. The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) in its report, “Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance,” defines academic mindset as the “beliefs, attitudes, or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work” (p. 28) that motivate students to engage in a learning task (Farrington et al., 2012). Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck (2007) in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* points out that what we believe about ourselves as learners and our ability to be effective are the catalysts for learning. Her research supports decades of other research findings that tell us students with positive academic mindsets are more willing to engage, work harder, and persevere during challenging assignments that stretch them.

Figure 7.1 Academic Mindset Components



On the other hand, students with negative mindsets are more likely to either act up or zone out in response to their internal belief that they can't be successful. They may put forth effort only to give up quickly when learning gets hard and they realize they don't have the tools to complete the task.

That is what happened to me right after junior high school. I was accepted to attend San Francisco's prestigious public high school, Lowell High. It was the only college prep high school in the school district at the



time. The student body was primarily White and Asian, with very few African American, Latino, or Pacific Islander students. From the first day, I felt I always had to prove I belonged there. I questioned if I really did belong there. All my friends had gone to the local high school with the general education or vocational tracks and I felt alone, which didn't help. I remember sitting in my trigonometry class understanding what seemed like every third word the teacher said. The formulas he wrote on the board seemed like chicken scratch. Then I failed the class final exam. That confirmed it for me. I didn't belong at Lowell. I told myself this college prep stuff was for the birds (I am sure my teenaged self used more colorful language) and asked my mother to transfer me. Not knowing how to intervene, she reluctantly sent me to the local high school with all my friends. Despite being a good reader and independent learner, I still experienced self-doubt.

Often we misinterpret a student's self-doubt or negative mindset as a lack of engagement or motivation when we see him exhibiting those common symptoms—zoning out, acting up, or shutting down in class. We then focus on trying to increase engagement with high energy starters such as *call and response* that aren't connected to deeper learning, hoping that it flips some internal switch for the student, leading to a more positive academic mindset, which will in turn transform their academic performance. In reality, we have it backward. What we believe about belonging, effort, and value of the task leads to engagement and motivation.

As culturally responsive teachers, we have to address the real root of the problem—students' self-doubt that leads to a negative academic mindset. This means that as culturally responsive teachers our focus has to be on shifting mindset rather than on trying to force engagement or cajole students' motivation. Students have to become self-motivated. That's one of the hallmarks of an independent learner.

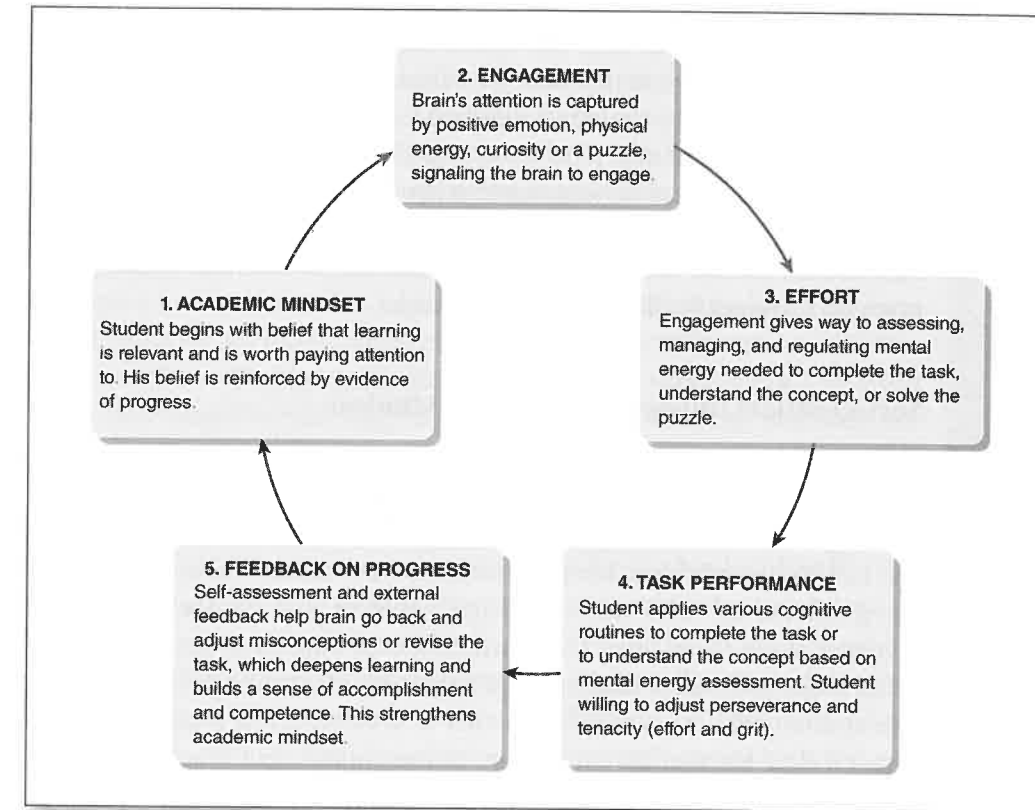
THE NEUROSCIENCE OF ACADEMIC MINDSET

As we try to connect the dots between dependent learners and intellectual capacity building, academic mindset is an important dot worth understanding. Teachers hear a lot about it as the source of self-motivation these days but not a lot about what's going on in a student's brain that creates a positive mindset toward learning. Because we don't understand how to develop a positive mindset or shift a negative one, many of our efforts are just trial and error with little lasting impact.

Academic mindset is the result of four conceptual and identity frames all braided together by our older limbic brain to create this thing we call

how might we gauge this shift of mindset? what data would we collect? ref: Coli's "belonging" goal

Figure 7.2 Academic Mindset Cycle Graphic



mindset. These four elements make up our internal mindset scripts (schema) that we talked about in Chapter 2:

- Our sense of mastery and competence as learners based on past experience and sense of preparedness
- Our belief in our ability to move about the world freely and control our external world
- Our deep belief in ourself and our ability to achieve what we put our mind and energy toward
- Our explanatory story that we tell ourselves about why we are or aren't competent learners

These elements make up the script that becomes the software that the limbic brain programs into our safety-threat system. It scans the information stored in our hippocampus (our own personal Wikipedia pages) and recognizes patterns over a period of time related to our sense of competence,

self-efficacy, and ability to grow as a learner. At a certain point, the brain believes that the same patterns will continue to repeat themselves, so it creates a software program (schema) that will run on autopilot to help us respond to various learning situations consistently, knowing when to pay attention or not, when to put forth any effort or not. The hippocampus feeds this information to the thalamus, our brain's "air traffic controller" and the amygdala, the guard dog. The brain has this script coded into its safety-threat system with instructions to either avoid certain learning situations or to embrace them. The way the brain chooses to interpret and encode this information results in either a **fixed mindset** (won't take a risk) or a **growth mindset** (willing to take a chance).

Sociopolitical Impact on Academic Mindset

Too often, we think of a student's academic mindset as a personal choice or an extension of his family's failure to value education. In reality, schools do a lot more to influence a negative academic mindset than we'd like to admit sometimes. Most schools still have structural inequities that are predictive of who will be a high achiever and who will be a low achiever along racial lines. Unfortunately, over time these structural inequities begin to shape a student's internal story about himself as a learner. The student who is a struggling reader in seventh grade might believe he is just a slow learner. He isn't aware of the policies and practices that led to poor reading instruction in second grade with no interventions to close his learning gaps before he moved to third grade. In addition to policies and practices that limit opportunities, culturally and linguistically diverse students encounter subtle and not so subtle negative messages about their capabilities, the importance of their contributions, and their expected life outcomes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011) from adults in schools and from more privileged students.

Microaggressions and Negativity Bias

The internal scripts students develop that turn into a negative academic mindset or low engagement in the classroom are a result of the everyday microaggressions they encounter. Microaggressions are those small, seemingly innocuous, brief verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that send hostile, derogatory, denigrating, and hurtful messages to people of color. They are not overt, racist actions, but small, nonverbal snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, and a condescending tone of voice (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012; Sue et al., 2007) that our neuroception has learned to pick up.

When teachers frame student differences as deficits rather than as assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student. Too often, teachers who are not working to become culturally responsive misinterpret cultural differences as deficits, dysfunctions, or disadvantages in students, leading the teacher to react negatively toward the student rather than respond positively (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006).

Unfortunately, the brain has what is called a *negativity bias*, meaning it remembers and responds to negative experiences up to three times more than positive experiences. Negativity bias was originally designed by the brain to help the RAS be on the lookout for threats to our safety and psychological well-being. It was important back then to remember what happened when we ate the wrong berry or said the wrong thing in public. The brain is still wired to pay more attention to negative experiences. The brain reads these negative microaggressions as feedback from our environment and codes them into our software program, internalizing these messages as mindset. When negativity bias is activated in classrooms, it only reinforces and amplifies a student's negative academic script, leading him to believe school is an unwelcoming place where he cannot be himself.

Here are other forms of microaggressions that show up in schools:

- *Microassaults* involve misusing power and privilege in subtle ways to marginalize students and create different outcomes based on race or class. In the classroom, a microassault might look like giving a more severe punishment to a student of color than his White classmate who was engaged in the same behavior. Or it might look like overemphasizing military-like behavior management strategies for students of color. With younger children, it looks like excluding them from fun activities as punishment for minor infractions.
- *Microinsults* involve being insensitive to culturally and linguistically diverse students and trivializing their racial and cultural identity such as not learning to pronounce a student's name or giving the student an anglicized name to make it easier on the teacher. Continually confusing two students of the same race and casually brushing it off as "they all look alike."
- *Microinvalidations* involve actions that negate or nullify a person of color's experiences or realities such as ignoring each student's rich funds of knowledge. They are also expressed when we don't want to acknowledge the realities of structural racialization or implicit bias. It takes the form of trivializing and dismissing students' experiences, telling them they are being too sensitive or accusing them of "playing the race card."

Setting the Stage for a Mind Shift

Now that we have a better idea of what is going on in the brain, we want to begin to think about how we help students shift their mindset. Before we can help dependent learners expand their intellectual capacity by willingly taking on challenging work and growing toward independence, we have to assist them in reprogramming their brain's academic mindset software and rewiring their safety-threat system so that they don't trigger the release of stress hormones every time they try to stretch themselves academically with new challenges.

Validation

In Chapter 5, we looked at affirmation and rapport as keys to establishing a positive cross-cultural relationship with your students. Here we couple validation with academic mindset. As an ally, the culturally responsive teacher validates students' experience in the larger sociopolitical context. We don't trivialize issues of racism, language discrimination, or socioeconomic injustice that show up in the media. Instead, we use these events to remind students that they are not crazy or being overly sensitive when they experience microaggressions.

Self-Efficacy and the Feedback Loop

The key to helping students push back and build a strong academic mindset, especially around effort, is by strengthening what psychologists call **self-efficacy**. Albert Bandura (1986) introduced the idea that self-efficacy, the notion of an "I think I can" philosophy affects how we feel, think, and act as learners. Students' efficacy beliefs are positively associated with how long they will persevere at a learning task. Despite all the focus on grit and perseverance, self-efficacy is at the core of academic mindset, especially elements 2 and 3:

- *My ability and competence grow with my effort.* Students who believe they can increase their academic ability by their own effort are more likely to work toward building competence, more likely to be self-motivating and persistent.
- *I can succeed at this.* Students who believe that they are likely to succeed at a given task are more inclined to put forth effort. Students tend to engage in activities that they feel confident in their ability to complete and tend to avoid those in which they lack confidence.

Rebuilding that "I think I can" attitude begins with helping the student achieve small, incremental success on important tasks. It is important to point out that building self-efficacy isn't just about positive thinking or having the student repeat inspirational affirmations. The brain is a pattern seeker and problem solver. It is happiest when it is making progress toward solving the problem, figuring out the pattern, or completing the task. This builds self-efficacy more than superficial positive thinking activities.

Reframing Mistakes as Information

When dependent learners have a fixed mindset, mistakes are viewed as confirmation of one's lack of ability. As part of building a culture of self-assessment and feedback, we have to help students see errors and mistakes as information to help them improve the outcome next time around. Think about how you will build a classroom culture that approaches mistakes differently. How will students talk about their mistakes? What opportunities will they have to rethink their approach to a task based on what they've learned from past failures? If the student views mistakes as information that help him to be more effective, he develops a growth mindset that is open to applying effort.

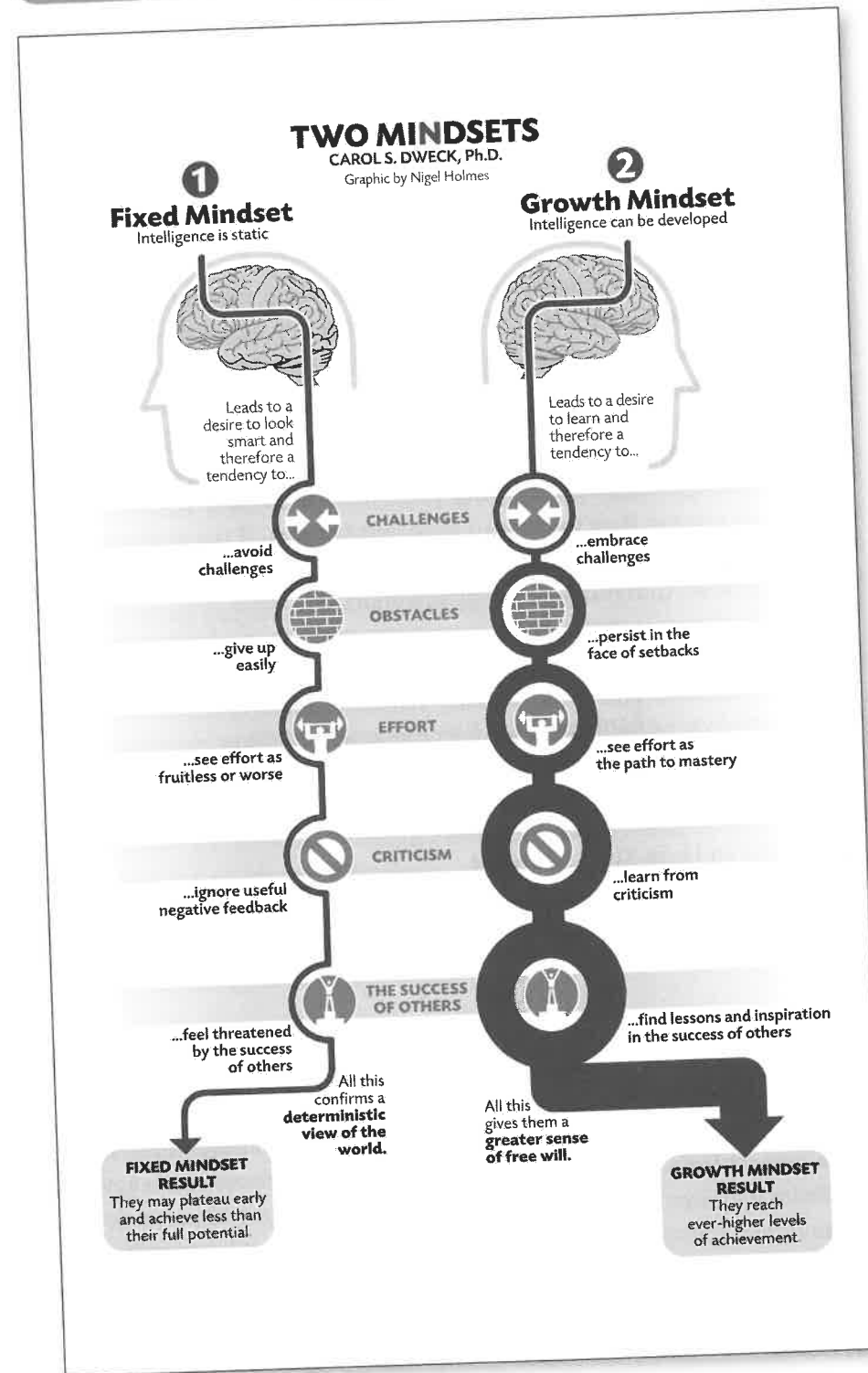
The challenge is that in most classrooms mistakes and errors are seen as something bad. While an answer may be wrong, it still can be instructive to the student. This is particularly critical in math and science where a student's low self-efficacy can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This means the teacher has to talk about errors and mistakes in new ways.

Strategies to Help Shift Mindset

Because only the learner can learn, our role can only be as a coach when trying to get dependent learners to shift their mindset.

Help students create a counter narrative about their identity as learners. As part of a fixed mindset, the dependent student usually has a narrative in his head about who he is as a learner. It's a story he tells himself about why he can't learn, what Seligman calls *explanatory style*. These narratives act like software that program the brain to behave and react in a particular way. Everyone carries a set of narratives that are an extension of our general schema. To help shift their mindset, dependent learners have to develop their own individual counternarratives. This particular narrative is designed to deliberately tell another story, one that runs counter to the

Figure 7.3 Two Mindsets



dominant messages a student gets on a day-to-day basis. This new narrative responds to experiences based on reality, not just inspirational positive thinking. Remember that the brain's natural way of making sense of things is through a story structure.

Here is a process to help students craft a powerful collective counter-narrative.

Step 1: Introduce the notion of counter-narratives to the class through stories or poetry. Read an age-appropriate story or poem that offers a different view of the student's cultural characteristics. For example, try classic poetry such as Nikki Giovanni's poem, *Ego Trippin'* (1993) or Sandra Cisneros' *Only Daughter* (1995).

Step 2: Lead a discussion of how the poem's images contrast with the way the students' culture is depicted in the mainstream media.

Step 3: Set up the narrative redesign task as a collaborative writing exercise. Help students identify two or three dominant beliefs that are relevant to academic mindset (i.e., girls aren't good at math).

- Discuss as a group during morning circle or class advisory time.
- Create brainstorming time so students can generate one or two points that counter each dominant belief listed earlier.
- Invite students to weave their new counterpoints into a story format. For example, they now write a new story about how girls *are* good at math using examples from their own life, community, or history.

Use images, quotes, and poetry to ignite student's imagination about what's possible. The limbic region is that part of our brain that connects emotion and cognition. It processes information without words. Instead, it focuses on images and emotions. It processes pictures at twice the speed of words. This is helpful in bypassing the negative self-talk that is part of a negative mindset. Literacy expert Alfred Tatum uses what he calls "poetic broadsides" to get students fired up and connected to their academic mindset. Linda Christensen, author of *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (2000), uses poetry as a way to open students to new possibilities.

Find culturally congruent images that communicate a positive sense of triumph, success, and accomplishment. Laminate the images and post them around the room. Have students select one and find a personal connection

to the image and then share. Start the lesson with the *Tea Party Protocol* to take advantage of the brain's *primacy-recency effect*, where we tend to remember what comes at the beginning of a learning episode or at the end of it (Sousa, 2001). When the primacy-recency effect is coupled with a strong emotional resonance, the brain begins to integrate those messages as part of its explanatory story. Eventually they become a mantra or empowering manifesto.

Notice and acknowledge students when they are acting according to the elements of academic mindset. Remember that the brain has a negativity bias. As a result, the student will gloss over evidence that he is making progress despite not reaching his goal. As the student's ally, you have to be that voice that cues his brain's reticular activating system to pay attention to these new behaviors. Practice catching students in the act of being self-directed learners or taking intellectual risks. Point out in a matter-of-fact way when you see students who may normally exhibit learned helplessness acting like scholars when they ask thoughtful questions, put forth effort, and learn from their errors.

Help students connect with their current expertise and competencies. Remember what neuroscientists say about "neurons that fire together, wire together." By having students state in writing and share with others their area of expertise, you are helping stimulate those regions of the brain related to self-concept and competency. Have them remember what it felt like to "get good" at their skill or body of knowledge. Ask them to bring this same effort to learning in the classroom. You are helping them make the link between effort and results.

Try the following *Success Analysis Protocol* patterned after protocols used in teacher professional learning communities to help students name their strengths and successes (Figure 7.4).

Help students interrupt negative self-talk. In its efforts to keep us safe, the amygdala tries to dissuade us from taking social or emotional risks. For a dependent learner, trying something new feels risky. These internal messages are designed to keep us safe from venturing too close to the edge of our comfort zone. This safety measure comes in the odd form of negative self-talk. Seligman (2006) says that negative self-talk is part of learned helplessness. Just praising the student or giving him a pep talk won't stop his negative self-talk. You have to show the student how to interrupt these internal statements and replace them with more positive ones.

Use the *Back Talk* strategy. Have the student write down some of the negative statements he makes in class and "talk back" or refute them based on evidence (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.4 Success Analysis Protocol

1. Have student reflect on and write a short description of the "best learning move" or completed project they are most proud of within the last grading period. Note what it is about the learning experience that made it so successful. Be sure to have them answer the following question as well: "What made this work different from other experiences?" (10 minutes)
2. Have students get into mixed groups of 3. The first person shares their "learning move" or completed project and why it was so successful. (10 minutes)
3. The rest of the group asks clarifying questions about the details of the work. (5 minutes)
4. The group does an analysis of what they heard about the presenter's success and offers additional insights about how this practice is different than other practices. Probing questions are appropriate and the presenter's participation in the conversation is encouraged. (10–15 minutes)
5. The presenter responds to the group's analysis of what made this experience so successful. (3 minutes)
6. Take a moment to celebrate the success of the presenter.
7. Each of the other members of the group takes turns sharing their work in the same manner.

Figure 7.5 Back Talk Strategy

Back Talk Strategy		
Negative Statement (Usually "always" statements)	Evidence It's Not True (At least not true all the time)	Positive Restatement (Challenge the "always" statement)
"I am not good at math. I never get any math problems right."	"On my last quiz I got 5 problems right out of 9. Before that I got 3 out of 9 correct."	"I am getting better at math. I do get some math problems right."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

One of the realities that we have to embrace as culturally responsive teachers is that the structural inequities in our school systems negatively influence the academic mindset of many of our culturally and linguistically diverse students. Many dependent learners have internalized the messages of not being smart enough. They have begun to believe they are

not capable of taking on rigorous academic content. Our task as culturally responsive teachers is to help them shift their mindset by helping them create a powerful counternarrative about who they are as learners.

Shifting a dependent learner's mindset takes more than platitudes and cheerleading. Through the process of validation and critical examination of dominant cultural messages, you can help them develop critical hope and recognize their true potential.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Helping dependent learners cultivate an academic mindset is critical in order for them to act on feedback and move toward independent learning.
- Microaggressions trigger an amygdala hijack and negatively impact academic mindset.
- Rebuilding mindset begins with helping students notice their own progress.
- Reframing mistakes as information is an essential part of having a positive academic mindset.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- Review your class roster. Put an *F* (for fixed mindset) or *G* (for growth mindset) by students' names. Possible ways to organize the data include the following: *How many of your proficient/advanced students have a fixed mindset? How many of your lower performing students have a growth mindset?*
- Based on what you know about the features of growth mindset, where are your students in relationship to some of those elements?
- How might you be reinforcing a particular mindset without knowing it?
- What are common features of your dependent students' explanatory stories?

GOING DEEPER

- *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2013) by Paul Tough
- *The Will to Learn: A Guide for Motivating Young People* (1998) by Martin V. Covington
- *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2011) by Daniel H. Pink
- *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (2011) by Claude M. Steele