

The Power of “YET”: Growth Mindset

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ABSTRACT

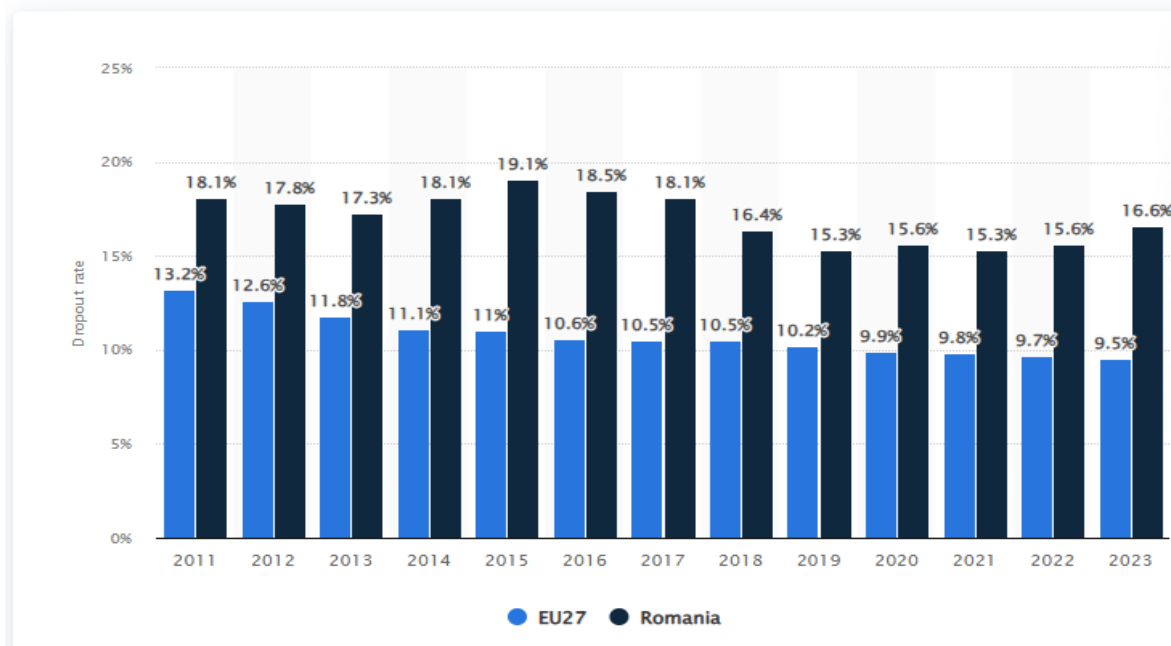
In educational systems where students must complete numerous subjects to graduate, alternative assessment methods may offer significant benefits. Rather than assigning failing grades, teachers could instead use the phrase “not yet” to indicate that students have room for improvement. This approach aligns with Carol Dweck’s theory on the power of “not yet,” which suggests that fostering a growth mindset can motivate students to persist and improve. We conducted a study among Romanian students to examine the impact of alternative assessment forms and of the sandwich feedback technique on learning outcomes. Our findings corroborate Dweck’s conclusions, demonstrating that emphasizing progress over static grading enhances academic performance and reduces dropout rates. This study suggests that adopting a growth-oriented evaluation model could serve as a viable strategy for educational reform, particularly in systems with high course requirements for graduation.

KEYWORDS: *education, growth mindset, fixed mindset, sandwich feedback, evaluation*

Concerning problem: school dropout rates in Romania and Europe

School dropout rates in Romania have been a longstanding concern, particularly when contrasting urban and rural regions. Rural areas experience notably higher dropout rates due to a range of economic, social, and infrastructural barriers. According to Eurostat and Romania’s National Institute of Statistics (INS, Annual Report 2023), approximately 15.6% of students in Romania left school before completing secondary education in 2022, significantly above the EU average of 9.7%. Reducing the dropout rate remains a critical goal for Romania, which has committed to lowering it to 10% by 2030 in alignment with EU targets.

School dropout rate in Romania from 2011 to 2023



Source: Statista

In rural areas, the school dropout rate is often up to three times higher compared to urban areas. Reports suggest that the dropout rate in rural regions can exceed 26%, while it typically remains around 6-7% in urban areas. A study conducted by Save the Children Romania highlights that 38% of children in rural areas are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which are key factors contributing to the high rates of early school leaving. The dropout rate in primary and lower secondary education (grades 1-8) is also much higher in rural areas, where students face challenges such as long distances to school, lack of transportation, underfunded educational facilities but also the strong belief of the children and parents alike that institutional education would have very little positive impact on their future life. (Peticilă, 2019) By contrast, urban schools generally have better infrastructure, resources, and proximity to students' homes, all factors that keep dropout rates lower. The dropout rate in upper secondary education (high school) also shows a stark contrast between urban areas, with a dropout rate of around 4-5%, and rural areas, with rates up to 18%. (Peticilă, 2019) To fight Romania's dropout rates and to even this clear urban-rural divide, efforts are being made through national and EU-funded programs to reduce these disparities by improving infrastructure, providing financial support to families, and encouraging participation and positive action in education.

Endorsing the national institutional remedial measures, there are also some actions to be taken individually, at the level of the classroom. In this respect we delved into the recent field of neuroplasticity and the psychological consequences of a fixed mindset. We explored the educational impact of regarding our children as evolving learners, bearing in mind how the growing brain can adapt to new challenges. In the present article we will investigate the educational impact of the pioneering work of Carol Dweck and her research about the “Growth Mindset,” (Dweck, 2006) which builds on to the principles of neuroplasticity and the most recent studies in children psychology and development.

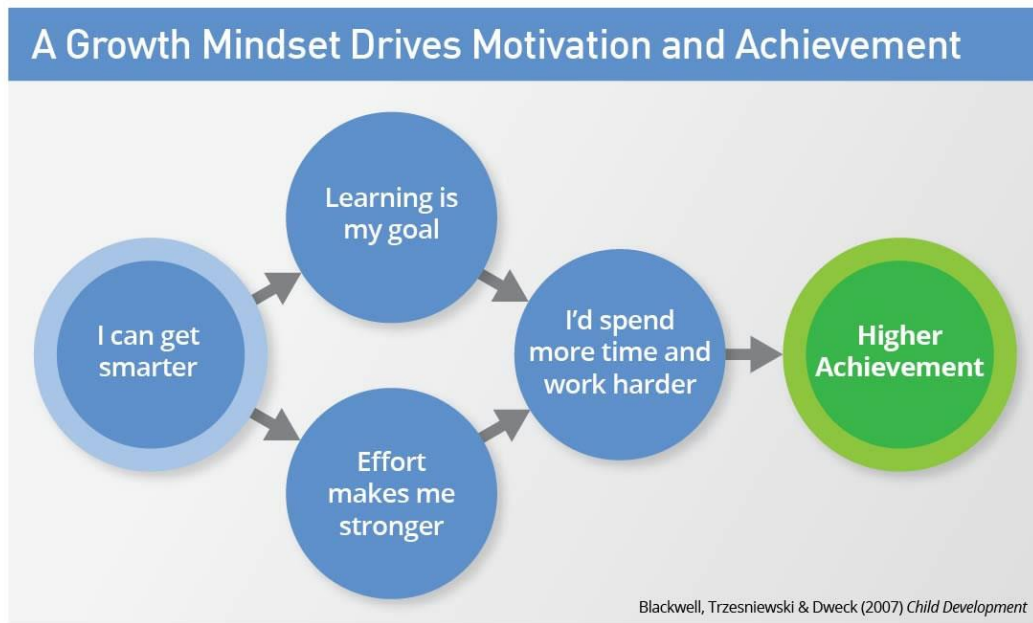
Studies on brain plasticity indicate that the connections between neurons can evolve with experience and learning whereas consistent practice allows neural networks to form new pathways, strengthen existing connections, and build insulation that accelerates signal transmission. These findings suggest that actions like using effective strategies, asking questions, practicing regularly, and maintaining healthy nutrition and sleep habits can actively promote neural growth. (Voss & Thomas [et al.], 2017) Thus, neuroscience research seems to fully confirm Dweck’s theory, demonstrating that the brain, especially in children, is much more adaptable than previously thought. This is why “the educational system is not just a means of transmitting knowledge but also a complex environment where students’ mental states, behaviors, and cognitive functions come together to influence learning outcomes. Psychological aspects such as motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional well-being significantly impact students’ engagement and performance.” (Mehrad, Bouzedif, & Rweramila, 2024: 4128) Carol Dweck’s emphasis on the impact of the “power of (not) yet” is thus relevant and applicable today, encouraging teachers and inspiring students to develop a growth mindset by framing their journey as one of continuous learning and progress, encouraging them to see effort and persistence as the keys to overcoming current limitations and achieving their goals.

“The Force Behind Limitless Potential”. Carol Dweck’s theories applied in education

Carol Dweck’s research integrates developmental, social, and personality psychology to examine how people’s mindsets shape their self-view and behavior. Together with Heidi Grant, Dweck highlighted new insights on fostering a growth mindset in organizations and institutions, with special focus on education. The key takeaway is that individuals and organizations with a growth mindset are more open to learning, continually evolving, and building the resilience necessary for high achievement. Although mindset is often associated with individuals,

organizations also adopt mindsets that influence their culture and growth. Those with a growth mindset view intelligence and talent as starting points, understanding that hard work and perseverance drive further development. By contrast, those with a fixed mindset see intelligence and talent as fixed traits, focusing more on proving their worth rather than developing it, which limits their growth potential. (Dweck & Grant, 2003) For instance, individuals with a fixed mindset often focus on “being good” at something, whereas those with a growth mindset are oriented towards “getting better.”

According to Dweck’s findings nobody has a pure growth or fixed mindset but each individual will position her/himself on a spectrum between the two that can shift, depending on the situation. In the education system and the classroom daily routine, for a teacher who pays attention to the different types of individuals, it becomes easier to discern a student’s dominant mindset. To support the cultivation or reinforcement of a growth mindset, the strategic use of the word “yet” can be instrumental in fostering ongoing learning and development. The “power of yet” encapsulates a remarkable capacity for transformation, despite its brevity. This term proves particularly impactful in three areas of education: encouraging continuous learning, sustaining engagement, and building confidence when working with students facing challenges. (Dweck, 2006) Consequently, discussions with students who adopt a growth mindset can focus on enhancing skills they have not yet mastered. Those with a growth mindset see themselves as “works in progress,” confident enough to acknowledge areas where improvement is still underway. This perspective also helps students to embrace challenges they have not yet encountered. In an environment that prioritizes growth, perceived weaknesses are redefined as “strengths not yet developed.” This reframing provides a balanced view of current limitations while also offering encouragement for continued progress and resilience. (Dweck, 2006) And indeed, recent research confirms through empirical studies the positive impact of a growth mindset by predicting not only academic achievement but also academic enjoyment (Barbouta, Barbouta, & Kotrotsiou, 2020: 654-664) and diminishing considerably the school dropout rate.



Cited by: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/>, 1.11.2024

To support educators in adopting a genuine growth mindset that truly informs their teaching practices, it may be essential to recognize the role of the fixed mindset. This means acknowledging that (1) each of us harbors both fixed and growth mindsets, (2) this duality will likely persist, and (3) to genuinely progress toward a growth-oriented mindset, we must stay mindful of our fixed-mindset reactions and behaviors. (Dweck, 2015) Surprisingly, attempting to “eliminate” the fixed mindset can lead to superficial growth that lacks authenticity. However, by carefully observing and reflecting on the fixed-mindset triggers¹, we can take meaningful steps on the journey towards an authentic growth, with lasting impact on our teaching and personal development.

¹ Carol Dweck enumerates such triggers: “Watch for a fixed-mindset reaction when you face challenges. Do you feel overly anxious, or does a voice in your head warn you away? Watch for it when you face a setback in your teaching, or when students aren’t listening or learning. Do you feel incompetent or defeated? Do you look for an excuse? Watch to see whether criticism brings out your fixed mindset. Do you become defensive, angry, or crushed instead of interested in learning from the feedback? Watch what happens when you see an educator who’s better than you at something you value. Do you feel envious and threatened, or do you feel eager to learn? Accept those thoughts and feelings and work with and through them. And keep working with and through them.” (Dweck, 2015).

“The Power of Yet” in the process of evaluation

Carol Dweck’s Ted Talk presentation from 2014 opens with this story:

I heard about a high school in Chicago where students had to pass a certain number of courses to graduate, and if they didn’t pass a course, they got the grade “Not Yet.” And I thought that was fantastic, because if you get a failing grade, you think, I’m nothing, I’m nowhere. But if you get the grade ‘Not Yet’ you understand that you’re on a learning curve. It gives you a path into the future.” (Dweck TED-Talk, 2014)

These two simple words, NOT YET, instilled hope in students, showing them that success was achievable, if they made another attempt, and motivating them to persevere. By contrast, assigning a failing grade can lead students to feel stagnant and more inclined to “give up” rather than continue putting in effort. Failure often implies finality and carries a stigma. The concept of “not yet” suggests a future opportunity and reassures students that success is attainable in time. This approach signals to struggling students that their current performance does not define their ability or worth, but rather opens a pathway forward, conveying: “You may succeed in this course the next time you try.” (Bergen & Bressler, 2020: 4-5) Following an organizational model (Farnan Street, 2016), there are some attributes that create a growth-mindset also in the school environment, such as

- Presenting skills rather than knowledge;
- Presenting skills as learnable;
- Conveying value to learning and perseverance, not to ready-made genius or talent;
- Giving feedback in a way that promotes learning and future success; and
- Presenting teachers as resources for learning and not as know-it-alls and judges.

A key aspect of the “Power of Yet” rests in the way teachers offer feedback to their students. In their quest for good grades that can ensure access to higher education and a future successful career, students are often encouraged to look for the easy way out, to focus on the outcome and end-result, being thus dependent on the validation from the teachers and parents. Carol Dweck offers once again the solution: “Don’t praise intelligence or talent, praise the work ethic.” (Dweck TED Talk, 2015) Her insight is supported by numerous studies across diverse age groups, ethnicities, and backgrounds, all examining the impact of different types of praise. These studies reveal that praising children for being “smart” tends to encourage a fixed mindset, while focusing praise on their hard work and effort fosters a growth mindset.

Focusing on the work progress and the individual’s effort means that the feedback should be carefully constructed, so as to highlight the positive outcomes but also to draw attention to what it is “not yet” achieved. This can be best applied using the “sandwich method.” According to various researchers, the sandwich feedback is “a specific negative statement surrounded by two positive ones.” (Prochazkaa, Ovcaria & Durinika, 2020: 3) Its merit lies in the fact that “beginning and ending with praise should build the recipient’s trust and comfort, increase the recipient’s receptivity to negative comments, mitigate the effects that negative feedback might have on the recipient’s self-image, and increase motivation, receptivity and engagement.” (Parkes [et al.], 2013: 398) Although this method has been sometimes criticized as being artificial (Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008) and as mocking the trust relationship between evaluator and recipient (von Bergen, Bressler & Campbell, 2014) in our view it is a perfect way to integrate Dweck’s “Power of Yet,” since it focuses both on the positive and the merits of the work, simultaneously integrating that what is “not yet achieved” and “what can be yet better.”

Teachers can also use the word “yet” to help sustain student engagement, particularly with tasks where the teacher’s enthusiasm may surpass that of the students. For instance, as a deadline approaches, teachers might ask, “How is your progress on X? Are you ready to review it yet?” By including “yet,” teachers convey an expectation for dialogue about the task while also allowing room for students who may need additional time to complete it.

Students’ perspectives on risk and effort stem from their underlying mindset. Some recognize the importance of pushing their boundaries and are motivated to put in the necessary effort to learn and develop. Some not. Through carefully constructed feedback and using the “Power of Yet” we can encourage students to have a growth mindset, to take on challenges and learn for themselves and not for grades or external validation, therefore increasing their abilities and achievement. Focusing on what your students know and can do, on their long-term critical thinking, and on developing continuous learning strategies, teachers can become more engaged in preparing students for life beyond the classroom.

“The Power of Yet” in Romanian secondary and tertiary education

To explore how this alternative feedback approach could impact our classroom practices, we designed a student-centered questionnaire with both closed and open questions aimed at examining Carol Dweck’s theory of “The Power of Yet.” We surveyed 60 high school and undergraduate students (ages 15–21) with diverse

learning habits and backgrounds: 65% have lived exclusively in a large city, 30% come from small towns in the Moldavia region, and 5% spent their early childhood in rural areas. This small percentage of students from rural areas who managed to access higher education illustrates the challenging educational conditions in these regions. Conducted as part of an English class, the questionnaire invited students to reflect on their learning experiences and the ways they have been assessed across different subject areas.

The survey was divided into two main sections. In the first part, students were asked to respond to some knowledge-based questions: 48% had a good understanding of Carol Dweck’s theory, while the other half could approximate the main idea of “The Power of Yet,” namely that one can master any skill with time and effort. In the second part of the survey, students were invited to reflect on past challenges and obstacles they had encountered in the learning process and to identify a subject or skill they found particularly difficult. The following question focused on how they managed to overcome that particular obstacle, and their responses highlighted, as expected, the importance of peer feedback and teacher guidance.²

When asked about their attitude towards mistakes and failure, the students were less apologetic than expected, instead focusing on finding the best strategies for them to address and learn from their mistakes.³ Using the feedback “not yet” instead of an unsatisfactory grade as an evaluation tool was positively received by the respondents. In fact, 93% of the students reported that they found this form of evaluation encouraging and focused on growth potential rather than on a fixed outcome.

Invited to write down their take from Dweck’s theories, the students offered examples of her “growth mindset,” like: “Nothing is tough, if you put your mind to it,” “When you encounter a tough problem or assignment, I stay focused on the subject and work to improve myself,” “Nothing seems easy, if you concentrate on the whole picture. You won’t be master at something by default but that doesn’t mean it is impossible,” “Try it more and more and never give up. It does not matter if you fail, you can improve yourself at any time.”

² Some samples of student’s answers: “I struggled with public speaking. What helped the most was receiving constructive feedback which allowed me to improve step by step.” Another example: “It seemed impossible to me at first when I started learning French. But with the help of a great teacher I was able to cope with it.”

³ Samples of answers: “I don’t feel upset or ashamed when I make mistakes. It is important for me to know that it’s human to make mistakes and that I can’t have the answers for everything.” Or : “I would strive to understand what I did wrong and to fix my knowledge about that. Yes, it [the growth mindset] has helped me, and I use it every day!” or “I learn from my mistakes and others’ mistakes. Practice makes perfect!”

Despite the positive feedback and the insightful remarks of the students who participated in the survey, there are some potential limitations when considering a direct classroom implementation of Carol Dweck’s theories on “Growth Mindset” and “The Power of (Not) Yet.” The Romanian education system has an inherent cultural resistance when it comes to feedback, perceived and given almost always in the binary form of “Right” or “Wrong”. In many cases, evaluation is modeled by comparing individual achievements to those of peers. As a result, most Romanian students, when receiving their evaluation, focus on their position within a social or professional hierarchy, rather than on their own individual growth or transformation.

Additionally, there is a lack of adequate teacher training in feedback techniques and alternative assessment methods. As a result, even though Dweck’s principles are increasingly recognized in theory and applied widely in entrepreneurial environments, only a limited number of educators possess the methodological and pedagogical skills required to apply these principles effectively in the classroom.

Conclusions

Given the results of our survey and bearing in mind the limitations discussed, there is a strong case for integrating Dweck’s “Power of (Not) Yet” theory and alternative grading approaches into the Romanian education system. Such practices would not only boost student motivation and create more individualized learning pathways but also foster resilience and a growth mindset – essential skills for navigating adult life. Embracing the “not yet” approach may inspire students to persevere in their learning both within and beyond the classroom, encouraging long-term academic engagement and personal development.

Carol Dweck’s studies and the immense literature that followed her insights clearly illustrate the fact that students who recognized that intelligence is adaptable achieved higher academic success compared to those who perceived it as a fixed attribute. In a structured learning program, students who were taught that they could “grow their brains” and enhance their intellectual abilities demonstrated marked improvements. Our small survey on high school and undergraduate students confirmed these findings and showed that students’ beliefs about their own capabilities greatly impact their motivation and performance. Additionally, encouraging students to focus on the learning process – through effort and trying new strategies – helps cultivate a growth mindset, leading to resilience and ongoing progress. Furthermore, adopting this mindset can alleviate students’ fear of failure and promote a greater willingness to take

risks and embrace challenges. These insights provide parents and educators with practical ways to support children’s academic and personal development every day.

This method encourages educators to emphasize individual student progress over rigid adherence to standardized benchmarks, allowing for more personalized feedback and support. Through this approach, teachers can help students identify their strengths and areas for development, improving learning outcomes and better addressing diverse learning needs. Implementing this feedback practice also builds resilience in students, reinforcing the idea that mastery requires time and effort. By framing learning as a journey where setbacks contribute to growth, students are likely to develop a robust growth mindset, equipping them with essential skills to overcome future challenges both academically and personally.

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