

the Catholic Educator

Recovering an Authentically Catholic
Philosophy of Education

On Self-esteem and a Growth Mindset

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In their article, [How Middle School Failures Lead to Medical School Success](#), in today's *The Atlantic*, Jessica and Tim Lahey bring together two topics that I want to write much more about in future blogs. They provide real life examples as an introduction to the topics of self-esteem and growth mindset.

Jessica, a teacher, and Tim, a doctor, relate the following stories.

In between teaching Latin and English, Jessica had tried to calm an upset parent whose daughter got a C+ on a test. The parent's many emails and phone calls bristled with accusations: This low grade would harm her daughter's precarious sense of confidence and self-esteem. Her daughter was smart, unused to getting such low grades, so what went wrong? In the end, the mother's message — both to Jessica and to her daughter — was clear: This low grade must be Jessica's fault and the mother was going to do what she had to do to fix it.

After treating patients with sepsis and other infections, Tim ended the day comforting a doctor in training who crumpled into tears after he politely critiqued a mistaken decision. Instead of talking about how to do better for the next patient, Tim and this young doctor had spent an hour discussing her fears that she wouldn't be able to get a good job. Didn't Tim know how stressful this all was for her? Wasn't it clear how hard she was working?

They analyze these two experiences through the concept of growth mindset, a concept promoted by developmental psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck. In her book, [Mindset](#), Dweck describes the two mindsets that each person can develop. A person's mindset forms the basis for the way a person perceives and achieves success. A fixed mindset is developed when children are praised for their attributes, talents, and gifts. From this mindset, children learn that success or failure is based fundamentally on God-given gifts or deficits, that is, on personal attributes that the child perceives as FIXED. The growth mindset is developed in children when they are praised, not for their gifts, but for their effort. These children learn that effort is the key to success or failure; they learn, with success, that they can GROW their personal attributes. When students with a fixed mindset come across challenges and difficult situations they tend to shy away from them because they believe, if they fail, that their failure is a reflection on their attributes (on who they are) rather than a reflection of their effort. Growth mindset students are attracted to challenges because they believe that their failures are not a reflection on who they are, but simply a function of their effort. More effort provides more opportunity for growth; success only requires more effort.

The authors see in their stories a connection in which a certain type of parenting style, exemplified by Jessica's experience, leads to a certain type of adult reaction and response, exemplified in Tim's experience. In other words, the student who is told that her C+ was inaccurate because she is smarter than that (rather than that she did not study well enough) grows up to be a person who does not know how to handle failure because failure is perceived, not as a function of effort, but as a reflection on her as a person. As they conclude they write,

Adolescents who develop resilience in the face of middle school failures develop exactly the kind of skills that will promote success in medical school. Confronted with the rigorous mental and emotional demands of medical school, they are able to maintain their sense of self-worth, and thrive despite adversity.

This conceptual framework of growth and fixed mindsets is powerful and, I believe, an absolutely correct principle. It coincides with an understanding of education that promotes virtue and habit development as integral to full human flourishing.

The second topic is self-esteem. While the article does not directly address this issue it is related - and terribly misunderstood. The tag-line of the article "Parents who insulate their children from disappointment may rob them of the chance to develop self-esteem — and a good bedside manner," is, I think, misstated. Insulation from disappointment and failure does not rob children of the chance to develop self-esteem, it robs them of the chance to develop habits of persistence and diligence and to develop a growth mindset. I think the authors understand the problems that arise when we focus on building self-esteem in children. They write in their last paragraph,

Some students and their parents may feel comforted by the platitudes and unearned honors that many teachers are willing to hand out along the way. But these false trophies prevent students from getting the real prizes of education: the resilience and self-worth that lead to grace under pressure, the ability to face adversity with intelligence and equilibrium.

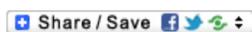
The concept of self-esteem is critiqued by Dr. Paul Vitz in his article [The Problem with Self-esteem](#). Vitz, a professor at the Catholic *Institute for the Psychological Sciences*, clearly identifies, from a Catholic perspective, the problems of promoting self-esteem. His article ought to be required reading for every Catholic educator. I have always required my faculty to read it. It is insightful and well argued. He argues that self-esteem has no foundation in the psychological sciences nor in Catholic tradition and that self-esteem is not, anyway, a reliable predictor of success. He notes that self confidence and self worth are real psychological factors for children, however, building self esteem does not positively impact these factors – only real success and real love create self worth and self confidence.

In light of the concept of growth mindset, self-esteem is further understood to be problematic. Building self-esteem by praising students creates fixed mindsets and, according to Vitz, does not lead to positive results anyway. Praising students for hard work, on the other hand, creates growth mindsets and, while it is praise, does not attempt to build self esteem. Praising effort builds habits of fortitude and diligence, which lead to success – and to positive self worth.

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