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Perspective!.

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Introduction

I've had the opportunity to travel to hundreds of schools across the country conducting professional development sessions with educators, assemblies with students, and small workshops with students who have been labeled "challenging" or "at risk."

Whenever possible, I try to publicly survey students on their perspectives during a live assembly with administrators and faculty present as witnesses. I begin by asking the students the following: "Raise your hand, and be honest, how many of you quickly bubble in answers on tests just to get done?" Inevitably, many hands go up. I then ask, "How many of you really don't like school?" Many hands go up again, and it's almost always the same students' hands. The difference between the students who are excelling and those who are not is now visible. I call this the *perspective gap*. I want to believe that most educators know that such a gap between achievers and nonachievers is not based on ability; in fact, some of the students with raised hands are quite brilliant.

In the course of responding to my first question, the students make it clear that this is not about ability but about the effort they put into the test. A common mantra among educators is "That student isn't dumb, they're just not trying." And this is usually spot-on. The students' lack of effort is simply a function of perspective and attitude, as evidenced by their responses to my second question during the assembly.

A critical point to keep in mind is that, like our brains, our perspectives can evolve and broaden. For this reason we must continue to teach to high expectations and adhere to the belief that even our most reticent students *can* learn, provided that they have a positive perspective on education. Still not convinced? How can I persuade you that that even your hardest-to-reach students have the ability to learn? If you really want to see some of the world's smartest individuals, I suggest that you visit the correctional facilities around the world. I'm not being facetious. The ingenuity of incarcerated young men and women, who can accomplish amazing things with limited resources, never ceases to amaze me. I remember speaking to a young man in jail who painted my portrait using colored ink he made from scratch. You read that correctly: homemade colored ink. He told

me that prior to his incarceration, he had never felt that he had a place in school, and he never saw himself doing any better than his parents. As our conversation came to a close, he told me, “My perspective toward school and life has changed since I’ve been locked up.” Again, the key word here is *perspective*. What came out of his mouth next brought tears to my eyes: “If I could go back, I would take school seriously, because it’s not like I didn’t have the ability to do my work, I just couldn’t see how $y=mx+b$ could change how my family was living.”

Educators, if nothing else, this is my primary motivation for having written this book. How could we have intercepted this talented young man from embarking on the cradle-to-prison pipeline? (Delale-O’Connor et al. 2018). I could sense that, at his core, this was a good kid with the wrong perspective. I asked myself: *If he were my student, how could I have made school fun for him, how could I have taught him in a way that would have reached him, and how could I have exposed him to something that would have changed his outlook on school?* These are questions we must ask if we want to change a student’s perspective.

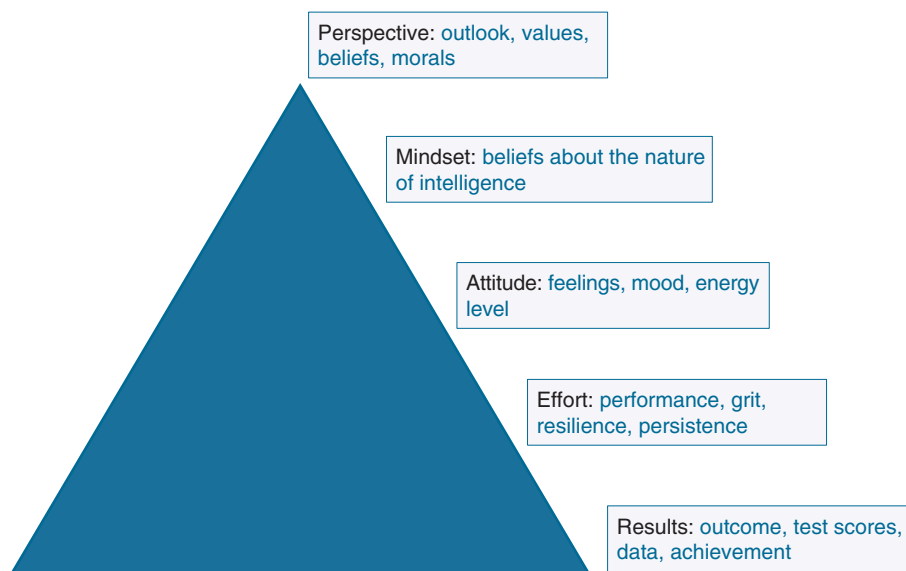
Prologue

The first step to changing a child's perspective is to understand it.

Perspective: The Secret to Student Motivation and Success examines how to provide a space for students to develop a positive perspective on their formal education. It provides teachers with real-world insight into how shifting their own perspective on their students can transform the educational process. By taking a deep dive into what shapes students' perspectives, educators can better understand the beliefs, values, and experiences of students who have been labeled as "troubled" or "at risk." The strategies and underlying assumptions of this book are based not only on education research but on my own lived experience as well.

You see, I too was once labeled "at risk."

Any of us who have taught (or have raised children of our own) understand that every child is different. When teachers have a better understanding of their own perspectives, they can hone



their understanding of what shapes the student’s perspective on school and act in a manner that expands the student’s perspective.

This book offers insight on how *perspective determines effort*, meaning that the way a person views the impact or value of what that person does will always determine how that person acts or performs. When you approach an endeavor with a high level of integrity, a high level of excellence, and a high level of commitment, the outcome is likely to be positive. It’s the effort that is put into something that yields results. By extension, such effort is often the difference between students who excel and those who don’t.



PERSPECTIVE IS AT THE TOP OF THIS PYRAMID

Perspective is a holistic concept. A student’s or teacher’s perspective is influenced by a variety of factors including life experiences, cultural and environmental influences, how one is treated, and how one experiences the educational system as well as other institutions in the community. Perspective is positioned at the top of the pyramid because it informs mindset, attitudes, effort, and, ultimately, outcomes.

A *mindset* (Dweck 2007) refers to beliefs about the nature of intelligence. Students (and teachers) with a *fixed mindset* believe that intellectual ability is innate—i.e., you’re either “born smart” or not. In contrast, a *growth mindset*, a concept that is supported by neuroscientific research, is based on the idea that intelligence is malleable—i.e., the brain can be grown like a muscle. It’s easy to see how the overarching influence of perspective and one’s mindset can result in the formation of positive or negative attitudes about school and, ultimately, the amount of effort that a student (or a teacher) exerts. And of course all of these influences flow down to results or outcomes such as assignments, student participation, and other measures of achievement.

Results are the consequences of your effort. It’s the effort that is put into something that yields results. A key principle of this book is that achievement disparities are, among other things, a function of perspective. In order for teachers to bridge or close these disparities, they too must have the right perspective to understand their students. Similarly, a shift in student perspective that fuels increased effort can help reduce disparities.

This book offers strategies for expanding teachers’ and students’ perspectives, but, most importantly, it emphasizes the

need to better understand our students and the influences on their perspectives that begin early in life.

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Feelings and thoughts can change by the second. Achievement doesn't occur in a vacuum and emotions play a key role. When we feel that our safety is under threat, our ability to learn is deeply compromised (Hammond 2015). Since we are controlled by our moods, if a student and teacher are both in a good mood on a particular day, both are likely to put effort into their respective teaching and learning. The corollary is that if the mood of one of them changes, so changes the effort. Moods may be powerful, but attempting to shift or regulate moment-by-moment feelings is, at best, a band-aid. Changing one's perspective—the holistic concept that encompasses mindsets, attitudes, emotions, and, ultimately, one's effort—amounts to a long-term change. Changing a person's perspective is a deeper-level endeavor in that it cuts to the core of that person's beliefs and values, all of which are shaped by that person's life experiences.

For example, if a school community is preparing for a state test, the principal might plan a morale-building event for the students and staff. Such “pep rallies” may result in a temporary uptick in morale around test taking and might even motivate some students to put more effort into taking the test. However, such a surface-level event is no guarantee that the students' perspective towards school will change.

I'll also offer a personal example of the relationship between fleeting emotions and deeper-level perspectives. My daughter is in the second grade, and her class uses a color system to denote the students' moods throughout the day. When she comes home with a certain color that is satisfying, she is in a great mood. And that mood is further sustained after my wife and I remind her that she is a good student and that it is important for her to follow directions in class. She usually goes back to school the next day with a positive attitude. However, over the course of a few days, she might revert to being a color that is not as pleasing—a reflection of her mood change. In her case, her mindset (“I can do this!”) and attitude (“I love this!”) can vary according to her mood. A positive mood and attitude alone aren't strong enough to change her behavior as a whole. Her behavior is unlikely to change until her perspective (the overarching concept) has shifted.

When your perspective shifts, the change is deep-seated and involves your outlook, viewpoints, values, beliefs, and even morals. Like my daughter, until you make such a holistic change, in

all likelihood you will continue to revert to normal behaviors. More specifically, if your perspective is that school isn't for you, then you will believe that sitting in a school building is a waste of time. To sum up:

Attitude reflects a feeling—e.g., the way I feel about school.

Mindset is a set of beliefs around my (or others') intellectual capacity.

Perspective is a holistic view based on a variety of factors. It can be grounded in a number of beliefs and values, including the belief that there are more important (or more valuable) ways to spend my time than in school.

Your perspective determines your thoughts, and your thoughts create a chain reaction that leads to taking actions that make you feel either good or bad about yourself and your life. One's perspective can predetermine the outcome. Perspective is the lens through which we see the world and that determines how we approach everything around us and interact with other people.

Let's be honest: Enrichment programs and other resources can help fuel motivation and achievement, but if a student's negative perspective of school remains fixed, the research suggests the consequences are negative academic outcomes, including increased likelihood of dropping out. Even if we can convince our students to show up, their perspectives will determine their levels of effort. You may not know it, but as an educator you can exert tremendous influence over your students' perspectives. That is the overarching theme of this book.