



When Being #1 Becomes an Addiction

Helping Kids
Define Success

Matt was slight of frame and mighty of mind when I met him. He was in the third grade at the time and spent much of his leisure in correspondence with noted archeologists. This was well before the convenience of e-mail, and he expended considerable effort in writing cursive letters about issues and methods in the field to archeologists who saw his potential and responded in kind. I remember being more amazed at Matt's tenacity with the pencil than at his knowledge about archeology—although that was stunning as well.

Fast forward several years and Matt landed in my advanced-level 8th grade English class. His frame was still slight as eighth graders go, his mind was still mighty, and his interest in archeology was now shaping his college plans—already pretty focused at thirteen. He wanted to become someone who could pursue the mysteries of the field. He wanted to make a contribution to the field, he said. To that end, he had three colleges in mind—all with stellar archeology departments—and all highly competitive.

The class in which I taught Matt was a hive of energy—kids with lots of opinions, lots of scathingly brilliant ideas about how to do (or how to manage not to do) whatever the day's work, lots of knowledge. I saw them all as achievers, despite their many differences. Matt apparently saw something else.

One day in early November, Matt's mom came to see me after school. Matt wanted to drop the class, she said, and added that she didn't know quite how to handle his request. She seemed as surprised as I was that he was asking for a schedule change. He had so many good friends in the class. He was doing well.

an uncomfortable understanding. I continued, "Being number one has its merits, Matt, but so does a life of contribution. To be a real contributor, you have to take chances, and as soon as you do that, you've risked the status. It doesn't have to be today, but you're going to have to make a choice for the long term."

Matt stayed in the class, but it was an uncomfortable fit for him. Too often he saw students whose insights and skills outstripped his own. Inevitably, those moments made him pull back—made him sulky. Being number one had become something of an addiction. School wasn't about learning. It wasn't OK to be a good student. He needed to be the best.

TEACHER DISCOMFORT

Matt wasn't the only person uncomfortable that year. His teacher was uncomfortable, too. I didn't like watching Matt withdraw from discussions. I didn't like seeing him finish an assignment half-heartedly. I didn't like seeing the look on his face when a paper came back with an A-, which, to him, was an indication of failure. Mostly, I didn't like the fact that I

"All my life, I've been the smartest kid in the class. In this class, I'm just average. I can't stand that feeling. I think if I were in a regular class, I'd feel smart again."

—Matt, 8th grade

Just as I was having a silent and personalized reaction, "I thought he liked me," his mom said, "Most of all, I don't know why he'd want to leave *your* class. He likes you so much." Sounding more mature than I was, I said, "Thanks, but that's not really the issue. Something is obviously bothering him in a big way, and I guess that's what we need to figure out." She agreed, and went home to see if she could help Matt put his finger on what prompted his request.

Several days later, Matt came to see me. He said he thought he could explain why he wanted to be in a different English class. It took some time and a few false starts, but ultimately he said, "All my life, I've been the smartest kid in the class. In this class, I'm just average. I can't stand that feeling. I think if I were in a regular class, I'd feel smart again."

Matt and I talked at length. I recall saying to him that if what mattered most to him in life was maximizing his chances of being #1, he'd need to re-think his college plans. "I suspect you'd have a pretty good chance of graduating first in your class at a community college. The chances are much lower in the schools where you want to go. But in those schools, you'd have a much greater chance of breakthrough learning." He looked at me with eyes that were reflecting both surprise and

knew his priorities were counterproductive, but I didn't have the language to sort out just why.

I tried lots of approaches to bring Matt along that year. I talked to him, wrote to him, used examples from well-known people, paid extra attention to him, gave feedback with opportunities for revision before grading work, encouraged him to focus products on topics that interested him, assigned him to work with students who were more interested in learning than in grades and alternately to work with laid back students who just didn't care about grades.

He stuck it out. At rare times, he seemed to engage with the work. Mostly, however, he continued to hate that he wasn't clearly the best in the class. We were both glad when summer gave us a break.

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN

Despite its miseries, the year with Matt was good for me. It helped me identify and put a very human face on a problem that is endemic in our schools. It takes on one shape with very bright kids like Matt and another with kids who struggle in school—and even those who do "OK."

Carol Dweck, a noted scholar and researcher, has given a

professional lifetime to looking at the problem. She writes about it in her book called *Mindset*, written for the general public, as well as in many scholarly pieces. She has found that early in life, people develop one of two mindsets about what leads to success—what it means to be smart. Some people develop what she calls a *fixed mindset*, believing that people who are smart succeed, and that being smart is determined by genetics, opportunity, experience. If you're smart, you'll be successful. If you're not, you won't.

Other people develop what Dweck calls a fluid or *growth mindset*. Those people come to believe that effort is what determines success. People who consistently try hard, they believe, become smart and ultimately succeed.

For people with a fixed mindset, there's not much you can do about your fate. Hard work can't trump biology or economics or family status. For people with fluid or growth mindsets, however, their fate is in their own hands. As Dweck explains, this mindset concludes that just because one person can do something easily and quickly doesn't mean most other people can't do it given time and effort.

School, sadly, is a fixed mindset institution. Whether through sins of omission or commission, we set about to figure out who is smart and who is not. Once we have data that make us comfortable, we sort and teach kids accordingly. We tend to give smart kids rich, complex curriculum that demands critical thinking. We expect them to address real issues through real products for real audiences. We set high expectations for them and become their partners in achieving those expectations. We teach them with humor and energy. By contrast, too often we give the not-smart students low-level, drill-based curriculum in highly structured classrooms—often delivered by the newest teachers. We set low expectations for them and are not surprised when they fall short. We teach them with resignation. After all, what can you expect given their backgrounds?

It's evident that students labeled as not smart would see little reason to expend effort in school. There's little in schools to suggest that effort would change one's academic lot. Such students give up in the face of failure. They may invest enough to get by, but little more. The messages they get from school affirm their detachment from things academic.

Interestingly, however, Dweck's research explains Matt as well. His status had always come from "being smart"—not from effort. Like many other bright kids, Matt had come to believe that smart was something you were or you weren't. Smart kids don't have to study—certainly don't have to work doggedly. Trying hard is evidence that you aren't smart. Smart and effort are incompatible, and besides, what's the point of effort? If you've got it, you've got it. If you don't, you don't.

Dweck's work dovetails in many ways with studies related to what has come to be known as "big fish, little pond effect." These studies concluded that bright kids in competitive settings often (although certainly not always) develop lower self

concepts—and that those lowered self concepts linger for a number of years. For these students, the outcome is often a mirror of Matt's struggle. They conclude that they are not smart, lower their aspirations, and take classes that are easier for them. In other words, rather than believing that effort can significantly enhance their performance and that learning is about growth, not perfection, these students retreat from their possibilities.

And Matt's dilemma wasn't a middle school slump. Dweck's work has found the same phenomenon from preschool through college. The big fish, little pond studies included high school students who took the negative effects of a "fixed mindset" to college with them.

I see Matt in my university graduate students regularly. They come accustomed to being "the best"—a big fish in a little pond. In the new ocean of scholars, their status is less certain. A few students respond with words or actions that say, "Hey, this is kind of cool. I'm really going to have to work here, but if I do, I can see myself taking a quantum leap forward." Many more students say, "Just tell me what you want in the paper. I just want to get it right"—or "I don't think I belong here. I don't have what it takes." And in an odd way, they're right.

They have the ability, of course. What they don't have is a growth mindset—a sense of the possibilities in them, so long as they fuel their potential with persistent effort and a desire to learn rather than to achieve status.

WHY I WISH I'D KNOWN

I still think about Matt, and wish I'd been able to discuss *Mindset* with him. I wish I'd had the "big fish, little pond" studies to share with him. What I really wish, however, is that I had understood how I was a part of the fixed mindset orientation of schools. I wish I'd seen how my practices supported competition for status rather than a hunger to learn. I wish I'd been aware how my teaching supported competition against peers rather than against oneself. I wish I had understood how I had been groomed to value "smart" over "effort"—and even groomed to be at peace with teaching some kids as though they weren't smart.

I'd like to have been more adept at talking with Matt. But what I really wish is that I had been more adept at teaching for the satisfaction of learning and at celebrating effort and growth rather than rankings and grades.

I don't know whether I could have changed things enough to help Matt, but I do know I'd have been a different teacher—and a better one. ■



CAROL ANN TOMLINSON, Ph.D., teaches at the University of Virginia in the Curry School of Education where she is Professor of Educational Leadership. She is a past president of the National Association for Gifted Children and author of numerous leading books on differentiating curriculum.