

Teacher's Guide to the Mental Edge

Written by:

Dr. Kevin Leichtman

&

Dr. Anala Leichtman

2019

Chapter 7: Teaching Mindset – Self-Applications

“Don’t try to fix the students. Fix ourselves first. The good teacher makes the poor student good and the good student superior. When our students fail, we as teachers too have failed.”

-Marva Collins

The previous chapters of this book has prepared you to train your students’ mindsets. Applying these principles to your classroom can lead to huge results in a variety of ways, both tangible and intangible. If you are like me, you may already be daydreaming about the amazing changes you will see in your classroom and the significant impact you will have on your students’ lives, now and in the future. Before you bring these lessons into your classroom, don’t forget about the real hero of the classroom... YOU! The mindset concepts that you are planning to teach your students can also be applied to your life and teaching practice to help you jump levels as a teacher! Any teacher educator program will stress the importance of modeling in the classroom: modeling how you think, how you work through a problem, or how you approach an essay. Modeling a strong mindset and having a willingness to train and practice strengthening your mindset will set the example for your students to follow. Not only will it improve your quality of life, but it will also show students your commitment to improvement and encourage them to follow your example whole-heartedly. This chapter will provide you with realistic methods to approach your own mindset training as it relates to your career.

Evaluate Your Language

Teachers make hundreds of decisions on a daily basis. It is common for responses to come out of our mouths before we have properly thought about what we say and how we want to say it. It can be helpful to keep a tally sheet on your desk to remind yourself to check your language when responding to students. It can be written as a simple question: Did my interaction with a student encourage a growth mindset? Create a yes and no box and mark off tallies as you go through your teaching day. The point of this exercise is not to criticize yourself or feel bad for missed opportunities. Rather it is to make you aware of your word choice as you quickly respond to situations. When you bring conscious thought into your decision making

process, you are more likely to produce growth in your students rather than set-backs.

Along with student interactions, be sure to consider your conversations with parents, co-teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and any other professional contacts. Before engaging in meetings, think of how you want to frame difficult or complex problems. Are you wallowing in the problem, or are you providing solutions? Is your language providing barriers or opportunities? Go into meetings with a problem-solving plan and the meetings will become incredibly productive. A blame game or excuse making session only drains your energy and steals from your professional joy.

Body Language Checks

My first year of teaching was spent with my head down and my hands in my pockets. Many new teachers suffer from the “imposter syndrome,” feeling like you don’t belong and aren’t good enough to lead. Your body language doesn’t just reveal those feelings, it creates and reinforces them. Students tend to be hyper-aware of your body language and what it portrays. They will not believe that you are a confident teacher if you don’t look the part. Worse than that, you will doubt your own confidence if your body language does not portray it.

A good measure to prevent poor body language is to create cues that remind you to check your stance. Perhaps calling on a student will be your opportunity to stand up taller, puff your chest out, and hold your head high. Maybe you tap on your desk as a reminder to sit up straight and correct your back posture. Whatever the gesture is, find ways to remember to actively check your body language. If you ever feel stiff or flat during a lesson, circulating the room can be a great change in body language. Movement shows energy and will prod your body into producing the energy that you are portraying.

Resilience

It is difficult to be honest with your students. Some teachers go to great lengths to hide any problems in the class to appear perfectly organized and well-planned. It is understandable that teachers want to act un-phased and nonchalant in any given situation, but it isn’t a realistic approach to life. If students only witness perfect order in your classroom, they will have trouble

understanding what to do if they are not perfecting the work for your class. Instead, it is important to show resilience. This means that you are opening yourself to sharing difficulties and obstacles that you face as an educator, while also having a solution-oriented approach in explaining how you have or will bounce back from it.

The danger of sharing problems with students comes in your tone and word choice. Expressing problems without showing resilience can lead to students complaining more often and with less cause. To prevent this danger, ensure that any problem you present is given with several solutions and examples of how you pushed through the barrier. You can even have students help you brainstorm solutions to complex problems. Just like you would model thinking sessions, think out loud about what problems the obstacle presented and show them your process of considering solutions calmly. Students will appreciate the example you lead while also learning how to practice showing stronger resilience.

Burnout - The #1 Teacher Killer

When people discuss burnout in education, many have the perception that old teachers who are near retirement are the most burned out educators. The truth is, teachers in their first five years have the highest risk of burnout. New teachers are dealing with a difficult transition to a challenging career path, are typically given the most difficult schedules, often receive little to no support, and are burdened by outside difficulties (like financial aid debt). What's even more: the people most in danger of burnout are the most passionate and committed to the profession. With 40-50% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years, it is so important to safeguard yourself from burning out of the profession.

There are several ways to apply mindset training to your career as a prevention and/or reduction method to burnout. One that is vital to teachers is to work on your self-knowledge, especially when considering your priorities. Know what is important to your life and your happiness and rank those priorities. Once you have a clear, written set of your most important priorities, you will know where your time needs to be spent. You cannot call something a top five priority in your life without spending time each week (ideally each day) in helping that priority grow and prosper in your life. Many of us need

the physical reminder of what our priorities are so we can budget our time wisely.

Similarly, goal setting is an important aspect of your happiness. It is great to have a written set of goals for your teaching practice, but you should also continually pursue goals outside of your career. If you aren't striving for greatness in other aspects of your life, where will your excitement come from when leaving work? The highest achieving teachers are often achieving great things outside of school simultaneously. Engage in a constant cycle of goal setting and achieving to keep yourself passionate and energized.

Lastly, understand and acknowledge the intrinsic motivations you have for teaching. In other words, know your "why." You should remind yourself daily of your purpose for pursuing this career. Keep positive letters from students who thanked you for your service in their life. Write down your reasons for becoming a teacher. Follow and engage with teachers who inspire you or who you look up to. We all can be motivated to succeed, even on our worst days. It is up to you to make the intentional effort to motivate yourself each day or risk losing your motivation and desire to move forward in an ever-changing and challenging career path.

A mistake that many teachers make in terms of burnout (myself included) is waiting for symptoms of burnout before reacting to it. By nature, burnout is silent and slow. Most people will not feel the impact of burnout until it engulfs every aspect of their life. A reactive approach to burnout is dangerous to your physical and emotional health because it will be firmly lodged into your life before you begin to take steps to reduce it. Plan ahead! Take a proactive approach to reducing burnout before you feel it. Make conscious decisions about your time and energy invested in the profession and employ strategies regularly to take care of your mental health.

Self-Care

Self-care and self-indulgence are not one in the same. If you watch enough movies or tv shows about teachers, or follow funny teacher pages on social media, you undoubtedly have seen self-care as binge-watching movies, eating horribly, drinking alcohol to loosen up, and sleeping entire days away. The concept of self-care is not to avoid problems or put life on pause. In fact, the best self-care methods are active.

A great way to approach self-care is to think: “Will this affect my health in a positive way, long term?” The goal of self-care is to put you in better position to handle your job stress and maintain a strong degree of mental toughness. There are a limitless supply of healthy ways to approach self-care, so it is important to pick activities that you enjoy and will be able to stay committed to. While some may exercise, others may enjoy a spa treatment. You may read a book on professional development, while another teacher reads a book on their favorite athlete. You could make cleaning a regular habit, take walks down a scenic area of town, invest time and energy into a hobby, or go to art exhibits. Anything that feeds your curiosity, increases your knowledge, and improves your level of health, will better prepare you for success in your career.

Another misconception about self-care is that it can only happen on weekends or away from work. However, some of the most important self-care strategies are the proactive approaches you use at work to increase your efficiency, decrease your energy loss, and perform at your best. In other words, working smarter, not harder, and staying on top of your health at work can pay huge dividends in your health and happiness.

Here is a list of positive self-care strategies broken down into categories. It is not an exhaustive list and you may come up with great ideas beyond what we’ve wrote, but we hope this will be a beneficial starting point for you as you consider active self-care strategies. The three categories we look at are Professional, Personal, and Passions. Professional refers to any self-care strategies you use at work. Personal is for self-care that you employ at home specifically to reduce burnout, relax in healthy ways, and recover energy. Passions are for self-care that you engage in to better yourself, increase your skills, and follow pursuits outside of your professional life.

Professional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgeting time and energy • Limiting extra roles / responsibilities • Actively seeking help & mentorship • Not taking work home • Focusing on what you can control in the workplace • Surrounding self with positive peers • Getting involved in projects and student-led clubs that you are passionate about • Mindfulness techniques to keep yourself in the moment • Learn and utilize programs and services that increase your efficiency • Adjust eating & sleeping habits to optimize performance

Personal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following an exercise program • Watching things that inspire and teach you (ted talks, documentaries, etc.) • Reading books for leisure or personal learning • Spending intentional time with your family or friends (not phones!) • Mindset training / strengthening activities • Receiving or giving mentorship • Physical or mental health recovery (spa treatments, therapy, etc.) • Journaling • Yoga / Plyometrics / Medidation • Listening to calming music • Writing down and reading inspirational quotes / stories

Passions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning a new skill • Investing in a continuous learning course • Running a business or "side-hustle" • Vacationing / travel • Competing in a sport or athletic event • Watching instructional videos or reading books that increase a skill in a passion of yours • Coaching or teaching a non-academic subject outside of work • Engage in the arts (see plays & musicals, visit museums and historical places, etc.) • Practice creating something (music, creative writing, etc.) • Help a friend reach their goal and keep them accountable to it • Go to events or activities outside of your comfort zone

Positive self-care creates forward momentum and propels you to new heights. It's vital to actively seek out self-care that will benefit you and not contribute to laziness, apathy, or demotivation. Be careful not to let the term "self-care" lead to "self-destruction." For the millions of positive ways that exist to build you up in this profession, there are millions of negative ways to decimate your career, family life, and happiness. Self-care should be full of active, conscious choices. Take care in choosing your care, and find ways to progress with forward momentum.

Mental Edge

While you teach your students to embrace a predator mindset, consider how that concept can help you jump levels as a teacher. Many teachers resort to a prey mindset, worrying about what other teachers are doing, comparing average test scores, panicking over which remediation tactics to use, etc. A predator mindset teacher is laser-focused on improving as a teacher every day and helping their students progress to the absolute best of their ability. They move with confidence and aren't afraid to stand out with their work ethic. These teachers set goals that seem unrealistic, but work tirelessly and with purpose to constantly take steps towards achieving those goals. They avoid teacher lounge gossip and only discuss "potential" and "opportunities" when discussing students with other teachers.

Your mindset will set the tone for your students every day of your career. The more you work on your own mindset, the more willing students will be to work with you. Each demonstration of mental strength, confidence, and fearlessness that you give will lead students to be more courageous. As you increase your time spent on intentionally and systematically training students' mindsets, they will perceive the value that you give it and ramp up their intensity in learning and applying the lessons. This journey into mindset training will challenge and change you, just like it will your students. Embrace the process, prepare to test your limits, and hold onto your patience as you steadily march toward long term success in teaching and life.