

# Insights: How Can We Support Teachers to Shift Their Mindsets?

*July 12, 2023*

Inherited, industrial-era paradigms of teaching and learning are not preparing and cannot prepare today's children for tomorrow's changing and challenging future. The world is calling for students to be collaborative, conscious, creative, critically thinking problem solvers, and yet all around the world, we see models of teaching and learning that are inhibiting instead of fostering those qualities.

At the same time, there is profound hope for change. Our collective studies of transformational classrooms around the world are revealing a powerful map of teaching and learning, one where teachers and students learn and grow together with increasing well-being, connectedness, awareness, agency, and mastery.

Among the most striking parts of this emerging map of transformational teaching are the central roles of teachers' mindsets, perspectives, and lenses: **when we commit to growing students as leaders, that purpose shifts our perspectives and mindsets, and those perspectives and mindsets shift our actions.**

Our mindsets are constructed from our experiences and ways of seeing the world. They are a combination of our beliefs, values, and assumptions about the way the world works that we have acquired through our life experiences. We are often unconscious of them, and yet they are one of the primary drivers of our actions. Therefore, to see sustained behavior changes, the mindsets supporting those behaviors will need to be changed as well.

Here is a summary of our key learnings about the mindsets which we have seen correlate with transformational teaching and how to support teachers to shift towards them:

## **1. We are finding clear patterns in the ways transformational teachers see and make meaning of their students, their own role as teachers, their communities, and the challenges we all face**

Our collective studies of strong classrooms across the network are revealing that these teachers share mindsets and "lenses". These teachers see:

- **students as leaders:** They see their students as *whole and intelligent people who are capable of shaping their own lives and the world around them*, instead of as passive "vessels" to be filled with knowledge.
- **teachers as learners:** They see themselves as *lifelong learners who respond to challenges with curiosity, humility, and creativity*, instead of as the sole source of knowledge and skill that students need.
- **community as power:** They see *communities as sources of power and wisdom and recognize that lasting change requires authentic partnership with students, families, and other educators*, instead of as a place with difficult challenges and unaddressed needs.
- **their work as systemic:** They see their work as *challenging root causes of injustices that inhibit students' potential—systemic barriers around them and limiting beliefs inside them*, instead of as getting students to work extra hard to adapt to injustices around them.

We are finding these “lens shifts” (which we sometimes call “unlearning”) are critical to the bundles of beliefs, values, and assumptions we often call mindsets: high expectations, growth mindset, strong locus of control, etc.

## 2. Shifts in mindsets, perspectives, and lenses enable different daily actions in the classroom

These lens- and mindset-shifts help teachers navigate the complex and dynamic challenges of teaching, see misalignment between aims and actions, and surface assumptions about our students, ourselves, community, and work that we might not realize we carry:

- A teacher who sees *students as leaders*, might, for example, set up her classroom for active debate where students learn from one another, rather than looking to herself as the sole expert (even though that action wasn’t on any teacher rubric she’d ever seen).
- A teacher who identifies as a *learner* might, for example, stop a lesson that is not working well and vulnerably examine his lesson’s shortcomings with students, modeling the reflective leadership he hopes to grow in students (even though that action wasn’t taught in his training).
- A teacher who sees *communities as power* might, for example, engage parents in co-creating a vision for students rather than doing it on her own (even though her university courses had suggested that she set classroom goals on her own).
- A teacher who sees her *work as systemic* might, for example, inquire more deeply about what’s going on in a child’s home environment, rather than jump to conclusions when facing a disruptive child (even though some of the teacher’s colleagues are jumping to conclusions about the inherent potential of the child to succeed in school).

## 3. Teacher development can be oriented towards shifting mindsets

Sometimes improving as a teacher means practicing new skills and actions. Sometimes, however, the real potential to develop new skills is unlocked through disorienting experiences and reflection that shift our mindsets and perspectives about our students, ourselves, our communities and our work.

To help teachers shift mindsets, we need to help them:

- **Broaden perspectives:** If our mindsets are developed through our experiences, we need new experiences in order to develop new mindsets. This can mean experiences (such as going to a new place), but it can also involve reading about new or different approaches or listening to the experiences and beliefs of others who come from different perspectives. These experiences are often considered “disorienting experiences” because they shift our previously held perspective which can feel disorienting and/or uncomfortable.
- **Reflect on new ideas:** It is important to pair the broadening of perspectives with time for reflection and meaning-making. Without reflection, we may miss the opportunity to analyze and internalize how the new ideas fit with our own, and whether or not we want to reconsider our own views as a result.
- **Make the unconscious conscious:** In order to shift a mindset, we need to unearth the mindset that we currently hold. Provocative reflection questions can help uncover unconscious mindsets.
- **Examine current mindsets:** Once we have identified our current mindset, it’s helpful to think about what experiences might have shaped it and whether or not it is serving us.

- **Articulate new mindsets:** Equally important to surfacing our unconscious mindsets is explicitly articulating our new (or emerging or evolving) mindsets. Similar to reflection, if we don't take time to explicitly articulate our new mindsets, they will be less clear in our own minds, and less likely to drive new behaviors or actions. This can include writing them down or simply having a conversation in which we put the new ideas into words.
- **Practice and reinforce new ideas:** Our mindsets develop based on our experiences in the world. The mindsets we hold as adults are often developed and reinforced over decades of experiences. When developing new ideas and beliefs, based on new experiences, it can be easy to slip back into our old, deeply entrenched ways of seeing the world without regular practice and continued exposure to our new ideas. Deeply internalizing new mindsets often requires finding new systems that will reinforce our new ideas, such as finding new peer groups, new social and other media voices, or other external influences that will help to combat our old ways of thinking and support our newly developed mindsets.

Learning experiences that actually shift mindsets require: time, trust, relationships, space for reflection over practice, explicitness of purpose, and repeated practice over time.

Facilitators must demonstrate non-judgment, curiosity, care/compassion, and courage in order to be able to effectively hold a space where teachers can shift their mindsets.

## Learn More

To explore more deeply how our actions change when our lenses shift—and to find reflection tools to help shift our lenses—please see visit the [Lenses page](#) on our Learning & Insights Hub.