Making Friends with Your Fixed Mindset

This activity was created based work by Susan Mackie

Time: (50 - 60 min)

Purpose - The main goals for this activity are to help participants identify what kinds of situations can trigger them to respond in fixed mindset ways, to normalize that we are all susceptible to having fixed mindset (FMS) reactions in certain situations, and to strategize ways to respond more adaptively in the future. This activity can help draw the distinction between having a more deeply held fixed mindset belief (I can’t improve at this) and having fixed mindset behaviors or reactions in certain contexts, even though deep down we may believe it’s possible to get better at the ability in question. Understanding this can help teachers view their students’ behavior more flexibly by prompting them to ask, “Does this student really have a fixed mindset, or is there something about this situation that is causing them to respond in a fixed mindset way?” Doing this activity as a group (with teachers or with students) also gives people an opportunity to see that everyone’s triggers are different, which can help cultivate compassion and trust within a group.

NOTE: This activity is framed for use with teachers, but it could also be used with students.

Materials -
- Chart paper to chart the prompts (you could also create a printed handout with the prompts)
- Felt marker
- Blank paper, enough for 1-2 sheets per participant
- Pens

Facilitation Tips - You can share a personal story about your own fixed mindset trigger. You can also remind participants about this study showing that praising students for their “smartness” after a success caused them to have a fixed mindset reaction to being challenged. Signals like this from our environment - in this case, the praise given by the researcher - is one kind of situational trigger that can induce fixed mindset behaviors. Help participants understand that there are many other situational cues and that this activity is about discovering what kinds of cues trigger them.

Steps:
1. Set up (2 min.) - Write the reflection questions in bold below on the chart paper ahead of time. Keep them covered until after introducing the activity.
2. Introduce the activity (2 min) - Explain the goal of the activity - to learn about what kinds of situations trigger each of us to react in a fixed mindset way. It will be...
different for each of us and it can be helpful to recognize this and realize that it’s normal. Ask them to think about an experience (either personal or professional) that triggered them to have a fixed mindset reaction or behavior. Give examples of common triggers such as:
  ○ Being asked to do something publicly when you didn’t feel confident about being able to do well, such as public speaking or doing math in your head in front of others.
  ○ Being criticized or laughed at in a way that felt unfair or humiliating.
  ○ Feeling frustrated that things weren’t going as planned in a high-pressured situation like a tight deadline.
  ○ Performing a new task in front of others with more experience or skill.
3. **Reflective writing** (3-5 min) - Share the charted questions below and give participants 3-5 minutes to write their responses.
   ○ **Describe the event:**
     ■ What was the context?
     ■ How did you feel?
     ■ What were your thoughts?
     ■ How did you behave/react?
   Encourage them to think carefully about whether they had a *fixed mindset belief* in the situation (I can’t improve this ability), or if they were just in a situation that triggered *fixed mindset behaviors*.
4. **Pair share** (10 min) - Find a partner and share your stories with each other.
   Encourage participants to discuss the following (which you can also chart):
   ○ **Are there any strategies that would help you respond differently in the future?** For example, what might you say to yourself? What might you do differently? Who might you seek support from?
   ○ **For fun, if you were to name your FMS persona, what would it be? Or is there a fictional character that embodies your FMS persona?**
5. **Group share** (15 min) - Invite people to share their story and what strategies they came up with. Chart the triggers and helpful strategies as participants share.
6. **Link to students’ experience** (5-10 min) - Have a group discussion on what classroom situations might trigger students to react with a fixed mindset. How might they, as teachers, alleviate them? Chart responses on a new piece of chart paper.
7. **Debrief and reflect on activity** (10 min)
   ○ Was this useful?
   ○ How might you use this with students?
   ○ Is there anything you would do differently?