

Prominent Scholar Calls Growth Mindset A “Cancerous” Idea, In Isolation

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Hilton Huffington Post

A prominent education scholar who specializes on issues facing Black boys and men in education has questioned the utility of the popular concept of Growth Mindset. Dr. Luke Wood, a distinguished professor of education at San Diego State University and purveyor of the nationally broadcast course Black Minds Matter provided an eviscerating critique of the concept in his most recent public course session.

In the session, he argued that the research on growth mindset was “not wrong, but incomplete” when applied to the education of boys and men of color. At issue is the assertion that educators should affirm students’ effort, not their ability. The concept of growth mindset is based on the idea that affirming effort will lead to a greater focus on working hard and resilience and thereby produce greater levels of achievement. This perspective has been widely embraced by the educational community as a strategy for enhancing student learning and development. So, Wood’s comments were not without controversy. Specifically, Carol Dweck (who advanced the concept) has vigorously argued:

[W]e can praise wisely, not praising intelligence or talent. That has failed. Don’t do that anymore. But praising the process that kids engage in: their effort, their strategies, their focus, their perseverance, their improvement. This process praise creates kids who are hardy and resilient. – Carol Dweck

During the Black Minds Matter broadcast, Wood suggested this viewpoint sets up a false dichotomy between affirmation of effort and ability that ultimately hurts the success of historically underserved students, particularly boys and men of color. He contends that educators should affirm both students’ ability as well as their effort. He stated, “if you are a person who has never been told that you have the ability to do the work, how will you be able to do so? We need to praise their effort and ability. If you come from a

community where you have never received messages like that from faculty members and educators, it's important at some point to be able to hear, you know what? You have the ability to do this. I believe in your ability to do this." His remarks were reacted to across social media among educators.

In a follow-up interview after the course, Wood extended his critique further. He stated, "I appreciate the concept, I really do, but I also believe this myopic perspective perpetuates a cancerous idea that tells students you can succeed as long as you work hard while depriving them from messages that affirm their abilities or recognize the external challenges such as racism and oppression that often inhibit their ability to do so. This point is relevant to all underserved students, but particularly to our Black boys and men who experience school as an intellectual and emotional prison."

Wood further noted that Black boys and men often do not receive messages that affirm their intelligence. He stated, "I have worked with students at all levels of education. And, even among my most esteemed masters and doctoral students, I find they have rarely (if ever) been told they have ability, that they are smart, they are brilliant. In fact, these messages are so foreign to them that they often receive them as disingenuous because they have never been told before that they are worthwhile, remarkable, and capable. This is shameful."

Wood mentioned during the broadcast that his own research with Frank Harris III has demonstrated that validation of ability is among the strongest predictors of success for men of color. In fact, he argues validation (including messages that affirm students' ability) is among the top three most important practices for Black college men. This is documented in his most recent books, *Teaching Men of Color* and *Supporting Men of Color*.

In challenging a widely embraced framework, Wood is attempting to show how well-meaning and well-intentioned White researchers often do harm to students of color by "ignoring contextual factors that create totally different educational experiences and realities for these students." Wood concluded his interview by stating "we must question,

incessantly, the scholarship and frameworks that have been perpetuated as foundational. They are incomplete. While they are well-intentioned they are sordidly incomplete.”