

The importance of belonging mindset and CFG® work

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director and International Facilitator. michele@nsrfharmony.org

You probably have heard of growth mindset, the belief that intelligence is not fixed at birth, a concept coined by bestselling author Carol Dweck. People with a growth mindset believe that intelligence, like a muscle, can be developed and grown over time. Dweck pioneered research at Stanford University around growth and fixed mindsets (the belief that intelligence is fixed at birth and can never improve). She was interested in the question of why some students are so resilient in the face of challenges while others are not. This research is especially important to educators because decades of research show a powerful relationship between a student's mindset (growth or fixed) and their academic achievement.

Growth is not the only mindset that powerfully impacts students

Not as well-known are the other two mindsets that have been known to affect a student's academic achievement: belonging mindset and purpose and relevance mindset. Students who have a belonging mindset believe that they are respected and valued by their teachers and peers and feel they fit well into their learning environment. For example, they may think, "I like coming to school because my teachers care about me and I have good friends in my classes." Think about students who may feel unsafe in school or "invisible" and consider how that mindset regularly if not constantly puts them into their "danger zone" (to use a term from the NSRF   [Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger Activity](#)).

If a student has a mindset that incorporates purpose and relevance, they believe that schoolwork is valuable because it is personally relevant to their life and that it is connected to a "higher purpose." They may, think, for example, "I want to do well in science so I can go to college, become a doctor and help my community when I get older."

Learning mindsets are important because they affect the way students see and react to challenges in and out of school.

Students will probably not do well in school if:

- They don't feel they can ever do better in a subject
- They feel like an outsider
- They just don't think school will make their lives better in anyway

On the other hand, students are more likely to do well in school if:

- They feel they can always improve in all subject areas if they work harder
- They feel like the school is their community and they are a valued part of it
- They believe that the things they learn in school are useful to them now and will pave the way for a promising future.

Mindsets are neither static nor immutable

It is important to note that research shows that mindsets can be changed. Teaching and nurturing the learning mindsets in our students can lead to sustained academic growth, as well as result in happier human beings.

A few years ago, I worked with some folks from Stanford University

who were creating a website of researched-based resources for educators called PERTS (Project for Education Research that Scales), at perts.net. (See previous Connections articles [here](#) and [here](#).) Together we put together a unique Five-day New CFG Coaches' Training for the Los Angeles Unified School District. We trained participants to use NSRF protocols and activities in combination with growth mindset presentations and materials. Throughout the training, my PERTS partner, Jacquie Beaubien and I made explicit to the participants how growth mindset was an integral part of all CFG work and protocols, in general.

Belonging Mindset and CFG work

After that experience, I became intrigued by the concept of belonging mindset. As long as I have been



Michele Mattoon is the Director of the NSRF, an International Facilitator, and CFG Coach. Prior to leading NSRF, she taught for more than 20 years and is an award-winning educator. Michele is also president of consulting firm Coltrain Group. Email her at michele@nsrfharmony.org.

working with CFG communities and using NSRF materials, I have heard people remark how much they enjoy this work, not just because the protocols work so beautifully, but because they get to work more intimately and effectively with a great group of intel-

ligent, creative, and reflective colleagues and then how we might use it in the classroom with our students. This naturally led me to begin the conversation with the LAUSD training participants about how they might use CFG principles and practices in their classrooms to create a stronger sense of belonging with their students. We know that students who feel that they belong and are valued, and engage more fully in learning. They tend to have fewer behavior problems. They generally have more positive attitudes about their peers and teachers, thereby building important relationships that can lead to their success at school.

Inherent in Critical Friends Group communities is the belief that we are all there to learn from one another (growth mindset), that we are among our “friends”, people who want to help us, support us and have a stake in our success (belonging mindset), and that we bring in work that we think is important to the group (relevance) in order to help our students reach the highest level of academic achievement they can (purpose).

When Critical Friends Group communities were developed, we knew they could be an essential element for continuous improvement in school culture if they are executed with fidelity. We learned that the reason they accomplish this is largely because CFG communities are intentionally built to foster a strong sense of safety and trust between participants. Inherent in Critical Friends Group communities is the belief that we are all there to learn from one another (growth mindset), that we are among our “friends”, people who want to help us, support us and have a stake in our success (belonging mindset), and that we bring in work that we think is important to the group (relevance) in order to help our students reach the highest level of academic achievement they can (purpose).

If you have already completed our Five-day New Coaches’ CFG training, you know that after experiencing every protocol or activity, we debrief our experience: first through the lens of how we might use this with our col-

leagues and then how we might use it in the classroom with our students. This naturally led me to begin the conversation with the LAUSD training participants about how they might use CFG principles and practices in their classrooms to create a stronger sense of belonging with their students. We know that students who feel that they belong and are valued, and engage more fully in learning. They tend to have fewer behavior problems. They generally have more positive attitudes about their peers and teachers, thereby building important relationships that can lead to their success at school.

Conversely, we know that when students feel like they don’t belong, they experience stress which adversely affects their learning, performance and ability to form relationships. This is because much of a student’s energy is taken up by scanning for anything or anyone in their environment that feels risky or acts with hostility towards them. The constant anxiety that this causes makes the student feel socially, emotionally and/or intellectually unsafe, producing stress that makes learning impossible.

The fact is that human beings are social animals—biologically and psychologically. We evolved to live in connection with other humans. We are designed to avoid any kind of threats and feel good in our environment when we can bond with others. If we feel as though we are a valued member of the group, we are more likely to feel safe and can turn our attention to activities such as learning. Deliberately nurturing a sense of belonging among all students in our classrooms is an important key for any kind of

learning experience to happen.

Keys to building Belonging Mindset in your students

Luckily, studies have shown that there are things we can do to alleviate students’ worries about belonging. Doing activities that acknowledge and normalize worries about belonging can help a student move past the stress that these worries can cause. Teachers can also help by introducing experiences into their classrooms to facilitate ALL their students being

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accepted and valued members of the community. Such experiences have been linked to long-term gains in academic performance and reduction of achievement gaps that are based on race/ethnicity and gender.

Use NSRF materials to help

So, what NSRF activities or protocols can help students develop a belonging mindset? Here are some that you might want to try in your classroom:

1. Transitions Activity: During **M Transitions**, students can volunteer to share whatever is demanding their mental attention at that time. Being listened to attentively by their peers, allows the sharer to feel valued, as do non-verbal signs from their teacher and classmates of empathy and compassion in their struggles, or joy at their good news. This activity is relatively risk free, as the sharers know that they will not be interrupted,

demeaned or silenced in any way. Sharing their joys and sorrow, irritations and successes gives students a chance for their peers to see them as a complex, whole person, one that they can relate to more than the cardboard stereotype they may have held in their mind previously.

2. Microlabs: The  **Microlabs Activity** is a way for students to make meaning of a concept or idea without judgment toward the person whose turn it is to speak. This protocol affirms all ideas that are brought forth and builds community by addressing specific issues that the students have. Because all students are expected to participate, there is an equity of voices in the room.

This protocol relies on each person practicing active listening, which, like Transitions, reinforces each participant feeling that their voices are heard and valued.

3. Hopes and Fears Activity: By surfacing our positive expectations and our concerns around any given experience,  **Hopes and Fears** builds community and increases belonging by highlighting the fact that our hopes and fears are often shared by others. Once they are spoken, they can be positively addressed by the coach and by their peers in this group.

The hopes and fears list becomes a living document that should be revisited from time to time to make sure that eventually all hopes and fears will be addressed, and to allow adding new ones as they arise.

4. Setting Agreements Activity: Having your students participate in  **Setting Agreements** creates a known, common list of expectations. By building the list together, everyone can depend on one another to respect the agreements, which cultivates a sense of belonging for everyone.

The prompt for creating a list of agreements is, “What do you need to have in place so that you may do the best work you can in this classroom?”

Students work in small groups to write agreements that work for all of them, and then share them out to the large group so that a scribe can make a list of agreements for the entire classroom. Students also agree to take responsibility to help one another adhere to their agreements, thereby relieving their teacher of being the sole “rule enforcer.”

5. Speed Success Analysis Protocol: This protocol allows all the students to analyze one another’s successes so that everyone in the class can learn from them and feel celebratory together. It demonstrates that everyone has had successes (as well as failures) and this creates a feeling of mutual respect that helps to build trust. Using the  **Speed Success Analysis Protocol** on a regular basis in your classroom throughout the school year will give everyone a turn to be celebrated and valued as someone whose shared successes contribute to others’ learning and life satisfaction. (For more about Success Analysis, see “Are you as Successful as a Fifth Grader?” on page 8.)

It’s all good

Generally speaking, all NSRF protocols and activities increase the likelihood of participants experiencing belonging mindset.

- Protocols are structured to ensure equity of voice and to level the playing field in terms of the power hierarchy. Ideally, no one voice has more power than another, regardless of experience, gender, class, age, race, or other unspoken attributes that contribute to power imbalances.
- Protocols give time for everyone to actively listen to their peers and to reflect and analyze what has been said.
- They reduce the stress that usually comes with giving and receiving feedback by being highly predictable, both in terms of their structure and the language used when giving it.

- By giving their peers suggestions for how they might improve their work, solve a problem, or create a new plan, all students now have a stake in each other’s successes, which increases trust, allows more sharing, and starts the cycle all over again.

Students, like adults, who are exposed to protocols experience deep satisfaction from interacting with their peers around subjects that are meaningful to them and, as a result, affect the broader community in positive ways. 

NEW! CFG COACHES’ TRAINING FOR CLASSROOMS

Secondary (middle school through high school) teachers, are you interested in learning more ways to use protocols in your classroom? Why not turn your classroom into a Critical Friends Group community?

In this training, teachers will learn practical activities and protocols specifically for the classroom. The training will teach the basics of growth mindset, belonging mindset and purpose and relevance mindset so you can strengthen your students’ belonging while boosting their achievement. This five-day training will give you tools to:

- » Build an atmosphere of safety and trust in your classroom
- » Encourage active participation and equity of student voice
- » Promote critical and creative thinking in your students
- » Encourage students to develop skills in active listening and deep reflection

For more information:

Contact NSRF at 812-330-2702 or nsrf@nsrfharmony.org, or email Michele directly at michele@nsrfharmony.org.