

# JTAR

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 The logo for the Journal of Teacher Action Research (JITAR) features the letters J, T, A, and R in a large, bold, serif font. The 'J' and 'R' are blue, the 'T' is red, and the 'A' is green. Each letter has a subtle drop shadow effect.

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## About the Journal

Founded in 2013, the Journal of Teacher Action Research (ISSN: 2332-2233) is a peer-reviewed online journal indexed with EBSCO that seeks practical research that can be implemented in Pre-Kindergarten through Post-Secondary classrooms. The primary function of this journal is to provide classroom teachers and researchers a means for sharing classroom practices.

The journal accepts articles for peer-review that describe classroom practice which positively impacts student learning. We define teacher action research as teachers (at all levels) studying their practice and/or their students' learning in a methodical way in order to inform classroom practice. Articles submitted to the journal should demonstrate an action research focus with intent to improve the author's practice.

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# THE IMPACT OF GROWTH MINDSET ON PERSEVERANCE IN WRITING

**Amanda Jankay**

**University of California, Davis**

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**Abstract** The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of growth mindset interventions on my students' perseverance in writing. This study took place in a kindergarten classroom at a charter school in Sacramento, CA. Baseline data was collected to measure my students' mindsets and level of perseverance prior to any intervention. Following the results of this initial data, I chose ten focal students who showed the most need for intervention. These students showed signs of fixed mindset and lack of perseverance. The interventions used were centered on growth mindset and included the meaning of perseverance, how to use problem solving skills, increasing independence, and goal setting strategies. Three rounds of data were collected over a period of four months. After every round of instruction, students wrote a journal entry which was analyzed as an assessment of their learning. Field notes were also taken on the ten focal students to record whether they were showing signs of perseverance or signs of discouragement. Analysis was conducted using a rubric that was adjusted as needed per round. Findings suggest that implementing growth mindset interventions can have a positive impact on student perseverance in writing. Thus, teachers may consider implementing ideas of growth mindset into their teaching to help improve students' ability to persevere through challenges.

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**Keywords:** teacher action research, growth mindset, writing, social emotional learning, perseverance, kindergarten

## **Introduction**

*Inquiry Question:* How does incorporating growth mindset interventions influence students' perseverance in writing?

*Context.* This inquiry project took place in a Kindergarten classroom at a charter school in Sacramento, California. The school consists of grades TK through 5th. The curriculum is teacher created and follows the California Common Core Standards. This school supports the use of Guided Language Acquisition Design which focuses on teaching language and literacy while incorporating whole units of study. The GLAD model is effective for all students but particularly

beneficial for English Language Learners. The class consisted of 24 students and demographics were as follows: White-10, African American-2, Indian-3, Asian-2, Hispanic-3, Mixed race- 4. There were three ELs in the class and their CELDT levels were beginning, early intermediate, and early intermediate. There was a large achievement gap among the students in this class. For example, many of the students knew their letters, could sound out some words, and were proficient in mathematics. In contrast, some students were struggling to perform at grade level in all academic areas.

*Purpose.* The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of growth mindset interventions on my students' perseverance in writing. Perseverance is defined as, "willingly pursuing a goal-oriented behavior despite obstacles, difficulties and disappointments." (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, as cited in Kutlu, Kula-Kartal, and Şimşek, 2017, p. 264.) In addition to overcoming challenges, my definition of perseverance includes starting and completing a task. To help my students achieve this, I introduced and implemented activities to promote a growth mindset, which Dweck (2016) describes as, "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (p. 7). Dweck also states, "the mindsets of students make them perceive their academic world differently. The growth mindset promotes resilience while the fixe done does not." (Dweck et al., 1995; Dweck, 2006, as cited in Zeng, Hou, and Peng, 2016, p. 2.)

In general, my class struggled to complete tasks that were challenging for them. I observed students becoming discouraged often in the classroom. Some things I overheard were:

- "I can't do it!"
- "It's too hard."
- "I can't spell."
- "I can't read."
- "I don't know how to write that letter."
- "I tried but I can't."
- "It's not perfect."
- "I messed up!"

When I observed more in depth, I specifically noticed my students were struggling with writing tasks. I wanted to change the way they were viewing challenges as well as improve my teaching practice in this area.

### **Literature Review**

Carol Dweck is a well-known researcher in the world of growth mindset. Dweck and colleagues explain that, "...the ability to persist on problems—in the face of confusion and complexity—is essential for success and advancement..." (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011, as cited in Marshall, 2017, p. 2). This made me realize how perseverance is related so closely to growth mindset. After reviewing my students pre –assessments, I realized they did not believe mistakes could be

a positive learning tool and this misconception was concerning. According to Boaler (2016), "... the brain sparks when we make a mistake, even if we are not aware of it, because it is a time of struggle; the brain is challenged, and this is the time when the brain grows the most" (Boaler, 2016, p.11-12). Additionally, Barnes and Helenrose (2016) suggest, "... individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to accept challenges, continue in the face of adversity, and remain open to learning opportunities." (Barnes and Helenrose, 2016, p.31).

When planning for Round 3, I was inspired by an article written by Wilburne and Dause (2017). The article focused on improving student perseverance by introducing self-regulated learning. Specifically, student goal-setting was used as the main focus to help improve motivation and perseverance. The results from this study suggest that self-regulated learning can have a positive impact on perseverance.

Marshall (2017) conducted a study similar to this inquiry project. She explains that after introducing growth mindset to her students she saw many changes in their perseverance. Specifically, she explains that her students reported less discouragement and started to realize that challenging themselves can help them learn (Marshall, 2017). Her data also shows a notable improvement of perseverance over the course of the study. The results of this study align with my long-term goal and I hoped to have similar results with my students.

## **Methodology**

This study consisted of five rounds of data collection. These rounds contained one set of baseline data, three sets of data collected after instruction or intervention, and one post-assessment. The main purpose of the baseline data was to explore my students' initial mindsets and feelings towards challenging tasks prior to implementing my first round of instruction. I also used the baseline data to choose 10 focus students for the purposes of this inquiry project. These students were chosen because they showed the most severe signs of fixed mindset and were in the most need of intervention.

With the information gathered from each round, I was able to notice patterns in my students' achievement which guided my instruction for the next round. Because each round of instruction was guided by the findings from the previous round, the organization of this article reflects this. The purpose of including some data analysis and findings throughout the article is to help the reader understand my reasoning for each step. In-depth findings for each round as well as overall results will be included in the designated findings section.

Five sources of data were collected over the three rounds of instruction:

1. Student journals (graded by a rubric)
2. Video recordings
3. Observation notes
4. Pre- and post-assessments
5. Goal setting worksheets

## Results and Discussion

*Baseline Data Collection.* I gave all 24 students a journal with the prompt, “How do you feel when you are doing something that is hard for you?” At this early point in the school year many of my kindergarten students could not write yet, so I asked each of them what they drew and wrote their responses for them on the bottom of the page. Examples of the baseline journal entry can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. I looked at each student’s response and decided if they were showing signs of growth mindset, fixed mindset, both mindsets, or neither. To do this, I analyzed their writing, drawings, and/or verbal explanations.

I looked for language associated with fixed mindset such as, “I can’t do it”. I also looked for examples of growth mindset in their responses such as, “I will keep trying.”

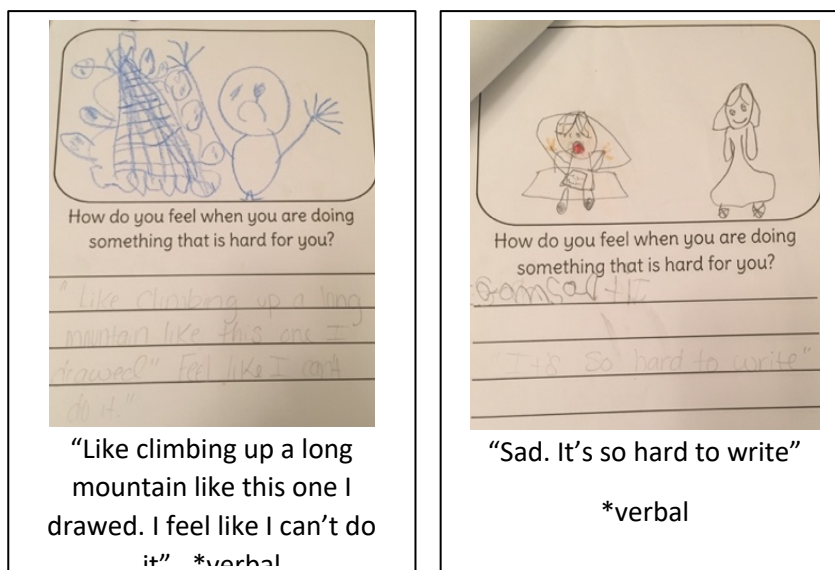


Figure 1: This student is showing signs of struggle and a fixed mindset by using the word “can’t”.

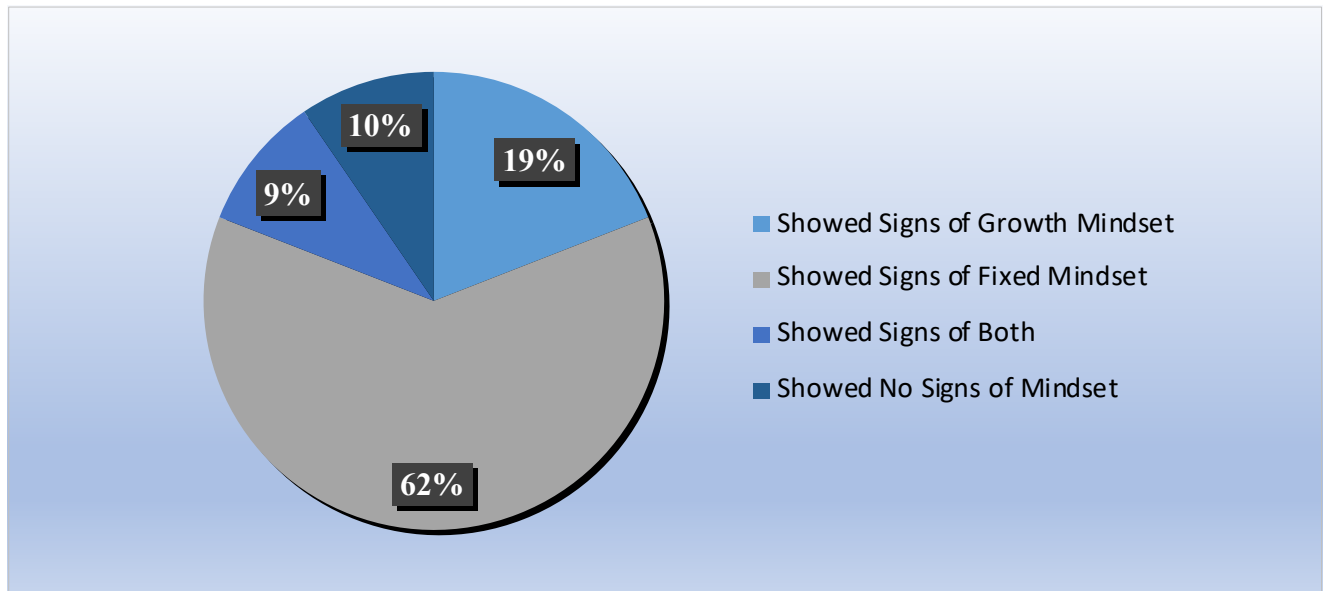
Figure 2: This student is showing signs of discouragement and a fixed mindset.

Other than the journals, the other baseline assessment I collected was a growth mindset survey. Because some of my students could not yet read, I verbally asked my students these questions individually and wrote what they said. The survey consisted of these three yes/no questions:

1. Do you think you are smart? Why or why not?
2. Do you think mistakes help you learn? Why or why not?
3. Do you think practicing helps you get better?

My hope was that these assessments would reveal if any of my students were showing signs of growth mindset.

*Baseline Data Analysis and Findings.* After analyzing the baseline journal data, I found that the majority of my students lacked a growth mindset. As highlighted in Figure 3, 72% of my students showed either a fixed mindset or no signs of either mindset. I also analyzed the data from the survey and I found that 11 out of the 24 students did not believe they could learn from mistakes. This was valuable data as I went forward with my inquiry and planned interventions for instruction.



*Figure 3: Baseline journal assessment data*

*Round 1 Instructional Approach.* I focused my Round 1 lesson on the meaning of perseverance. I used GLAD strategies to introduce the new vocabulary. The CCD (Cognitive Content Dictionary) Chart was the first instructional tool I utilized. After introducing the word perseverance, the students came up with predicted meanings of the word at their table groups. Each group shared their prediction and I wrote it on the poster. Then, I told the class the real meaning and wrote it on the poster. We came up with a hand gesture to go along with the meaning and this became our new signal word. Whenever I said the word, the class responded by repeating the word, saying the word meaning, and doing the hand gesture.



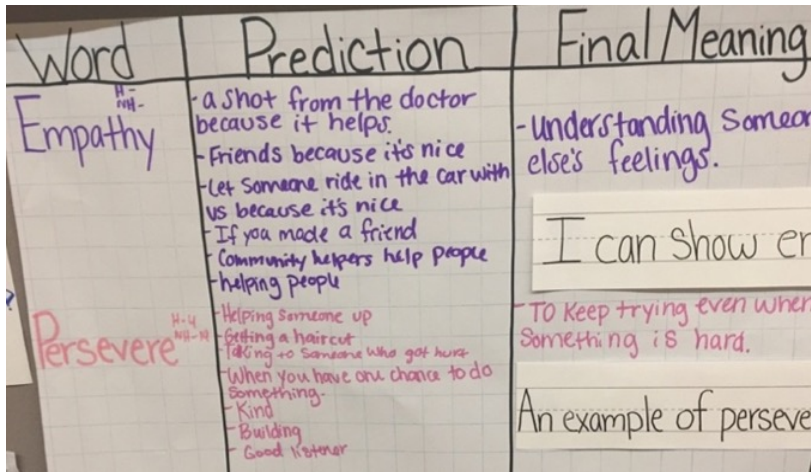


Figure 4: Teaching tool; Cognitive Content Dictionary Chart

The next part of the lesson was completing the social emotional skills t-chart as a class. I asked the class what they thought perseverance looked like and sounded like. The poster shows direct quotes from students. This activity showed me if my students understood the vocabulary word completely.

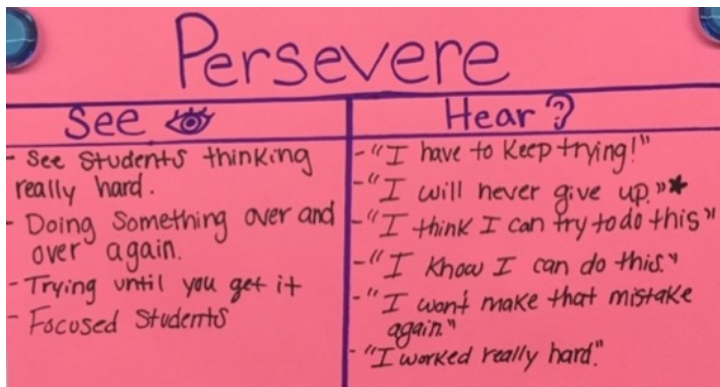


Figure 5: Teaching tool; social emotional skills t-chart

**Round 1 Data Collection.** After I taught my students about perseverance through the CCD chart and social emotional skills t-chart, I gave them a challenging writing task to test their perseverance. I asked my students to complete a journal entry with two full sentences and a picture. I collected these from all of my students but only analyzed my 10 focus students' journals. The last piece of data I collected in Round 1 was field notes while my students were working on their journals. I walked around the classroom and recorded when my ten focal students were showing signs of discouragement and in what ways as they completed the task. I also recorded when students were showing signs of perseverance. I collected this data because I wanted to have a record of how my students reacted to the challenging task.

**Round 2 Instructional Approach.** My baseline data showed me that almost half of my students did not believe that they could learn from mistakes. To address this, I decided to utilize a

website called ClassDojo. The website provides short videos focused on growth mindset and other social emotional topics. I showed my students the videos to begin the discussion about mistakes. After watching the short videos, we had a class discussion about making mistakes and how they help you learn. I said, “mistakes are good!” and “mistakes help me learn!” I had my students repeat these phrases and explained how mistakes help us all learn and how. Next, I wrote “Mistakes help me learn!!” on a large poster and had each student sign it. I explained that it was a “contract” and they must remember that mistakes are good from now on. This lesson related to my long-term goal of improving perseverance because students believe they learn from their mistakes, they will be more likely to keep trying after they do something incorrectly.

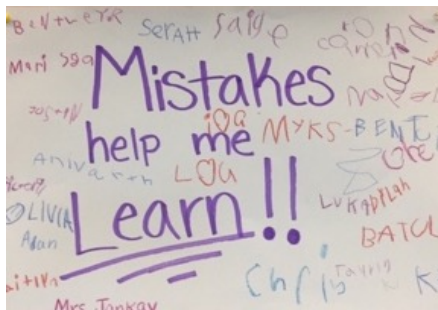


Figure 6: Teaching tool; motivational poster

A common struggle I noticed from the Round 1 data involved problem solving skills. Only 50% of my focus students used problem solving strategies to persevere through the writing task. To address this in Round 2, I facilitated a whole group lesson about common struggles in writing and what we can do about these struggles. I asked students what they usually have difficulty with during writing assignments and we brainstormed some solutions to those problems. I wrote the struggles and solutions on a poster for them to refer to. My hope was that this lesson would also increase my students’ perseverance by decreasing discouragement and frustration.

*Round 2 Data Collection.* To assess my students’ learning, I gave them a journal assessment to see if they would use problem solving skills to help them persevere to complete the writing task. I walked around the room and took field notes on my 10 focus students. I also decided to video tape the class as they worked in this round to ensure I did not miss any of my focal students showing perseverance, discouragement, independence, or lack of independence.

*Round 3 Instructional Approach.* Round 2 data showed me the most used problem-solving strategy was asking for help. To further increase my students’ perseverance and confidence in themselves, I had them complete a task independently in Round 3. I began the round with a group discussion about independence. Then, I created a poster for the students and we talked about ways we could be independent when completing writing tasks.

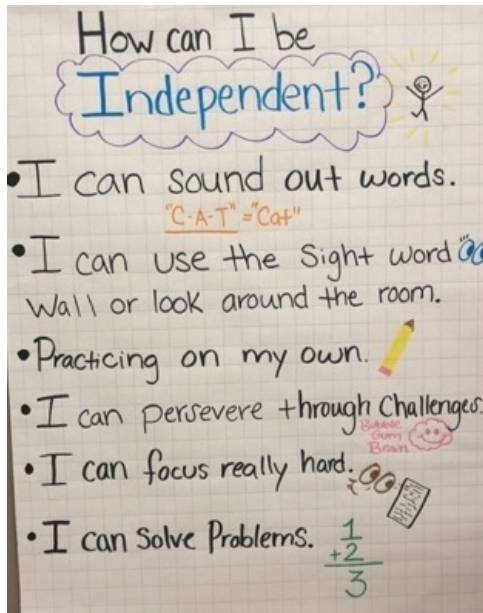


Figure 7: Teaching Tool; independence poster created with students

Similar to the research of Barns and Helenrose (2016), I focused the second part of Round 3 on goal setting. First, we had a class discussion about setting goals. I gave examples and asked students to give examples as well. Then, I gave each student a goal setting assignment where they had to choose three goals to achieve on their next writing assignment. There were six goals to choose from and I read them each out loud while describing the photo that went with it. The students cut out and glued the goals they wanted to achieve.

The goal options were:

1. I can write 1 or 2 full sentences
2. I can write my name at the top of the page
3. I can use problem solving skills
4. I can color neatly
5. I can finish my work on time
6. I can work quiet

*Round 3 Data Collection.* To see if the goal setting and independence discussion impacted my students' perseverance in writing, they completed a journal and wrote about a time they had fun. Students had their goal setting sheets on their desk to help them remember what they were working towards as they completed the task. I also collected these goal setting sheets as data. I walked around the room and took field notes on my 10 focus students and videotaped the class as they worked. When the students were finished writing and drawing, they looked at their goals and checked off what they believed they accomplished.

*Post-Assessment Data Collection.* After completing my round 3 data collection, I gave my whole class a post-assessment to compare to the baseline assessment journal and baseline survey. I gave the same prompt from the baseline journal assessment, “how do you feel when doing something that is hard for you?” For this post-assessment, I added the question, “Do you think mistakes can help you learn?” at the bottom of the page. Students had to circle yes or no. I decided not to give a full survey like I did for my baseline because the question about mistakes was where I saw the only struggle.

*Rounds 1-3 Data Analysis.* For all three rounds, a rubric was used to analyze the focal students’ journal entries. (See Appendices A-C). Each rubric had the same four criteria, however, two categories were added to Round 3’s rubric to assess specific aspects of that lesson. For example, a code was added for whether or not the students used their goal setting chart correctly. A code was also added to measure if students showed signs of independence. I created the first version of this rubric deductively before I gave the first journal assessment. As I analyzed my students’ work, I used the inductive approach to recognize emergent themes and add to the rubric. For example, I noticed some students started but did not complete the task so I decided to make starting the task and completing the task two different categories. I did this in hopes that it would show me whether or not students showed perseverance to complete the assignments. For all three rounds, I analyzed my observation notes and/or video recordings to determine whether or not my students used problem solving skills. I did this by recording if they looked at the sight word wall, asked for help, used resources around the room, used invented spelling, sounded out words, etc.

Because I focused on problem solving skills in Round 2, I looked more in depth at the types of problem-solving skills my students used while completing this task. I recorded which problem-solving skills were used, how often each skill was used, and how many problem-solving skills each focal student used while writing in their journal.

For Round 3, I assessed if the goal setting chart was used correctly. I first checked to see that three goals were chosen. Then, I checked to see if students checked off any of the boxes to show they had accomplished that goal. Lastly, I analyzed if they accomplished the goals they checked off. I used my observation notes to decide if my focal students were showing independence by recording if they asked their peers or myself for help.

*Post-Assessment Data Analysis.* I analyzed the journal entries by deciding if the student was showing signs of growth mindset, fixed mindset, neither, or both. Similar to the baseline assessment journal, I judged this by analyzing their writing, drawings, and answers to the yes/no question about mistakes. I looked for language associated with fixed mindset such as, “I can’t” or “It’s too hard”. I also looked for examples of growth mindset such as students mentioning perseverance or trying their best.

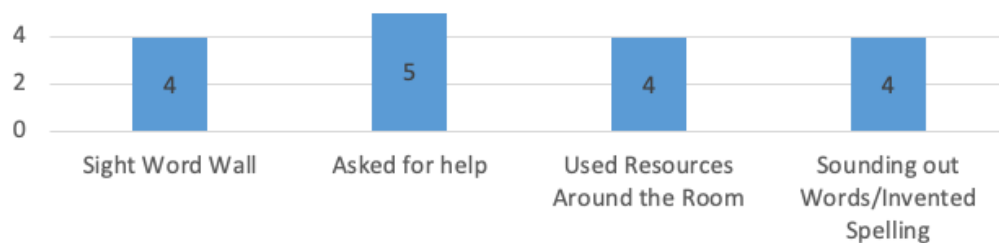
*Findings.*



*Figure 8: Rounds 1, 2, and 3 overall results*

Comparison of the three rounds of data in Figure 8 shows a gradual and noticeable improvement in my students’ perseverance in writing. In every category (other than the category, starting the task because two focal students were absent in round 2) my students gradually and steadily improved in every aspects of the rubric that showed perseverance. There was an average increase of two students per category, per round. Also seen in Figure 8, students who showed discouragement or lack of motivation went from six in Round 1 to one in Round 3. These findings support that my students’ perseverance improved over the course of the three rounds of intervention.

One key finding from Round 2 was that my students increased the number of problem-solving strategies they used in comparison to Round 1. Two focus students were absent for round 2 collection, however, 100% of focal students who were present used at least one problem solving strategy. This is compared to only 60% in Round 1.



*Figure 9: Problem solving strategies used in data round 2*

Figure 9 breaks down the types of problem-solving strategies students used: 50% of the focal students used the sight word wall, 50% used resources around the room, 50% sounded out words or used invented spelling, and 63% of students asked for help. This data shows that students were more likely to ask for assistance than to use other problem-solving strategies. 25% of the focal students only asked for help instead of utilizing other strategies to complete

the task. This data guided my instruction for round 3 as I realized that I needed to instill more self confidence in my students to help them persevere independently through challenging tasks.

After analyzing the data from Round 3, I saw that the goal setting activity did not have a major impact on my students' achievement or perseverance. 50% of my students used the goal setting activity successfully. Some students did not check off one or two goals, which showed that they were being reflective and honest about their work (see Appendix D). These results may be due to the fact that this was my students' first attempt at goal setting. It is possible that this type of intervention could have a more positive impact with more practice. After analyzing my observation notes from Round 3, I found that 62% of my focal students showed independence compared to only 38% in Round 2. I measured this by recording if the focal students asked for help to complete the task from their peers or myself.

In the examples of pre- and post-assessments from focal students below, improvements can be seen in their responses to the prompt as well as their overall work. For example, Student 1 did not write any words on his pre-assessment, but wrote a whole sentence about perseverance on his post-assessment. Similar to Student 1, Student 2 did not attempt to write anything on his pre-assessment. On his post-assessment, he reflected on a personal experience and described when he was struggling while building a gingerbread house in class. He did not give up and completed the gingerbread house.

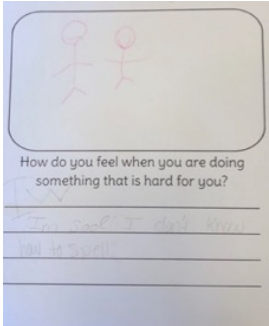
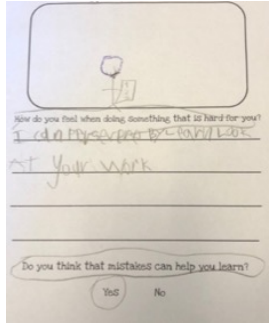
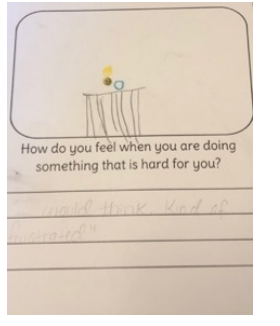
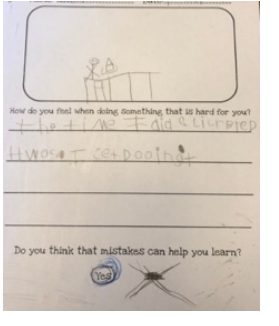
Student 1 Pre	Student 1 Post	Student 2 Pre	Student 2 Post
			
<p>"I'm sad I don't know how to spell." *verbal response</p>	<p>"I can persevere by learn. Look at your work."</p>	<p>"I would think. Kind of frustrated." *verbal response</p>	<p>"The time I did the gingerbread house. I kept doing it."</p>

Figure 10: Comparisons of two students' pre and post assessments

Another overall finding was that introducing growth mindset through various activities as well as focusing on the concept of learning from mistakes can help students go from a fixed to a growth mindset. As seen in Figure 11, the number of students who showed signs of growth mindset went from four to fourteen students. The number of students who wrote they believe that mistakes help them learn went from thirteen to twenty-two (100% of the class who was present). This data, along with the increase in the use of problem-solving skills, increase in independence while completing writing tasks, and daily observations of perseverance in the classroom, support the idea that my students' may be altering from a fixed to growth mindset. Marshall (2017) agrees that even brief mindset interventions may help shift students' mindsets and help them persevere through challenges.

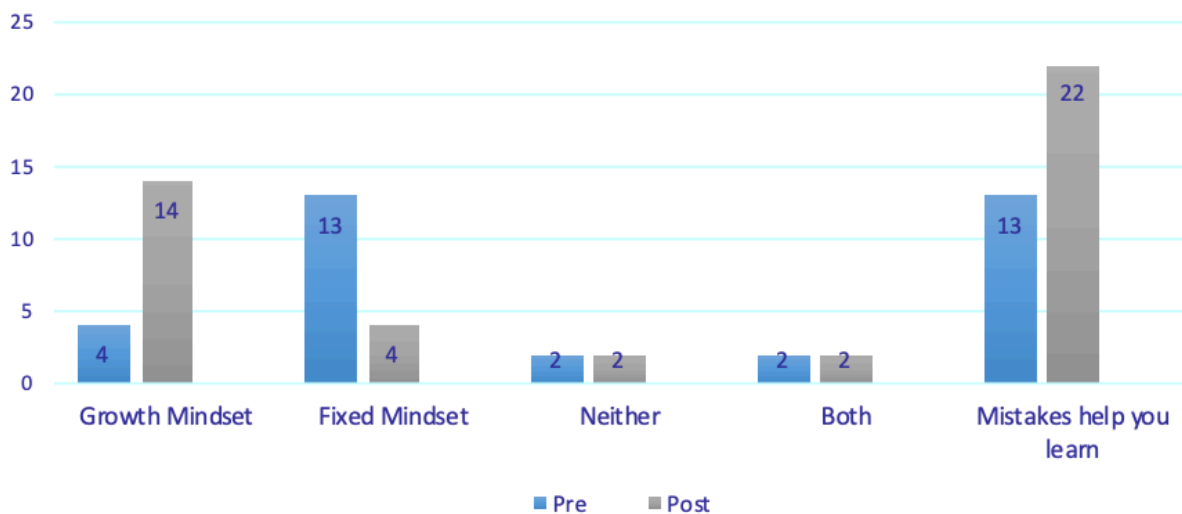


Figure 11: Pre and post assessment results

### Limitations

There were some limitations to the validity of my data throughout my inquiry. One of these limitations involved the post-assessment yes/no question about mistakes. I asked my students to circle whether or not they believed mistakes help them learn. Although 100% of my students said yes, it is possible they were just choosing that because they thought I wanted them to. They also could have copied their answer from their peers. Another limitation was that during Round 2, two of my focus students were absent. The results include only 8 out of 10 focus students and having the other students present could have changed the outcome of the results. Also, because I chose focal students who demonstrated the most need for growth mindset interventions, I do not know how much impact these strategies would have on students who initially did showed signs of growth mindset.

## Conclusion

I saw many positive changes in my classroom after implementing growth mindset interventions. Not only did I see this in raw data, but through daily observations in my classroom. My kindergarteners used the word “perseverance” as a part of their vocabulary. I saw my students working harder on challenging tasks as well as working to solve problems independently. I often heard them say “mistakes help me learn” in the classroom. Some still used the poster for inspiration long after the lessons, as seen in Figure 12.

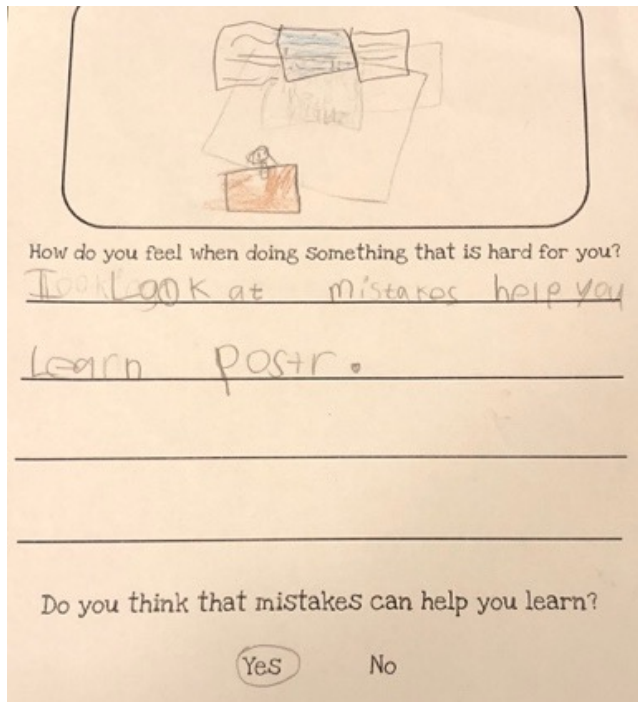


Figure 12: Student work sample

My next steps are to continue to encourage and teach growth mindset to my students across all subjects. I will continue to focus on problem solving strategies as situations arise. I am hopeful that these ideas and tools will help my students continue to be confident problem solvers who persevere through challenges and celebrate mistakes.



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**About the Author**

**Amanda Jankay** earned her Master's in Education in 2018. She has worked as a primary elementary school educator for the past four years. Amanda continues to focus on and analyze the effects growth mindset has on her students each year. She currently works in Menifee, California, as an elementary educational advisor supporting homeschooling families. Email: [amandajankay@gmail.com](mailto:amandajankay@gmail.com)

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**Appendix A: Round 1 Rubric**

<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Started the task (3 points)	Wrote letters, words, or one sentence	Yes	No
Completed the task (3 points)	Wrote two sentences and drew a picture	Yes	No
Used a problem-solving skill to help them persevere (3 points)	-Used resources around the room -Asked for help -Sounded out words	Yes	No
Showed signs of discouragement or lack of motivation (1 point for no)	-Said "I can't" -Gave up or stopped working -Showed signs of frustration	Yes	No
Total: /10			

**Appendix B: Round 2 Rubric**

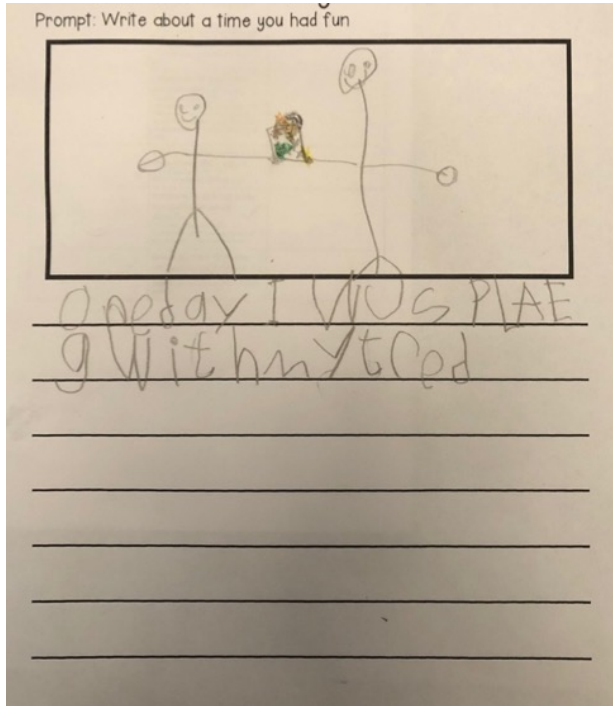
<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Started the task (3 points)	Wrote letters, words, or one sentence	Yes	No
Completed the task (3 points)	-Wrote who their favorite community helper was and why -Drew a picture	Yes	No
Used a problem-solving skill to help them persevere (3 points)	-Used resources around the room -Asked for help -Sounded out words -Used invented spelling	Yes	No
Showed signs of discouragement or lack of motivation (1 point for no)	-Said "I can't" -Gave up or stopped working -Showed signs of frustration	Yes	No
Total: /10			

**Appendix C: Round 3 Rubric**

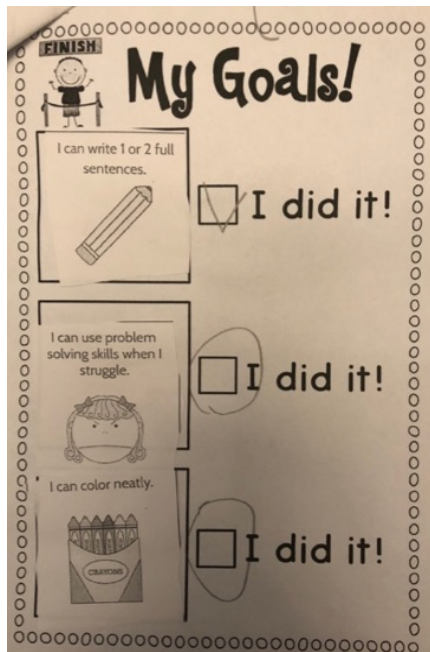
<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Started the task (2 points)	Wrote letters, words, or one sentence	Yes	No
Completed the task (2 points)	-Wrote about a time they had fun -Drew a picture	Yes	No
Used a problem-solving skill to help them persevere (2 points)	-Used resources around the room -Asked for help -Sounded out words -Used invented spelling	Yes	No
Showed signs of discouragement or lack of motivation (2 point for no)	-Said "I can't" -Gave up or stopped working -Showed signs of frustration	Yes	No
Used the goal setting sheet correctly (1 points)	-Chose 3 goals -Reflected on their work and honestly checked off the goals they met	Yes	No
Showed independence (1 point)	-Did not ask for help -Did the task on their own	Yes	No
Total: /10			

### Appendix D: Completed Goal Setting Activities for Student 1

Student 1 Journal:

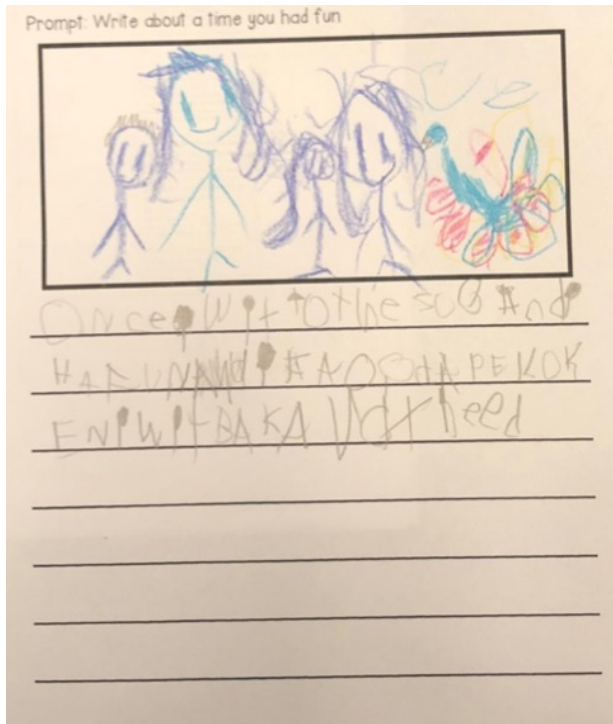


Student 1 Goal Setting Sheet:



### Appendix E: Completed Goal Setting Activities for Student 2

#### Student 2 Journal



#### Student 2 Goal Setting Sheet

