

Rethinking achievement

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As the 2009-10 school year draws to a close, parents are getting a first look at their children's course loads for next year and receiving congratulations from well-meaning friends and families for assignment to gifted and talented, AP (Advance Placement) and other high-level classes.

Many people consider enrollment in these elite courses to be some indicator of future accomplishment. Not necessarily. More and more, research suggests that by labeling children smart, gifted or talented, people -- including their teachers -- inadvertently may do more harm than good. Effort and risk-taking, not innate ability, increasingly are considered greater factors in success.

For every [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](#) who succeeds with the label of "gifted and talented," there is another person who practically is stymied by the designation. [David Shenk's](#) new book "The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ Is Wrong," suggests that "child achievers are frequently hobbled by the psychology of their own success. Children who grow up surrounded by praise for being technically proficient at a specific task often develop a natural aversion to stepping outside their comfort zone." Instead of learning perseverance and risk-taking, they develop an apprehension of new challenges and a deep fear of failure.

Our culture encourages the myth and accompanying belief in inborn gifts. But rapidly emerging advances in brain research show just how wrong we are to label some children "smart" and others "dumb." Mozart is a good example. Long portrayed as a genius who wrote and performed intricate pieces as early as age 3, a number of publications now credit Mozart's success to constant practice at the insistence of his relentlessly ambitious and visionary father, Leopold Mozart. Leopold also used teaching strategies with Wolfgang which, by many accounts, were centuries ahead of Leopold Mozart's time.

Boston College's Ellen Winner has gone so far as to state in her research that "most gifted children, even most child prodigies, do not go on to become adult creators" or become successful at that which they first were labeled "gifted" or "talented." And Stanford's [Carol Dweck](#) irrefutably has demonstrated in her experiments "that people who believe in inborn intelligence and talents are less intellectually adventurous and less successful in school."

Indeed, those who hold this belief about the nature of intelligence can be hampered in life by what



Dweck calls a "fixed mindset." By contrast, she argues that learners who develop a "growth mindset," born of a belief that intelligence is modifiable and increased by effort and good teaching, become more intellectually ambitious and successful.

As [Albert Einstein](#) once said: "It's not that I'm so smart. It's just that I stay with problems longer." In this statement of profound humility, drawn from one considered by many to have been a "genius," is a lesson for a lifetime: Effort is a more important goal than achievement.

We must begin to teach our young and ourselves to embrace failure -- to learn from it -- and to believe that all people have enormous potential and unique gifts that can be developed in a manner that recognizes that "the genius in all of us is that we can all rise together," as David Shenk said.

It begins with belief, as the great violin teacher Suzuki knew so well. In the 1930s, he developed a model of teaching that emphasized "heavy parent involvement, steady practice, extraordinary repetition, memorization and lots of patience." To this day, his approach continues to develop musical talents in tens of thousands of students. This belief animates hope, which research has shown leads to authentic and positive biological changes in the brain of the learner, and which in turn leads to determination, persistence and confidence in the face of challenges and, at times, failure. Talent is not determined by our genes, but by a process that builds on failure, sustains our effort and taps into our true potential.

As parent, as teachers, our role is not to make things easier for our children/students. Instead, we must learn to guide, monitor, culturally reinforce and adjust our interventions to align with the incessantly shifting winds experienced in learning. We must deepen our resilience while providing comfort and instilling the strength of will. When asked questions about learning, the late, great [Susan Sontag](#) was known to borrow from an Italian philosopher: "We should be driven less by the pessimism of the intellect, more by the optimism of the will."

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