



## A Growth Mindset for Christian Educators

What are the elements of successful professional development? That is the question posed to school leaders around the world as they seek to fulfill their duty of developing teachers and professional staff to serve students effectively. As school principals and heads of school, we are tasked with ensuring that our faculty and staff deliver excellent instruction utilizing effective, evidence-based techniques. But is this responsibility any different for the leader of a *Christian* school? I contend that it is. It must be. In fact, our professional development must be as unique as our service to students is from that which is offered in our local public and non-sectarian private schools. A uniquely Christian education stands upon the philosophical idea that all truth belongs to God and this truth can be fully understood only when placed in its proper context in relationship with him who revealed it. Therefore, learning is approached best through a biblical perspective where each field of study reveals the nature of God, the nature of mankind, and how the two relate to each other and with the rest of creation. Such a philosophy has immense implications for Christian schools and their educators and is starkly juxtaposed with another, all too common approach to Christian education that results in a secular academic program to which we add Bible study and prayer.

Just as our approach to learning should be different and informed from a biblical perspective, so also should our approach to developing Christian educators. If we, school leaders, are to expect teachers to practice honest biblical integration in their teaching practice, then we must do the hard work of biblically integrating our in-services and training programs to equip them to deliver a uniquely Christian education in the classroom. And just like Christian education, biblically integrated training requires addressing best practices in the classroom as an outworking of biblical truth. It cannot simply be the implementation of the latest educational fad supported by a few bible verses. I believe this can be done in a natural, unforced way.

A recent example of such a training occurred during our annual fall in-service. Our chapel and in-service theme was “The Patience of Christ in Sanctification” and the central scripture was 2 Peter 3:8-9:

*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you,[a] not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pt 3:8-9, ESV)*

Our quarterly training always begins with chapel, succeeded by professional in-service training. The chapel speaker focused on Christ’s patience with us as we are slowly transformed into the likeness of Christ. The comforting truth is that God, though perfectly holy, does not expect us to be perfectly Christ-like overnight but instead that over time we become more like Christ “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18, ESV). The Christian life can best be compared, as Jesus did, to the life of a crop that is planted with the seed of the Gospel and is cultivated over a long period of time, bearing fruit in due season. His divine patience produces in us a deep sense of peace, knowing that, even when we inevitably fall short, we can return to him, repent, and be forgiven, and he can use even those mistakes to mold us to the image of Christ. Alexander McLaren, in his exposition of 2 Corinthians 3, says it this way:

*Such transformation, it must be remembered, comes gradually. The language of the text regards it as a lifelong process. ‘We are changed’; that is a continuous operation. ‘From glory to glory’; that is a course which has well-marked transitions and degrees. Be not impatient if it be slow. It will take a lifetime. Do not fancy that it is finished with you. Life is not long enough for it. Do not be complacent over the partial transformation which you have felt. There is but a fragment of the great image yet reproduced in your soul, a faint outline dimly traced, with many a feature wrongly drawn, with many a line still needed, before it can be called even approximately complete. See to it that you neither turn away your gaze, nor relax your efforts till all that you have beheld in Him is repeated in you. (MacLaren)*

At the end of the chapel message, there was a clear transition into our in-service at which we focused on learning how to apply the biblical principle of God's divine patience in our professional practice. How then can we apply this truth to our professional practice as educators? Just as we seek to develop a "big picture" view of sanctification, not getting discouraged by our setbacks, but instead being transformed from one degree of glory to the next, we must take the same approach to our own professional growth. In the world of secular education, viewing professional growth as a long journey— where one expects and accepts failure and setback as natural parts of the process—is called a *growth mindset*.

The term Growth mindset was coined by Carol Dweck to describe people who believe that they can grow and develop through hard work and perseverance (Dweck). People with a growth mindset will "view challenges and failures as opportunities to improve and grow" (Growth and Fixed Mindset Definition). In short, we need a "big picture" view of our journey as educators, not being discouraged by failures or setbacks, but being determined to improve little by little. A superintendent that I once worked for used the terminology of "moving the needle." Just a little at a time. Perhaps the clearest way I have heard this said is the following quote of which I am unsure of the origin: "Elite performance is the accumulation of small gains over time." By the way, such elite performance is not only for classroom teachers. Every person or team, from the administrators to the support staff, can benefit from working toward making small gains in their professional practice. As each department improves incrementally from these small gains, the students and their families begin to experience an educational service that is excellent. A classroom in which the teacher is intentionally committed to achieving excellence while comfortable with setbacks is truly a wonderful space for learning. While Carol Dweck's research and writing about the concept of a growth mindset have positively impacted countless educators around the world, I firmly believe that these ideas are most impactful when they are faithfully contextualized within the Christian faith. A growth mindset, when found outside the Christian faith, builds upon secular humanism and can be developed through various practices such as reflection, mindfulness, and goal setting. Within the Christian faith, a growth mindset flows naturally from a proper understanding of the Gospel. Our reconciliation to God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus sets us free from the guilt of sin *and* the shame of failure so that we can "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2), trust the work that he is doing within us by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and seek to bring him glory by being excellent at all that we do.

Following the keynote presentation that laid out the foundation of this teaching, our administration team spent time talking through the Continuous School Improvement Plan, pointing out the areas in which we have “moved the needle” over the last few years as well as the areas where we have not grown (or sometimes even regressed). Our objective during this session was to model honest reflection and a growth mindset when it comes to setting and reviewing our goals by celebrating the successes, accepting the areas of growth, and looking ahead to areas that we want to grow most. This session was perhaps the most important. Our school employees need to witness their leaders displaying a growth mindset before they will take that step themselves. Finally, we gave each department the opportunity to meet and discuss ways that they could grow, and each group worked together to develop a S.M.A.R.T. goal as a department.

In this particular in-service, my desire was to send back to the classrooms teachers and staff who view their professional journey in the same way they view their sanctification—as a journey. Through professional development that is integrated with our Christian faith and biblical principles, I believe we can equip our educators to be the mentors and spiritual leaders that our students need and also genuinely excellent teachers, counselors, and support staff.

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