

Critically exploring the implementation of growth  
mindset in a primary school, using bioecological  
systems theory: An ethnographic study

Richard Baron

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## **Abstract**

Growth mindset approaches in education have become commonplace within primary schools across the United Kingdom (Foliano et al., 2019). The function of growth mindset is to have an impact on a pupil's belief system, regarding the malleability of their intelligence, with the aim of improving educational attainment and resilience. As such, growth mindset has become a desirable psychological construct within primary schools. Much of the research covering growth mindset is quantitative and does not examine why or how it is being used in schools, nor has research explored its implementation in schools over a prolonged period (more than three months). Qualitative evaluations on the implementation of growth mindset have been short-term and have identified some common characteristics of growth mindset approaches, such as celebrating mistake making and the use of process praise. However, the qualitative research that has been conducted is limited in its critical analysis of the intervention and fails to account for the wider socio-cultural factors that may impact a child's academic performance or why a school may decide to implement a growth mindset approach. As such, this critical research seeks to explore how growth mindset was implemented in a primary school in the North-West of England through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory. The overall aim of the research was to understand the conditions with which teachers use growth mindset, exploring how and why they use it and identifying any factors that may have an impact on their implementation of this intervention. Data was collected over a period of one year using ethnography in a reception and nursery within a primary school. Ethnography was chosen as it provided an opportunity to observe how growth mindset was implemented, allowing space for nuance to be observed. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with staff members across

the school. Following this in-depth method of data collection, the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and were analysed using thematic analysis alongside the ethnographic observational notes. The findings provide insight into why schools use growth mindset, with teachers explaining that growth mindset can help children be good citizens and independent learners even if their home environment is not conducive to this. Findings also highlight the significant role of external meso factors in the successful implementation of growth mindset, that social deprivation must be considered when implementing it and successful implementation requires a whole-school approach, particularly regarding organisational leadership. This research is, therefore, important because it uses qualitative, in-depth data collection methods to show that wider socio-cultural factors need to be considered when setting up and implementing a socio-cognitive educational theory in a school setting.

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>1 Chapter 1 Literature Review</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>1.1 Introduction to growth mindset</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>1.2 The introduction to growth mindset psychology</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>1.3 What growth mindset is and what it is not</b> .....	<b>17</b>
1.3.1 An individual’s growth mindset towards a skill or academic area can only explain their ability in a small part.....	17
1.3.2 Growth mindset interventions are not passive .....	18
1.3.3 Growth mindset interventions seek to manipulate the perception of developing potential ability .....	19
1.3.4 Not all growth mindset interventions are made equal.....	19
1.3.5 Growth mindset interventions can be delivered by teachers and researchers.....	21
1.3.6 Growth mindset practices target the psychological .....	26
1.3.7 Growth mindset as psychological measure of individual difference .....	26
1.3.8 Growth mindset as a conceptual framework of motivation.....	27
1.3.9 Growth mindset as an intervention or approach in education .....	28
<b>1.4 Theoretical Foundations</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>1.5 Understanding the rationales for growth mindset</b> .....	<b>30</b>
1.5.1 Rationale 1: Learning .....	30
1.5.2 Rationale 2: Increasing resilience .....	31
1.5.3 Rationale 3: Distal influences which influence the uptake of growth mindset .....	32
1.5.4 Summary.....	35
<b>1.6 Education context</b> .....	<b>35</b>
1.6.1 Neoliberalism.....	35
1.6.2 Situating growth mindset within education as performocracy .....	38
1.6.3 Performocracy in the UK context.....	40
1.6.4 Performocracy in action.....	41
1.6.5 Leadership in supporting continued professional development .....	50
1.6.6 Summary.....	55
<b>1.7 How growth mindset is used in schools</b> .....	<b>55</b>
1.7.1 Growth mindset being delivered by teachers in schools.....	56
1.7.2 Factors contributing to the implementation of growth mindset .....	67
1.7.3 The importance of language in growth mindset training .....	67
1.7.4 Emphasis on mistake making.....	70
1.7.5 Forces of influence – external powers that interact with the pupil and teacher in the delivery of growth mindset.....	71
1.7.6 Parents.....	71
1.7.7 Individual teacher mindsets.....	73
1.7.8 School systems.....	74
1.7.9 Growth mindset in the early years .....	74
1.7.10 Summary.....	79
<b>1.8 Concluding the literature review</b> .....	<b>80</b>
<b>2 Chapter 2 Methodology</b> .....	<b>84</b>
<b>2.1 Research aims</b> .....	<b>84</b>
<b>2.2 Ontology and epistemology</b> .....	<b>85</b>
2.2.1 Critical realism .....	85

<b>2.3</b>	<b>Theoretical influences .....</b>	<b>89</b>
2.3.1	Bioecological Systems Theory .....	90
2.3.2	The microsystem.....	92
2.3.3	The mesosystem .....	93
2.3.4	The exosystem .....	95
2.3.5	The macrosystem.....	96
2.3.6	The chronosystem .....	99
<b>2.4</b>	<b>Doing the research.....</b>	<b>100</b>
2.4.1	The setting .....	100
2.4.2	My role in the school .....	101
2.4.3	Data collection process.....	105
2.4.4	Access .....	106
<b>2.5</b>	<b>Ethics.....</b>	<b>107</b>
2.5.1	Sources of distress and informed consent.....	107
2.5.2	Developing informed consent and my dual role in the school .....	110
2.5.3	Ethics in practice .....	112
<b>2.6</b>	<b>Employing ethnography .....</b>	<b>116</b>
2.6.1	Timeline for data collection described .....	116
2.6.2	Participant observation .....	119
2.6.3	Interviews .....	121
2.6.4	Focus groups .....	123
2.6.5	My impact on data collection .....	124
<b>2.7</b>	<b>Data .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>2.8</b>	<b>Analysing the data .....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Chapter 3 Findings and Discussion .....</i></b>	<b><i>132</i></b>
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Section 1: Understanding why the school implemented growth mindset.....</b>	<b>136</b>
3.2.1	Growth mindset to help develop the self-responsible learner.....	140
3.2.2	Teachers' perception of parents.....	151
3.2.3	Growth mindset for children on their own.....	169
3.2.4	Making children responsible.....	174
3.2.5	Conclusion.....	181
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Section 2: Implementing growth mindset .....</b>	<b>184</b>
3.3.1	Using growth mindset to encourage children to take responsibility for their thinking and choices 186	
3.3.2	Growth mindset within an entrepreneurial discourse .....	195
3.3.3	Making mistakes is okay .....	199
3.3.4	Class Dojo and super learners.....	203
3.3.5	Communicating growth mindset .....	213
3.3.6	Conclusion.....	221
<b>3.4</b>	<b>Section 3: The impact of growth mindset on staff .....</b>	<b>223</b>
3.4.1	Developing a community of practice .....	224
3.4.2	Teachers and teaching assistants reflecting on their practices .....	235
3.4.3	Growth mindset supporting staff in difficulty.....	237
3.4.4	Growth mindset is useful for those with resources.....	242
3.4.5	Growth mindset, choice, and self-responsibility .....	244
3.4.6	Conclusion.....	250
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Chapter 4 Contribution to Knowledge, Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion</i></b>	<b><i>252</i></b>



<b>4.1</b>	<b>Contributions to knowledge .....</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Limitations of the research.....</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Recommendations for practice, policy, and research.....</b>	<b>262</b>
4.3.1	Recommendation for educational practice .....	262
4.3.2	Recommendation for policy .....	265
4.3.3	Recommendations for further research .....	267
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Overall Conclusion .....</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>References .....</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>306</b>

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development. Santrock (2011) 91

Figure 2: Thematic tree 135

Figure 3: Why growth mindset is being used derived from the reported perceptions of teachers and teaching assistants 139

Figure 4: Key empirical and theoretical explanations 182

Table 1: Overview of data collection 109

## Introduction

This research explores the implementation of growth mindset in a primary school setting.

The concept of growth mindset was formed from an initial study by Elliott and Dweck (1988), who sought to explain the motivation for achievement through performance or learning goals. They found that children who attributed failure to an innate ability to perform a task struggled to challenge themselves further, demonstrating learned helplessness behavioural characteristics (fixed mindset). However, those who attributed failure to a lack of experience tended to demonstrate behaviour associated with finding greater challenge and mastery over the task at hand (growth mindset). Dweck's research was concerned with an individual's implicit perception of the formation of intelligence or skills, and its association with their persistence, engagement and achievement needed for the acquiring of knowledge and skills (Dweck and Leggett, 1988).

The complexity of real-world settings is not afforded within the methods of socio-cognitive psychology where growth mindset is situated. The empirical base of quantitative social sciences de-emphasises the individual case as the product of knowledge acquisition.

Instead, the Positivist approach found in socio-cognitive psychology focuses on the delivery of the generalisable child, teacher or school as an individual unit for discussion.

Educators in all settings strive for improvement in pedagogy, and primary schools within the UK use organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to help them in this endeavour. The EEF is a government-funded charity that provides research and evaluations of approaches and interventions to teaching and learning, with an emphasis on improving the educational attainment of the poorest children to close the attainment gap.

To inform educators of an intervention's effectiveness, EEF evaluations focus on cost and time in relation to a student's progress. However, these evaluations tend to overlook the intricacies and uniqueness of implementing these interventions within real-world educational settings, despite the similarities with socio-cognitive psychology. These evaluations very rarely consider the wider impacts of training, delivery and impact on staff and more readily make assumptions towards conceptual knowledge being ostensibly understood. Equally, the ecology of delivery, the wider supportive systems, such as leadership, community, family, and organisational culture that interact with other coherent or incoherent interventions, are not considered within these evaluations. As such, research is needed that allows for the synthesis and analysis of real-world and perceptual information.

While growth mindset research has been conducted within school settings in the United Kingdom, it has largely been quantitative, short-term, and failed to consider the wider systemic and structural influences that may contribute to the implantation of this construct. This research is therefore important because it uses ethnographic methods to help understand socio-cultural influences and the unintended consequences of using growth mindset within a school setting.

Typically, socio-cultural influences within traditional evaluative research are overlooked in favour of siloed intervention studies that are separated from other educational practices and philosophies, as well as wider cultural and community influences that teachers and children within a school are nested in. This research is important because the influences and unintended consequences of growth mindset are sheds light on to present a rich and detailed understanding of why and how growth mindset is being implemented, and it explores the perspectives and experiences of how growth mindset psychology has been

understood, enacted, and integrated by teachers and staff within an education setting. This research is also important because it explores, in rich detail, the implementation of growth mindset approaches within a primary school with high levels of deprivation, which is something that other studies have not done. Growth mindset in real-world settings is situated within wider systems of influence, but it also potentially influences how systems, such as a school, family, and child, interact with each other. These interactions could enable a more effectively functioning system, or they could create barriers and friction. This research seeks to consider the influences on these systems by looking at why and how growth mindset was implemented in a primary school.

The following thesis will present the findings of an ethnographic study that explores the implementation of growth mindset within a primary school setting. Chapter 1 will provide the reader with an overview of growth mindset that outlines the reasons why schools may adopt it in their practice. I then provide the reader with an overview of the educational context to draw attention to the mismatch in growth mindset theory and the development of a neoliberal education system. I then go on to provide details of universal growth mindset practices found in schools. This literature review demonstrates a gap in critical qualitative research that takes account of the wider, socio-cultural, system within which pupils, teachers and the school are situated.

Chapter 2 will provide the reader with details about the methodology used, including the overall research aim and questions, ontological and epistemological positions, and the process of carrying out the research, including the data collection processes, negotiating access and ethics. Finally, I will justify and explain the methods found in ethnography before providing details of my use of template analysis.

Chapter 3 is split into three findings sections. The first section examines the key rationales for using growth mindset in the school. The participants perceived that growth mindset would support children to become self-responsible learners. This was important because teachers perceived deficits in children's levels of resilience and aspiration that was traced back to problematic parenting. Some teachers perceived that parents and members of the community were in multi-generational worklessness and this provided the children with negative role models. Children were deemed to come from 'fixed mindset bubbles' that impacted on their ability to make self-responsible behaviour choices.

The second section examines how growth mindset was implemented in the school. The study identified typical practices associated with growth mindset in the literature, such as the emphasis on embracing mistakes. However, the fieldwork also found incongruent practices such as the use of reward systems to promote specific learner ideals.

Finally, the third section explores the impact of implementing growth mindset on staff.

There was a positive evaluation of the experience of developing a growth mindset with the use of reflective spaces and freedom to try out ideas in class. However, these perceptions were linked to happier times at the school before the original Headteacher left. Staff perceived the use of their own growth mindset to help them through a period of instability, and some cited growth mindset in helping them to rationalise the choice to leave the school.

This thesis concludes by highlighting my contribution to knowledge: chiefly, the importance of understanding how growth mindset cannot be implemented in a bubble as it, the pupils, the teaching staff, and the school are all located within various nested systems.

# Chapter 1

## Literature Review

### 1.1 Introduction to growth mindset

Growth mindset psychology, theorised by Carol Dweck (2006) slowly rose to prominence following its inception in the 1980s (Dweck and Leggett, 1988), and has become a familiar idea in education settings within the United Kingdom (Foliano et al., 2019; Rienzo et al., 2015). Apart from being a psychological theory, growth mindset is also understood as a name for a particular kind of educational practice seen in educational institutions across the United Kingdom (Donohoe et al., 2012; Fraser, 2018). Although the amount of research carried out that explores or evaluates growth mindset in real-world settings is small, growth mindset as a concept has been implemented in schools is known to be a prominent idea over the past five to six years around the world (Busch, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2015; Macnamara, 2018; Rustin, 2016). What is more impressive is that even with widespread uptake of a growth mindset approach, research that focuses on the effectiveness of growth mindset interventions have generally found that growth mindset is not effective (Sisk et al., 2018). Much debate has been had about the quality of the growth mindset interventions that have taken place in schools, with researchers often citing external factors beyond their control as the reason why the intervention did not meet the intended outcomes (Donohoe et al., 2012; Rienzo et al., 2015). As such, research is needed that explores the real-world settings where these interventions and approaches take place. To do this, socio-cultural approaches to understanding the systems that interact with growth mindset practices and conceptualisations are needed. It is important to explore teaching and learning practices influenced by growth mindset qualitatively so that the context of those practices can be

understood in the socio-cultural world they exist. The shortcomings of growth mindset in research are only made through a shadow methodology (Kelle, 2006) drawn from common-sense interpretations of why results may be not significant or have low effect sizes for academic improvement. These common-sense interpretations that explain the failure of interventions also assume the purity and truth of the growth mindset model developed by Carol Dweck and her proponents.

## 1.2 The introduction to growth mindset psychology

Growth mindset as a theoretical construct has also been known as implicit theory or self-theory (Dweck, 2000). Growth mindset, self-theory and implicit theory refer to the idea that the self-perception of abilities and intelligence can drastically influence motivation for learning and how a person overcomes struggle (Dweck, 2000).

Self-theory puts forward the notion that some people strive and learn because of a perception about their ability to come through adversity and learn from their previous mistakes; as such they develop a 'growth mindset'. In comparison to the person with a growth mindset is someone with a 'fixed mindset'. Self-theory states that those with a fixed mindset struggle to complete tasks that are outside of their abilities. Dweck (2006) argues that having a growth mindset is preferential because having a positive view of failure is believed to have a positive effect on academic performance and increases a person's potential to develop further. But those with a fixed mindset are thought to shy away and avoid difficulty, which limits their chances of growing.

A more comprehensive history of growth mindset psychology can be found in Yeager and Dweck (2020), and Dweck and Yeager (2019). They explain the lineage of growth mindset research from the 1970s, which identified that an individual's explanation of success and

failure can influence their reactions to an event (Weiner and Kukla, 1970). Elliot and Dweck (1988) aimed to investigate why students of similar ability might react differently to failure. They found that students that valued performance above learning became discouraged when they failed. However, the opposite applied for those students that valued learning from their failed exercise and wanted to keep improving, even through failure. It was this differentiation that formed the notion of implicit theories of intelligence and therefore mindset theory; a difference between how an individual perceives their ability to improve at a skill by learning through failure and a notion that the self is intrinsically good or bad at that given skill. This opened a line of enquiry to explore the associations between these two different ways people can perceive the development of their intelligence and whether that impacts on other aspects of their lives. Finally, mindset theory was proposed to explain not only why some people face a particular goal orientation, but also to explain why some people face setbacks in failure, while others develop from them. Elliot and Dweck (1988) found that those that showed learned helplessness were more likely to have a performance (ability) goal, in contrast to those that showed a mastery response who had a learning goal. Mindset theory aims to explain this by stating that people who implicitly believe they can improve at something through experience – a growth mindset – will value learning over performance and demonstrate mastery behaviour towards tasks.

Molden and Dweck (2006) argued that given a particular situation, a person can have a fixed or growth mindset, and they hypothesised that it is growth mindset characteristics that lead to a person having better academic outcomes. Yeager and Dweck (2020) pointed out that growth mindset is a theory about responses to challenges and setbacks. As such, growth mindset theory is something that is promoted in education environments, particularly in disadvantaged education contexts (Yeager and Walton, 2011). The theory predicts that



those who face challenges and succeed have a growth mindset (Dweck and Yeager, 2019), therefore growth mindset is viewed as a piece of psychology to be developed with the use of interventions within education settings so that pupils are more likely to use setbacks and challenges as opportunities for their own development (Yeager and Walton, 2011).

Despite with this basic description of growth and fixed mindset, the application of such ideas in schools can be questioned, because mainstream schools in the United Kingdom place a large emphasis on performance (Brown, 2013), where the final outcome of education is the the determining factor for young people to attend their preferred university or secure an apprenticeship. In primary schools, some children concentrate on preparing for entry exams for grammar schools known as the eleven plus (Ahmavaara and Houston, 2007), but increasingly, the pressures of school performance tables have been seen by Headteachers to impact negatively on children in their care (Bradbury, 2019). On the one hand, there is an omnipresent culture that values performance over everything else, yet there is also an underlying hesitancy about the impact this performance culture has on children. Ideas related to a growth mindset appear to offer an alternative position to a performance-focused education system, although it is unclear whether this is a reason why schools have readily taken growth mindset on as an approach to teaching and learning.

### 1.3 What growth mindset is and what it is not

#### 1.3.1 An individual's growth mindset towards a skill or academic area can only explain their ability in a small part

The development of growth mindset theory has not been without controversy (Yeager and Dweck., 2020). Notable studies, such as a meta-analysis by Sisk et al. (2018), have demonstrated that greater depth is needed to explore the positive and non-conclusive

outcomes of growth mindset intervention studies. Yeager and Dweck (2020) assert that the overall data suggest that growth mindset research is replicable and stand by the use of their theory in practice. Growth mindset was believed to be associated with the achievement of those that faced challenges. However, Yeager and Dweck (2020) highlight that a growth mindset approach is not a theory about academic outcomes in general and does not claim to explain most of the variance associated with academic outcomes. As such, proponents of growth mindset state that an individual's mindset towards a skill or academic area can only explain their ability in a small part of their ability.

### 1.3.2 Growth mindset interventions are not passive

Yeager and Dweck (2020) differentiate growth mindset interventions from simple 'attribution manipulation exercises' as they have numerous components that combine to positively influence a pupil's perspective on the potential to improve their own abilities. Growth mindset interventions, as used in intervention studies such as those by Blackwell et al. (2007) and Yeager (2019), involve a combination of psycho-educational manipulations that seek to actively persuade a person of their potential to improve their own abilities. The growth mindset interventions must draw on at least two different kinds of evidence that can be taught to pupils, e.g., descriptions of brain neuroplasticity combined with metaphors of 'the brain is like a muscle – it gets stronger (smarter) when you exercise it' (Yeager and Dweck, 2020, p. 9), but also the use of celebrities and role models for pupils to identify with. The final ingredient for a growth mindset intervention aims to engage pupils in a 'saying is believing' exercise as used by Aronson et al. (2002) where pupils write letters to a future self or fictitious pupil that they are peer-mentoring so their learning is socially applied.

### 1.3.3 Growth mindset interventions seek to manipulate the perception of developing potential ability

Yeager and Dweck (2020, p. 9) argue that ‘a growth mindset is not simply the idea that people can get higher scores if they try harder’. For it to be a growth mindset intervention, it needs to support the idea of the potential for change and not a formulaic understanding that X amount of work or practice would lead to Y amount of improvement in ability.

Additionally, growth mindset interventions are less interested in ability across groups and more interested in ability change within individuals.

### 1.3.4 Not all growth mindset interventions are made equal

Yeager et al. (2016) sought to develop on previous interventions by utilising existing psychological theory to make the growth mindset intervention more inductive to the participant group; they developed the mindset intervention to have a greater suggestibility to the participating student. They used a user-centred approach to develop a mindset intervention that increased short-term educational outcomes of ninth-grade students. The researchers reframed hard work and effort from being a focal point by highlighting the importance of trying new strategies, and with that a goal to remove the stigma of asking for help. Yeager et al. (2016) also considered re-emphasising a growth mindset approach into more collectivistic contexts. The researchers drew on research that suggested working-class and ethnic-minority populations might be more influenced by collectivist rationales for inducing positive beliefs in the potential to change one’s abilities. This was enacted by saying to the teenagers that other people were excited by growth mindset because it helped them and the people they care about, and that they use growth mindset to support their community and make a difference in the world from what they learn. Other changes to the

interventions were included insights from developmental theory. Firstly, the researchers sought to utilise adolescents' tendency to conform (Cohen and Prinstein, 2006), so they 'created a norm around the use of a growth mindset' (Yeager et al., 2016, p. 10). Secondly, they sought to use the adolescent tendency to reject external advice by framing a mindset message as a reaction to adult control:

*"I hate how people put you in a box and say 'you're smart at this' or 'not smart at that'. After this program, I realized the truth about labels: they're made up ... now I don't let other people box me in ... it's up to me to put in the work to strengthen my brain."* (Yeager and Dweck, 2016, p. 10)

This is important because it demonstrates how much the context of the intervention matters. David Yeager and Carol Dweck used their knowledge of psychology to develop false narratives that influence how a person perceives the world and to make growth mindset more conducive. Because mindset theory is being delivered in real-world settings, such as schools, it is being delivered by people with different world views and contextual motivations. Therefore, it is highly likely the practice of mindset theory is not homogeneously applied and, in some cases, could have unintended consequences. A critique of the adjustments Yeager et al. (2016) made could be that they are not being respectful of the anxiety's adolescents experience, in some cases this could exacerbate a paranoid state of mind by focusing on 'others' controlling their lives. Little do these pupils know that their vulnerabilities are being actively taken advantage of by the researchers they trust. They provide a methodology for the systematic manipulation of whole cohorts of young people's belief systems, thus limiting the choices they may have in being in the world and developing their own identity. The student in growth mindset research becomes a probable object to be actively shaped and manipulated into another probable homogenous ideal.

### 1.3.5 Growth mindset interventions can be delivered by teachers and researchers

Growth mindset is an approach delivered in real-world settings by real-world professionals. However, evaluation studies of growth mindset administered by teaching professionals in secondary schools is limited and demonstrates weak efficacy and non-significant findings (Foliano et al., 2019; Rienzo et al., 2015). These large evaluation studies involved the training and delivery of mindset interventions in secondary schools across the South-West of England and were deemed to be well-designed field-experiments at scale (Yeager and Dweck, 2020). The remaining main body of research examples of mindset delivered by teachers is shown in a literature review of growth mindset informed interventions in primary schools (Savvides and Bond, 2021).

Savvides and Bond (2021) reveal the great heterogeneity and limited research on the application of growth mindset theory in primary schools. This was accomplished using a thorough, systematic evaluation of the literature that included ten studies from a total of 105,042 potential articles spread across four databases and Google Scholar. The researchers had to expand and deepen their search in order to validate early searches that revealed the scant number of empirical studies on the application of growth mindset in primary schools, which resulted in the high initial retrievals of 105,042 and the low number of included studies of ten.

According to Savvides and Bond (2021), growth mindset was implemented alongside other interventions in primary schools to improve students' maths, reading, and writing skills, as well as cooperative learning. Most of the studies found were exploratory, but both qualitative and quantitative research indicated effectiveness. Typically, growth mindset led to a shift from performance to process praise, and the change in discourse with children

altered their perceptions of difficult tasks and mistakes. Savvides and Bond's synthesis shows that growth mindset theory informs various learning frameworks, including metacognitive learning, pupil reflection, reflection on teacher practice, and dialogue between teachers and students. They also found that growth mindset was implemented as a whole-school approach in at least one primary school, demonstrating its potential reach across all teaching and learning practices. The high number of teacher-researchers in the sample of studies suggests a strong interest in the profession. Additionally, key findings suggest increased collaboration among employees and inspired independent research, including additional reading on growth mindset theory. Four out of ten studies identified by Savvides and Bond (2021) indicate potential benefits to socioeconomically disadvantaged children, with progress results that were closer to significance and teachers' perceptions that growth mindset theory was important for children from low-income families.

Savvides and Bond (2021) report is important because it sheds light on the limited yet promising research on the application of growth mindset theory in primary schools. While the number of empirical studies is currently sparse, the existing literature points towards the potential benefits of implementing growth mindset interventions in various aspects of teaching and learning practices. This includes improvements in math, reading, and writing skills, as well as fostering a cooperative learning environment. Savvides and Bond's research show growth mindset theory has been successfully integrated into metacognitive learning, pupil reflection, reflection on teacher practice, and dialogue between teachers and students. Furthermore, the review highlights the potential of growth mindset theory to support socioeconomically disadvantaged children and emphasises its importance for children from low-income families.

The first real-world application of growth mindset was found to be a script based on growth mindset messages (e.g., Schrodt, 2015; Rienzo et al., 2015; Seaton, 2018, Vallejo, 2018; Truax, 2018), which conditioned teachers to speak in an acceptable way. Secondly to script writing, research has found growth mindset principles guiding the overarching frameworks of schools and whole-school cultures (Fraser, 2017; Seaton, 2018; Teal, 2012; Vallejo, 2018). Thirdly, it was demonstrated that teachers were engaging with research-based practices as all, except Rienzo et al. (2015), were conducted by teacher-researchers. Fraser (2017) found that teachers were encouraged to engage with research and use it to inform their teaching practices. Finally, four of the ten studies (Rienzo et al., 2015; Schrodt, 2015; Teal, 2012; Vallejo, 2018) found positive outcomes for pupils that were socio-economically deprived. Yeager and Dweck (2020) answer critics by concluding:

*“Why should the idea that students can develop their abilities be controversial? And why should it be controversial that believing this can inspire students, in supportive contexts, to learn more? In fact, do not all children deserve to be in schools where people believe in and are dedicated to the growth of their intellectual abilities? The challenge of creating these supportive contexts for all learners will be great, and we hope mindset research will play a meaningful role in their creation” (Yeager and Dweck, 2020, p. 13)*

Their quote clearly has a defensive tone as Yeager and Dweck are proponents of growth mindset. Within these rhetorical questions the reader can see that they believe growth mindset can be successful where there is supportive context, yet the correct observation and integration of growth mindset could help create a supportive context. They implicitly suggest that a growth mindset approach creates a context where children are supported by

teachers who are professional and dedicated to developing students' learning capacity. However, research exploring the influence of growth mindset in real-world settings is limited. Yeager and Dweck (2020) suggest that contextual research is necessary to begin to unpick and explain why growth mindset theory has a limited impact in real-world settings, but equally highlights the need for qualitative research. Without qualitative research it is unclear why certain settings have better outcomes while growth mindset is being incorporated. The proponents of growth mindset are affirmed in their belief in the theory and are sure from studies that it is scientifically proven to be successful beyond reasonable doubt. Two iterations of Carol Dweck's (2017) book *Mindset: Changing the way you think and fulfil your potential* indicate that there is significant real-world interest in the notion of growth mindset as a self-help intervention but also as a possible intervention to use in organisations such as schools.

Dweck (2017) reflects on personal anecdotes and reporting from colleagues and student enquiries around what she believes growth mindset is and what it is not. Firstly, Dweck reports on the ambiguity of how growth mindset is conceptualised. She argues that growth mindset is often misunderstood as an 'open mindset' that is more suggestive of someone basking in their own talents, rather than cultivating them.

Secondly, Dweck (2017) argues that practising growth mindset is more than just praising effort. Dweck points out that the outcomes of the process must be tied together, and the developing strategies used must be taken into account. Dweck continues that sometimes children are praised for effort when in fact they've not tried very hard at all. In this case, the praise a child receives is incongruent with their experience. Furthermore, Dweck has noted that some people use effort praise as a consolation prize for children that were not successful. This section of writing moves beyond interventionism, which is close to the



growth mindset framework. Dweck believes that when children fail to improve while applying effort, those around them must support them by guiding them to new strategies and resources so their learning can continue. Dweck's expresses concern that growth mindset can be used to paper over the cracks of children not performing and as a tool to make children feel good.

It is important to note that within Dweck's writing on what growth mindset is and what it is not, growth mindset is never seen as a tool that fosters a teacher-child relationship. There appears to be a clear separation between the person applying a growth mindset approach, growth mindset and the child receiving growth mindset. What is missing in what Dweck explains growth mindset is an ongoing relationship with memories, feelings and the way children are treated by teachers.

The third point Dweck (2017) makes is how some people she encountered conflated aspirational discourses of 'you can do anything' with growth mindset. In this regard, Dweck argues that just telling them they can do anything does not constitute a growth mindset intervention, nor is it practically helpful and is just a form of empty reassurance. Dweck believes that by doing so all the responsibility is put on the pupil, which risks them feeling like a failure.

Finally, Dweck (2017) believes that growth mindset theory should not be used to separate good from bad, or growth and fixed mindset, in a negative way towards children. Nor should children be bullied or disciplined for exhibiting a fixed mindset. She believes that educators have a responsibility to create growth mindset-friendly environments that are collaborative and non-judgmental, where children believe that adults believe in their potential to grow and develop.

### 1.3.6 Growth mindset practices target the psychological

From a lay person's perspective, practising growth mindset could be viewed as simply taking a forgiving stance towards teaching and learning that supports children through tasks and activities, they find difficult. However, growth mindset research is focused on the science of mindset. The main proponents of growth mindset recommend growth mindset practices and interventions have a specific focus of transmitting a growth mindset to a child or young person. What appears to be missed is the quality of relationships that emerge from mindset practices and interventions. It would be important to see whether the use of growth mindset by teachers benefits the quality of the relationship they have with their children. This is because the quality of teacher–pupil relationships is important (Verschueren and Koomen 2012; Wall, 2021). Research on growth mindset focuses on outcomes that give an indication of the psychological or educational advancement through a messaging output (teacher/parent) to a messaging input (pupil), which then results (hopefully) in a child more able to persevere and learn. What is unclear is the importance of the memory of that interaction and what it means to the teacher and pupil.

### 1.3.7 Growth mindset as psychological measure of individual difference

Growth mindset as a psychological construct of individual difference stems from the socio-cognitive tradition, measuring the degree to which an individual implicitly believes intelligence can develop over time through practice and perseverance; contrasting with a fixed mindset individual who believes that intelligence is stable (see Elliot and Dweck, 1988). A person with a growth mindset is characterised as being motivated by learning and developing strategies for adaptation, while a person with a fixed mindset is concerned with performance – the outcome (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Those that view intelligence as

something changeable and developed over time are categorised as having an 'incremental theory of intelligence', which has latterly become known as 'a growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006). Conversely, those that perceive intelligence as something stable and unchangeable are categorised as having an 'entity theory of intelligence', which is contemporarily known as a 'fixed mindset' (Dweck, 2006). In the early literature, growth mindset was known as 'incremental theory of intelligence' and fixed mindset 'entity theory of intelligence'. For the purposes of simplicity, I shall only use the terms 'growth mindset' and 'fixed mindset' (Dweck, 2006).

#### 1.3.8 Growth mindset as a conceptual framework of motivation

Dweck, Chiu and Hong (1995) propose that having a growth mindset compared to a fixed mindset leads to different responses to positive or negative experiences. Growth mindset has been conceptualised as a foundation for mastery responses and positive consequences, such as academic success (Dweck, Chiu and Hong, 1995). This conceptual framework underlines the theory that having a growth mindset leads to academic achievement (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007; Dupeyrat and Mariné, 2005). Conversely, an individual with a fixed mindset is performance or goal-orientated, such as gaining approval and avoiding negative judgements of their skills and attributes. The behaviour pattern of someone with a fixed mindset is theorised to be helpless; they avoid risk and struggle to persist (Dweck, Chiu and Hong, 1995). This raises questions about why and how this can be operationalised within schools since academic attainment is a key performance measure.

### 1.3.9 Growth mindset as an intervention or approach in education

The development of growth mindset research naturally transitioned to applying and testing theory with experimental research (Blackwell et al., 2007) and practical applications in real-world settings (Foliano et al., 2019). Intervention-based research, such as that conducted by Blackwell et al. (2007), is carried out by trained researchers that follow an eight-week standardised programme designed to manipulate pupils' attitudes towards a growth mindset. Growth mindset approaches involve staff training in growth mindset, and then the development of their own context-specific approaches (Foliano et al., 2019; Fraser, 2018; Seaton, 2018) Something important here is that growth mindset involves the individual, but the notion of intervention in the educational context suggests that research should consider the setting and teacher–learner relationships. Therefore, it is important to observe a growth mindset intervention in practice and to understand how and why growth mindset intervention is being used. The approach of 'doing' of growth mindset cannot be replicated from one school to the next due to the contextual circumstances that inform the development of practices that are needed within a particular school. However, there is a lack of research that comprehends contextual influences on growth mindset-informed approaches. Therefore, research is needed that explores why and how schools develop growth mindset-informed approaches.

## 1.4 Theoretical Foundations

Research on growth mindset has emerged from a paradigm of psychological research known as 'socio-cognitive' theory of personality (Bandura, 1999). Bandura (1999) explains that in this tradition, psychology understands people in three different ways. Firstly, people are viewed as having the capacity for being active, self-reflective, self-organising and proactive

in the decisions and lives that they lead. Secondly, people can be understood to be subject to environmental conditions which govern their behaviour. Thirdly, people are viewed as having a reciprocal combination of both self-directive free will and environmental determinism.

Socio-cognitive theory primarily focuses on structures of thought that influence how a person interacts with the world. In this context, growth mindset is seen as a key structure of thought or cognition influencing how a person approaches and reacts to learning experiences and other skill-based activities. As such, pragmatic socio-cognitive psychologists are interested in identifying causal structures of thought, such as growth mindset, which enhance self-organising, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating structures of thought within individuals (Bandura, 1999).

The ontological stance of socio-cognitive research assumes growth mindset is something that can be taught through psycho-education and training (Bandura, 1999). Growth mindset information is processed and mediated through the development of an individual's experiential understanding, their structures of behaviour and environmental events (Dweck, 1986). This learning is assumed to occur as a person is engaged in the engagement of an activity, known as an enactive process. Secondly, the learning could take place by observing a growth mindset activity vicariously, such as when a teacher models a behaviour (Schunk, 2014). Research on growth mindset evidences this ontological position by demonstrating that some psycho-educative interventions result in a measurable change in children's growth mindset (Seaton, 2018; Esparza, Shumow and Schmidt, 2014; Brysacz, 2017); however, these interventions do not take social and individual contexts into account.

## 1.5 Understanding the rationales for growth mindset

### 1.5.1 Rationale 1: Learning

Proponents of growth mindset make the primary function of growth mindset practices in learning ostensibly clear. Boyd and Ash (2018, p. 216) state that ‘a growth mindset is a belief that the harder you work, the smarter you get’. This is the view that is echoed throughout the literature where the key outcome measure is academic achievement (Paunesku et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2014; Romero et al., 2014). Yeager and Walton (2011, p. 274) are particularly vocal about the function of social psychology in education:

*“Hidden yet powerful psychological forces, also investigated through basic science, can raise student achievement. An engineer uses theories of fluid dynamics to fine-tune a wing, which, in the context of other factors, makes a plane fly. Analogously, a social-psychological perspective uses basic theory and research to identify educationally important psychological processes and then subtly alters these processes in a complex academic environment to raise performance.”*

It is clear from Yeager and Walton’s viewpoint that the power of psychology in the hands of a teacher who can subtly manipulate how a child feels about their struggles brings about improved academic performance, akin to experimental designs. The idea of Yeager and Walton’s teacher as an engineer mirrors that of a chemist in a lab that is able to finely tune experiments in order to maximise the amount of product of a reaction, or indeed a business manager sweating the assets in an attempt to cut costs while improving productivity.

Although Yeager and Walton acknowledge the complexities of the academic environment, this is hardly addressed in any detail, which is also the case with researchers that focus on the quantification of growth mindset. This is a key gap in the research that needs to be

addressed: just how do teachers and teaching assistants 'fine tune' important psychological process to raise performance in a complex environment?

### 1.5.2 Rationale 2: Increasing resilience

Another prominent function of growth mindset is associated with increasing resilience. Yeager and Dweck (2012) believe that with the help of growth mindset approaches, teachers and parents can be supported with the primary task of developing the ability their pupil or child's ability to navigate and manage challenges by themselves. Growth mindset is believed to mitigate against children feeling vulnerable, stressed and discouraged by learning tasks. It also perceives challenges as things that can be persevered through and overcome over time, with effort, support from others, by creatively developing new strategies and by learning from them and having patience. However, even if the class conditions do not enable challenges in the classroom, learning growth mindset can be important for how pupils approach challenges in the future as they have learned skills to enable resilience. This kind of resilience is understood to exist within a child as an independent characteristic and as something that can be trained. This simplistic cause-and-effect perspective overlooks the challenges that many children face outside of the educational system. There are other notions of resilience that do not focus on individual characteristics. For example, Hart et al. (2007) conceptualises resilience in a holistic way that takes into account important ecology, such as basics including safety, nutrition, play and leisure through to empathic responses with others, having plans in life and the quality of relationships in their life. This kind of perspective about resilience views the child outside of their own mind and situates them in surroundings that can increase or reduce stress and strain. A problem may arise if a school takes a predominantly narrow view of resilience,

where it is something like a skill that can be taught; contrary to other models such as a that found in Hart et al. (2007), who view a child as a complex being with multiple and unique systems influencing development. Other systemic frames of resilience can be seen in the work of Callaghan et al. (2019), who apply an understanding of resilience as a multidimensional process that children and young people negotiate in an involved and active way in a social and relational context (Zahradnik et al., 2009; Ungar et al., 2013). Within this perspective, problematic behaviour is viewed as an adaptive response, similar to an attachment perspective that focuses on interactional processes, rather than a search for a measurable trait that distinguishes children as being more or less able to cope (Ungar et al., 2013). As growth mindset comes from a scientific approach that makes attempts to increase the levels of traits, such as growth mindset or resilience in children, it would be interesting to examine the kinds of interactional processes that feature, and also how staff understand those interactional responses. Thus, this more ecological view of resilience would link teachers with the unique challenges individual children face but also highlight strengths and support in their lives. Growth mindset promotes the idea that resilience is a skill that supports the individual children to cope with difficulties they face, without consideration of the wider systems that support their development as in the traditional psychological idea of resilience (Peterson and Yates, 2013). As such, it is important for research to make sense of how a teacher's understanding of growth mindset influences perceptions of pupil resilience but also understand why that may be the case.

### 1.5.3 Rationale 3: Distal influences which influence the uptake of growth mindset

Another key rationale of growth mindset is for closing the achievement gap (Cohen and Garcia, 2014). Chao et al. (2017) noted the global motivation for reducing the attainment



gap through the use of soft skills that help children learn or ‘think how to think’ (Halpern, 2015, p. 769, cited in Chao et al., 2017). Growth mindset has gained prominence within organisations as influential as the World Bank (an international financial institution that provides loans and grants to the governments of low- and middle-income countries for the purpose of pursuing capital projects), which has highlighted the value of growth mindset as a useful motivational construct to reduce pervasive global inequality. However, even though the World Bank may believe that increased growth mindset psychology increases prosperity for all, wider systems and structures are far more important in determining levels of investment within economies, as demonstrated by the World Bank’s ease of business indicators (Anderson and Gonzalez, 2012).

The financial value in delivering the intervention is a critical part in the promotion of growth mindset among policy makers like Headteachers and macro-level governmental education departments. Cost analysis provided by a packaged online intervention (Rattan et al., 2015) rationalised growth mindset interventions as cost-effective ways to narrow the attainment gap. The ‘Changing Mindsets’ Education Endowment Foundation trial (Foliano et al., 2019) costed their intervention at £4 per pupil, which is an extremely low cost for schools to procure such interventions. Similar agencies in the United States, such as the Regional Educational Laboratory West, also commented on the low-cost training provided by academic growth mindset mentors (Snipes et al., 2017). Therefore, growth mindset functions as a low-cost intervention for schools and policy makers to try to implement. No studies have, however, factored in the cost of scarce resources used during whole-school approaches, such as internal training. A cost-benefit analysis would take into account opportunity costs and the wages of teachers’ time spent developing growth mindset

approaches or the cost-benefit of delivering growth mindset instead of another intervention.

In a global context, where institutions such as the World Bank propose growth mindset as a key educative skill, Jinkling and Wals (2008, p.7) view growth mindset as ‘an instrument for getting one’s “message” into impressionable young minds—for implanting a particular agenda’. This more global agenda, which is supported by industry, including Google (re:Work, 2017) and Microsoft (2021), demonstrates that growth mindset training could potentially be key for students to be successful in the job market. Google and Microsoft are businesses with turnovers greater than many countries in the world, and they have highlighted growth mindset as an important employee quality for their employees, but also as a subjective stance towards their current employees. Growth mindset has become a key contemporary ideology that could be seen as something that is necessary for educational institutions, like schools, to be aware of so that they can mould children to develop these lauded characteristics to prepare them to compete in the global job market. However, differences exist between competitive market forces that influence human behaviour and thinking and the ideals presented by growth mindset. This is because market forces rely on competition between businesses that are ultimately judged by their profitability. It may well be that an organisation presents itself one way, but acts in very different way that is more coherent with the wider systems that are influencing it. The problem here is that schools work within a marketised competitive model where performance counts. How would a school reconcile a performance agenda imposed on them by wider structures when utilising growth mindset? To understand some of these features more clearly it is important that empirical research is carried out. This will provide insight into socio-cultural influences that might create discrepancies in practice.

#### 1.5.4 Summary

This section has presented an overview of growth mindset as a socio-cognitive theory that positions people as either having a 'growth' or 'fixed' perception of intelligence that can either be developed over time or not. Growth mindset can be referred to as an individual characteristic, a conceptual model which explains different kinds of behaviour and outcomes or as an intervention. As it has emerged from a socio-cognitive paradigm, growth mindset seeks to find measurable individual differences that have the ability to be changed through social processes like interventions. This has meant there is potential for implementing cost-effective approaches that are specifically targeted at increasing the amount of growth mindset in a person to enable them to be more effective and resilient learners while also preparing them for the job market. This section also presented an overview of growth mindset, situating it as a socio-cognitive construct that has the potential to be utilised within educational settings. The proceeding section will explore the relationship between growth mindset and the wider educational context that it sits in.

### 1.6 Education context

#### 1.6.1 Neoliberalism

Over the past 40 years, countries have borrowed and exchanged educational policy ideas as part of the process of 'policy borrowing' (Green, 1993), which has resulted in a particular set of structures that are defined by neoliberal ideology (Ball, 2017). Within education, the development and exchange of policy has been nested within a culture of neoliberalism, whereby the capitalist structure is thought to be the ideal way of organising social and human activity in an effective and rational way. Value is determined by standardised and

quantifiable measures that concurrently demand and create a context where social relationships and education function based on efficiency and competition. The parts that form education are understood through inputs and products that are evaluated in terms of output efficiency and cost (De Lissovoy, 2013). Therefore, educational interventions that have a foundation in Positivist research, that has a theory structured in terms of inputs and outputs, such as growth mindset, echo accepted neoliberal discourse.

Bradbury, McGimpsey and Santori (2013) argue that neoliberal education contexts differ from the classical liberal requirement of pure market freedom by neoliberal reforms that are characterised as working in conjunction with state regulation and intervention. In this context, central government funds a preferred model of school – the academy – and dictates the curriculum from afar by setting the syllabus for high-stakes examinations and decides on the quality framework. Under this regime, schools can choose their curriculum but at the risk of achieving lower high-stake exam performance and receiving a negative inspection. Consequently, standardised and quantifiable outcomes measures define value and rank and differentiate schools, teachers and pupils.

More investment was being made into the early years in the 2000s to reduce the likelihood that young children would eventually become more costly to society as a result of increased demand for public services (Moss, 2014). Increasing investment was perceived as a way of improving the quality of early years provision that would lead to gains in later life. However, neoliberal accountability led to expectations that schools would be measured against predefined outcomes (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), including how well early year settings made children ready for compulsory schooling (Rose and Rogers, 2012). As such, this could create a space for preferred subjectivities, and tools to promote such subjectivities, such as growth mindset, to enter the discourse of early years education.

Early year practitioners in the United Kingdom assess government-guided outcomes of children as part of the accountability regime. This is done with two key assessments. Firstly, an assessment at the beginning of reception, the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA); and secondly, at the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), which is carried out prior to a pupil starting year one. The EYFSP contains seventeen Early Learning Goals (ELGs) for assessing the child, which consist of 51 competencies that span over seven key areas of learning, including: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design. A satisfactory profile is completed when a child is judged to be at the expected level for each ELG (Department for Education, 2022). Iterations of this particular statutory framework have been ongoing since 2014 (Department for Education, 2014), and a version of this framework was enacted under the previous New Labour government began in 2003. Growth mindset could be perceived by teachers to support personal, social and emotional development and improvements in mathematics and literacy.

Bradbury (2019) contends that even though high-stakes testing has not yet formally started in the early years classroom, the distinctly neoliberal nature of the early years classroom has meant resistance to reform (e.g. *Keep Early Years Unique*, 2017). The policy history over the past twenty years has formalised a perspective of what is viewed as 'the good learner' (Bradbury, 2019). The good learner is a neoliberal ideal that is projected onto children by teachers informed by wider cultural influences. Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021) show that children integrate these ideals to the extent that they rationalise their own punishment for not making progress in the terms set out in a highly performance focused neoliberal context.

### 1.6.2 Situating growth mindset within education as performocracy

The use of growth mindset psychology in schools (Dweck, 2006) has emerged within the context of neoliberalism, within education policy and wider society. The underlying aim of neoliberalism is to aims to improve the prosperity and economic value of a nation and individuals, through deregulated market forces, which place the emphasis on individual responsibility rather than government intervention (Palley, 2005).

Within this context, the normative assumptions require individual 'resilience' to be able to cope with the increased levels of personal accountability for an individual's actions (Joseph, 2013). This is important because growth mindset is viewed as something that increases a pupil's resilience (Yeager and Dweck, 2012), and resilience is something that is understood to be developed through self-reflective practices, such as those characterised by a growth mindset (Chandler, 2014).

Government policy (DfE, 2019) encourages personal accountability in pupils and teachers, and also advocates for resilience building in pupils so they can improve their educational performance (Brown, 2013). Neoliberal ideology is cemented into the education system of the United Kingdom through global systems and is reflected in what Brown (2013) calls the ideology of 'performocracy'., whereby student and staff performance is metricised, analysed and modelled. Although growth mindset might be perceived to enhance resilience, it does so in the context in which those with resilience tend not to perceive performance too greatly. If a person is living within structures that are nested in competition and performance, that idolise personal accountability and self-responsibility, it is unlikely that those pressures would be ignored. As such, research is required within real-world settings that are nested within a performocracy.

Within this performocracy, schools and staff are assessed and rewarded through the lens of a marketised system (Brown, 2013). This is driven by a desire for an increase in global competitiveness, improvement in excellence and quality in education (Brown, 2013). To adopt excellence and quality in educational performance, academic-attainment is the focus (Zajda, 2013), which is then used to compare and contrast schools and pupils. This is represented by a drive towards performance and quality that is mediated by integrating global standards of excellence in conjunction with corresponding assessment across the globe.

The United Kingdom competes with other nations through an instrument known as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) (Martens, 2007; OECD, 2021), which was developed by an organisation that creates global indicators of development, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Economic Development (OECD). PISA functions as an international league table for education attainment, which then forms the framework for an international league table of subscribing countries (Zajda, 2013). As such, core subjects such as maths, reading and science have been prioritised over other aspects of the curriculum as it is believed that these subject areas provide the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in life (Schleicher, 2018). Additionally, the narrowing of the curriculum has also coincided with increased standardisation of practices (Bradbury, 2013) and a focus on high-stakes accountability, e.g., teacher promotion and salary being dependent on performance measures (Skinner, et al., 2021). High-stakes accountability is also created with the use of school league tables, which are used to inform parent's decision making when choosing which school to send their children to and creates a competitive environment which is thought to increase performance (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017; Sahlberg, 2012). However, it's debatable whether increased performance is realised because of more exam

practice rather than improved standards of teaching. As such, the prevailing context that growth mindset practices are developing within must be understood with qualitative research that can attempt to understand how these influences impact on practice.

### 1.6.3 Performocracy in the UK context

Performocracy within education in the United Kingdom began with introducing the role of consumer accountability within state-funded education in England, which was initiated by the 1988 Education Reform Act (Solomon and Lewin, 2015; Glatter, 2012). Because performocracy has been around for a long time, cultural expectations become accepted, which makes it difficult for a counter-narrative to be established. Within the United Kingdom, schools are made accountable to their consumers, i.e., families that choose which schools they send their children to, based on performance indicators (league tables or approved government quality reports). This creates an enterprising space for schools to operate within, where there is pressure to innovate and improve standards to compete against other local schools on academic performance (Gewirtz et al., 1995). This focus on academic performance can engender particular practices, including ability grouping, intervention cultures and prioritising children who are close to meeting the expected standards (Bradbury et al., 2021). The pressures felt by schools to demonstrate their data looks 'right' is enforced by an additional layer of regulatory accountability, which is provided by the state-funded education regulator Ofsted, which carries out periodic inspection, grading schools on a four-point scale to indicate how well it is performing and enacting government policy; the rates include: outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Exley and Ball, 2013). Ofsted inspections and performance tables are a key selection criteria for many parents when selecting which



school to send their child to, alongside the school's proximity to the family home (Börcsök et al., 2018). This creates a 'high-stakes' environment for schools to operate in as they could potentially see pupil numbers reduce as parents choose to send their children to neighbouring schools with 'better' Ofsted results; this can have positive or negative consequences on funding from central government (Exley and Ball, 2013). Another important aspect of high-stakes education is how the focus on data influences the perception of both teachers and pupils (Bradbury, 2019). Bradbury (2019) argued that the datafication of education brings about data-driven subjectivities, as such, it is arguable that psychological concepts that are based in quantitative data, such as growth mindset, will be more readily accepted; however, qualitative data is required to explore whether a reason why growth mindset is readily accepted is due to the intersection between quantitatively driven narratives.

#### 1.6.4 Performocracy in action

In order to enable children to be more responsive to pressurised systems that expect higher levels of achievement, the Department for Education's (DfE, 2019) 'Character Education Framework Guidance' advocates for the use of character education. While there is no specific definition of the term 'character education', it appears to be an umbrella term that encourages schools to provide opportunities to help young people to explore and express their character and build the skills they need for resilience, empathy and employability (DfE, 2019). Schools are given autonomy to develop character-based education programmes that promote resilience, which purports to allow state education schools to provide the same opportunities afforded to children that go to independent schools.

Devolved powers within the UK education sector pushed forward by the Education Excellence Everywhere policy (DfE, 2016) present schools with greater autonomy to implement policies such as character education. Schools that have 'academy status' have greater autonomy over how they teach and the ideas and practices they implement; this is known as academisation (Gorard, 2009). As such, schools that have been made academies, or choose to become an academy, can choose to adopt growth mindset approaches in the delivery of their teaching (Gorard, 2009). However, if a school fails to exercise its autonomy effectively, the UK government can put it under centralised control and limit the control the school has over the direction of its teaching (DfE, 2016).

The Department for Education (2016a) argues that character traits 'open doors to employment and social opportunities, underpin academic success, happiness and wellbeing' (DfE, 2016, p.95) and that the UK would be a leader in teaching character (DfE, 2014). This emphasis on developing character traits which support learning and education fit well with the underlying premise of growth mindset, as training supports the development of resilience while also positioning it as something to support social mobility and improving academic attainment (Claro et al., 2016; Yeager and Dweck, 2012; Blackwell et al., 2007). This belief in traits as the foundation for individual success became an increasing trend in the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2009 to 2016 (Bull and Allen, 2018). The Character Education Grant Fund, which funds character-based learning projects that seek to bring about performance improvements by increasing resilience in pupils, highlighted growth mindset as an appropriate approach for organisations to take. Government funding enabled several projects from 2015 to 2017 to implement growth mindset in high schools and pupil referral units (Rienzo et al., 2015).

In 2015, character education policies were introduced that guided schools to seek approaches to learning and interventions that sought to improve pupils' internal abilities, so that they could continue to make progress through an increasingly challenging education context. This is where the complexity in growth mindset lies. Educators should focus less on performance and more on learning (Truax, 2018), as this diversion from a focus on performance is what leads to mastery responses (Dweck and Legget, 1988). The approach to character education policy emphasises an ideal performing child which again goes against learning from growth mindset theory. From a socio-ecological perspective, it demonstrates that potential contradictions can emerge from an education sector that could potentially be trying to integrate incoherent ideas.

#### *1.6.4.1 Self-responsibilisation*

In this context, self-responsibility differs from agency, in that agency suggests an ability to make a difference and hold some kind of power (Giddens, 1984) and through agency in an inter-relational world, a sense of self develops (Bandura, 1989). This means that a child develops a sense of autonomy. However, self-responsibilisation of learning in a neoliberal context makes a child accountable for their learning and academic progress.

Recent critiques of character education in its current form argue that the neoliberal expectation of an individual becoming the entrepreneur of the self (Christiaens, 2020) is modified to be concerned about developing dispositions for the future (Spohrer and Bailey, 2020). Arguably, educators could perceive growth mindset as one of these dispositions to develop in children. These desired dispositions have particular focus on working-class individuals to be more self-reliant, which draws on parallels with character education found in Victorian discourses that link character to social mobility, employability a perpetuation of

the idea that intrinsically linked to human capital and the cultivation of a continuously future-thinking entrepreneurial self (Taylor, 2018). Unlike an adult businessperson who is responsible to make their own profit, within the neoliberal classroom context, children are responsabilised for producing their own education progress. Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021) found that within neoliberal settings the impact of heightened self-responsibility in the classroom can lead to lower-attaining pupils suffering. Pupils in Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan's study was situated in contexts that were familiar with growth mindset, pursued a narrow curriculum and placed children in attainment groups. They spoke to children that hid their special interests, including art and reading, from their teachers who they perceived to value narrow constructs of acceptability in the classroom. The main theme in their study was that children within the neoliberal classroom assume that they must persevere at all costs. These costs include feeling alone in their struggles with attainment, while positioning blame on their fellow pupils for not making fast enough progress. One child was quoted saying that they thought it was fair to sacrifice their lunch for learning so they did not lose another lunch at a later date. This shows how children can feel self-responsible and internalise an acceptability of punishment. Further costs to the lower-attaining child included feeling humiliated when providing an incorrect answer, which led to the development of avoidant strategies so they would not get picked to answer questions.

While the neoliberal school appears to promote a culture of blaming the child, incoherencies can limit children being self-responsible for their learning. This tension was illustrated in another sub-theme found by Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021), which was that children described responding with anger where self-reliance and self-determination was cut off, which led to subsequent frustration. An observer noted a pupil

to role-play their teacher punishing them for not completing their work, which they were motivated to do on time by forfeiting their lunchtime the following day. This shows that children can feel self-responsible yet have their autonomy for learning removed. Children were observed to absorb dominant discourses around acceptability of identity, and like Youdell's (2006) study, identify themselves as a group of lower-attaining pupils that were excluded as inadequate learners and felt alienated from their peers.

#### *1.6.4.2 The ideal learner*

This study argues that the language and ideas used in a socio-cultural context shape the beliefs of both teachers and pupils regarding what constitutes acceptable approaches to learning and the characteristics of learners themselves. This, in turn, impacts how children are perceived as learners within school settings (Youdell, 2006). Given that socio-cultural norms change with new psychological ideologies, understanding the impact of integrating growth mindset psychology into teaching practices is particularly relevant. Savvides and Bond (2021) demonstrate that schools implementing growth mindset psychology can shift their language towards a process-based approach from a performance-based one. This means that teachers could potentially help construct new growth mindset-informed ideals of the importance of learning rather than performance.

In primary schools, growth mindset is implemented through the use of growth mindset-oriented scripts, other interventions, and reflective practices guided by dominant discourses influenced by growth mindset psychology and related literature. This combination of cultural stereotypes and prejudices can lead to new ideals and potential stereotypical views

about children and communities (Savvides & Bond, 2021). In this context, understanding the construct of the ideal learner is critical to comprehending the integration of growth mindset into the teaching and learning practices of primary schools.

Archer (2007) and Archer and Francis (2007) have examined the "ideal learner" through the lens of gender, race, and social justice. Archer (2007) stance draws on Hesse (2000) idea that identity is discursively produced and 'becoming' within a multi-layered system of structural inequalities. Their analysis has identified a discourse that attributes the underperformance of children of colour to personal, family, and cultural factors. A typical discourse regarding the underperformance of these children often presents it as a pathological lack of aspiration caused by a "poverty of aspirations" within families. Archer (2007) argues that this is a result of the dominant discourse that positions white, middle-class students as the ideal learners,

*This approach can pathologize minority ethnic pupils and their families and shift the locus of blame/attention away from social structures and institutions and on to minority ethnic families – who are positioned as the primary site of both 'the problem' and any solutions (Archer, 2007, p. 117)*

Archer's (2007) study holds significant relevance in the context of integrating growth mindset psychology in primary schools because the concepts of aspiration and growth mindset could be used interchangeably, leading to the potential pathologisation of children and their communities with growth mindset understanding and prejudiced discourses. Children who are perceived to have a "fixed mindset" could be viewed as a problem that requires a solution, and may be subject to interventions aimed at increasing their levels of growth mindset.

More recently the term 'ideal learner' is a term used by Bradbury (2019) to describe desirable learner subjectivities within a primary school setting. Bradbury (2019) found that pupils who were taught in schools that promoted choice, self-improvement and growth mindset developed subjectivities that could be described as 'Little Neoliberals'.

The policy-informed practices found in schools, such as in Bradbury (2019), emerged from neoliberal reform from the early 1990s to the present day. This has created a split between what is deemed to be a good and a bad learner in settings dominated by neoliberal discourse. What is key here is the shifting expectations of how teachers and children perceive a good learner. These expectations form discourses across classrooms that constitute social reality and the taken-for-granted knowledge on ways of being in the world (Ball, 2005). Importantly, within these kinds of discourses the blame settles on within-the-person characteristics of the child; the child becomes pathologised (Archer, 2007).

Growth mindset found in whole-school approaches (Fraser, 2018) provides an example of possible how discourse can be manipulated in a way that could change perceptions of an ideal learner. This creates a new subjective way children and teachers constitute expectations of themselves and dyadic interaction between each other. It's important that studies explore these settings that adopt potentially narrow discourses on learner subjectivities that literature on growth mindset provides, and how this either constitutes the good learner, or potentially used by the learner to constitute themselves of the desirable traits in their school and classroom. It is important for qualitative studies to explore the implementation of growth mindset in primary schools to address Archer's (2007) concerns about within-the-child constructs, such as growth mindset, being used as a mechanism to deflect blame away from structural issues, such as schools' negative

perceptions of working-class children, gender stereotypes (Archer et al., 2013), poverty, and racism (Reay, 2020).

Whether the school is constituting growth mindset into a discursive system dominated by a statutory framework or not, power is intimately linked because it's designed to do something to the children. As such a pupils common sense view on what it is to be a good learner is ideological. As such, Foucault's post-structural ideas of subjects being constituted by a powerful discourse is important for explaining how children generate assumptions of what is valuable, how they are valued and the nature of relationships (Foucault, 1990).

Youdell (2006) draws on the Butler's (1993) work that further developed these Foucauldian notions by defining the process as performatively constituting subjects. Butler argues that

*“Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make ... [g]enerally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares” (Butler, 1993, p. 107).*

So, the children found by Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021), who perceived that perseverance in conforming to the school's rules was their only chance of not slipping out of the race altogether, could be interpreted as functioning within a discourse that performatively constituted their subjectivities to accept blame, punishment and a lower standing than their higher-attaining peers. Children's needs of rest, play and friendship are unconsciously destroyed in favour of succeeding in narrow performance evaluations of an ideological self. Archer's (2007) analysis suggests that the structural context of these pupils is overlooked when the focus is solely on personal characteristics such as perseverance. This limitation can hinder teachers' understanding and empathy towards the children they work with.



Bradbury (2019) might argue that the implications of constituted neoliberal subjects in children could be seen in Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021). Here 'little neoliberal' subjectivity could not see injustice because the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) operates to hold children responsible for their own separation in school – whether they constitute the good or bad learner respectively children will be separated according to the discursively governed truths within their socio-cultural context. This is what happened in Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021) when lower-attaining children appeared to be conditioned to bear the humiliation they experienced of working in lower-attainment sets and missing out on the most meaningful part of their day at school: playing with their friends. This is while children in their class recognised the humiliation suffered by those children dropping down a year for maths lessons, but thought it was fair because in their regime of truth they hadn't persevered enough. Burman (2018) may consider that the character and resilience manifesto (Paterson, Tyler, and Lexmond, 2014) emphasises on 'developing mental toughness' alongside 'bouncing back' from adversity, offering an insight into a regime of truth that enables these humiliating practices and a particular notion of what an ideal learner might look like

This highlights the importance of critically examining the integration of growth mindset psychology in primary schools and its potential implications on the construct of the ideal learner. As socio-cultural contexts evolve with the integration of new psychological ideologies, it is crucial to examine how these changes impact the beliefs and practices of teachers and students within educational settings. In particular, the potential pathologisation of certain groups of children, their families, and communities must be considered, as this could lead to negative consequences and the perpetuation of stereotypes and inequalities.

### 1.6.5 Leadership in supporting continued professional development

Findings from Savvides and Bond (2021) demonstrate that growth mindset psychology can be implemented as part of a continued professional development program within a primary school. As Savvides and Bond demonstrate, growth mindset psychology can be implemented and incorporated into a school's practices as continued professional development using different approaches. Therefore, it is important to explore literature around leadership in the context of continued professional development.

Leadership in educational settings was reviewed by Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019). Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy's (2019) narrative review of literature demonstrated that educational settings, such as the primary school in this study, can be influenced by a variety of approaches to leadership of their CPD, and that leadership is central to organizational performance.

They identified instructional, situational, transformational, distributed, and contemporary hybrid leadership approaches being applied in research over the last 20 years in education settings. Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) highlighted that instructional leadership was found to be viewed as a top-down approach to leadership where the leader takes a hands-on approach to supporting teachers they are leading. Instructional leadership was also found to be paternalistic and depended on obedient followers. Contemporary versions of instructional leadership focus on influencing processes, such as integrating growth mindset ideas and practices into their teaching team while understanding the organizational conditions for teaching and learning. Situational leadership is a move towards appreciating the impact context can have on school leadership and any outcomes resulting from it.

Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy's (2019) review shows that situational leadership theories tend to focus on both within-the-person characteristics of school staff and hierarchies, power relations, and the structure of tasks within the school. As such, situational leaders are characterized as treating employees according to the dynamics of that situation to enable them to improve the employee's confidence and skills.

A combination of instructional and situational approaches was found in Stevenson et al's (2016) study, which looked at different approaches to leading CPD. The first, a whole-school top-down approach, began with leaders consulting teachers on their needs, analyzing and synthesizing those needs before presenting their findings back to the teachers. This included the content and method of delivery of the CPD. However, while this might appear to be grounded in the staff needs, and therefore 'bottom-up' rather than top-down, the leaders explained that there was a need for top-down leadership to ensure each teacher was accountable for their learning. The leaders of this particular school explained the influence of popular and celebrated educationalists of inquiry-based learning, cognitive strategies, and 'twenty-first-century school design'. These influences were passed onto teachers in the school, and the leaders had expectations of how classrooms should look and the nature of pedagogy in this school. Leaders who encouraged this 'top-down' approach perceived the importance of teachers being adaptable to change, particularly when they might not have knowledge and experience in what they are asked to do.

More collaborative, bottom-up approaches to leadership were identified by Daniels, Hondeghem and Dochy (2019). These approaches are known as transformational leadership theories and are philosophically based on humanistic perspectives of self-actualisation. Transformational leadership is characterised as shared. Therefore, innovation stems from practice within the community while being guided by overarching goals, values, and

principles set out by the leader. Daniels, Hondeghem and Dochy (2019) highlight literature suggesting that transformational leadership is more important for student achievement and school improvement, and this is particularly the case when situational factors are considered.

An example of transformational to leading CPD was described by Stevenson et al (2016) as the 'offering approach.' This approach involved the leader attending a variety of workshops and engaging with experts in a particular area before 'offering' an idea to their teachers. In this approach to CPD, teachers were not mandated to deliver the new educational approach but were instead encouraged to try, learn, and demonstrate aspects of the learning they found beneficial to other members of staff. The leader in the 'offering approach' encouraged a small team of innovators to develop new approaches and then disseminate them to other members of staff. This approach required a philosophy that gave teachers space to decide whether to be co-opted into an innovation team or not, while also distributing leadership responsibility across the school. Stevenson et al (2016) reflected that this approach was more in line with autonomous and self-directed adult learning, where voluntary engagement was a factor in its implementation.

Finally, Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) found that distributive models of leadership emerged as a reaction against power imbalances associated with instructional leadership. In this case, power is distributed across several team leaders, and desired outcomes are achieved through clear communication of mission goals, better alignment of resources and structures to support students, and greater engagement in learning among staff. In this model, teachers are viewed as experts and are involved in school improvement processes. As such, responsibility for school improvement is spread more broadly across a school as power is shared between staff.

Recent studies by Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) have recommended using combinations of instructional, situational, transformational, and distributive - i.e. pluralistic - approaches to leadership in schools. According to the authors, the Leadership for Learning approach is characterised by a team-oriented, collaborative approach that distributes leadership responsibilities across formal management roles. One of the key outcomes of this model is the development of a process that encourages active participation from the whole school community in advancing learning. The overall goal of Leadership for Learning models is to create a school system where learning exists at all levels. Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) found that developing a culture of learning at all levels could lead to an increase in capacity and levels of collective efficacy within the school setting.

Leadership for Learning has been shown to be result-oriented across all aspects of a school system, including the curriculum, assessment, and administration of the school. Notably, the approach emphasises the importance of instructional strategies and individual skill development, making it a promising candidate for integrating psychological approaches into primary schools. With this in mind, interventions informed by growth mindset research could be implemented into primary schools using a Leadership for Learning approach.

Daniels, Hondeghem, and Dochy (2019) literature review on leadership approaches and found that effective school leaders primarily focus on core processes such as curricula and instruction, effective communication, and maintaining good relationships. In addition, those who are more effective communicators are better at shaping the school culture and climate, and defining and sustaining the school mission.

Fraser (2018) recommended that successful implementation of a whole school approach to growth mindset would require embedding a permanent change in the school culture that is sustained over a period of time. Therefore, effective leadership is crucial in developing communities of learning and a clear vision for learning using Leadership for Learning approaches.

However, there are instances where leadership in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) can be less effective and potentially costly. Stevenson et al (2016) identified an approach to CPD they called 'innovate first, plan later.' This approach involves senior leaders setting a broad direction and letting individual teachers take responsibility for their professional learning. In their case study, Stevenson et al (2016) found that the level of individual starting knowledge and confidence greatly increased the likelihood of teacher take-up and adherence. They also highlighted that the school had spent a significant amount of money on technology without a clear staff training strategy, showing that innovation can be a costly endeavor without distributed leadership and a clear community of learning. This review has explored the significant role that leadership plays in the implementation of growth mindset psychology within primary schools as part of a continued professional development program. The literature demonstrates that various leadership approaches, including instructional, situational, transformational, and distributive, can be employed to effectively integrate growth mindset practices into a school's culture. Moreover, the Leadership for Learning approach has emerged as a promising candidate for fostering a culture of learning and growth mindset within primary schools, as it emphasizes instructional strategies, individual skill development, and active participation from the whole school community.

### 1.6.6 Summary

This section has shown that the educational context, the neoliberal ideology and performocracy are deeply embedded in the UK's education system and have profoundly shaped the landscape of early years education. The adoption of growth mindset psychology and character education, while ostensibly beneficial, may inadvertently reinforce the competitive and outcome-driven nature of the education system. To address these concerns, it is essential for educators, policymakers, and researchers to critically examine the influence of these ideologies and practices on primary school education and consider the broader implications for child development and well-being.

### 1.7 How growth mindset is used in schools

As explored in section two, performocracy has an important role in the implementation of growth mindset in schools across the United Kingdom. Section three will look at how growth mindset is used and practiced in primary school education. Primarily, this chapter will outline research that has focused on teachers delivering growth mindset interventions in primary school settings, exploring how teachers are trained to practice or implement growth mindset in the classroom, with special attention given to the importance of language and embracing mistakes. This section also highlights external factors that influence the implementation of growth mindset with a focus on the role of parents, teacher's theory of intelligence and school systems.

### 1.7.1 Growth mindset being delivered by teachers in schools

Growth mindset is understood as an intervention delivered by a facilitator, as online training, or as an approach to learning across an entire school (Blackwell et al., 2007; Donohoe et al., 2012; Fraser, 2018). Growth mindset interventions typically consist of eight-week programmes that seek to increase the growth mindset of students and demonstrate improved academic outcomes (Blackwell et al., 2007). However, limited studies have been carried out in primary schools that have evaluated the use of growth mindset (Savvides and Bond, 2021).

Typically, growth mindset interventions consist of eight to ten one-hour sessions, which are designed to educate children about the brain (Blackwell et al., 2007; Aronson et al., 2002; Chao et al., 2017). During these sessions, educators explain how the brain functions and grows by neurons connecting as knowledge to teach children that people can biologically get smarter. Educators then use this as a basis for other discussions about ‘working hard’, ‘learning from mistakes’ and ‘seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow’. These interventions can be classroom-based or delivered online through a profit-making platform known as ‘Brainology’ (Mindset Works, 2021).

Although the empirical rationale for operationalising growth mindset within primary schools is very thin (Sisk et al., 2018). However, there has been significant investment in developing growth mindset in primary schools (Foliano et al., 2019; Rienzo et al., 2015) and growth mindset approaches have become common practices across the United Kingdom (Foliano et al., 2019; Savvides and Bond, 2021). To understand how growth mindset is implemented within schools, it is important to first understand how teachers deliver growth mindset in primary school settings, in both the early years (three to five) and five to eleven ranges.



Rienzo et al. (2015) conducted a randomised control trial on a growth mindset project with schools in the South-East of England. The changing mindsets project consisted of two separate studies. Study one compared the increases in academic performance of year five pupils that took part in a six-week growth mindset intervention delivered by researchers. Study two was another randomised control trial, including teachers from thirteen participating schools who were trained on how to foster the growth mindset of children, with the aim of improving their academic performance compared to the control group. In the experimental group, teachers were given two days of training, akin to a typical in-service training day (INSET). The first training day saw the teachers learning about Dweck's concept of growth mindset, the evidence of impact in the United States (Good et al., 2003; Blackwell et al., 2007) and how to reconsider whole-school and classroom culture to encourage a growth mindset. The key focus of the training was on how teachers used language, reward systems and allowing pupils to make mistakes. The second training day, six to eight weeks later, took the form of a practice development day during which the same teachers were invited to share their experiences of implementing growth mindset in their classrooms. The trainers promoted the use of a growth mindset, provided help and support when teachers encountered difficulties and shared specific techniques and approaches that they could apply where the teachers were facing difficulties. However, it was emphasised that the strategies the participating teachers employed was up to their discretion and that a standardised approach was not a manualised approach.

Following the training, the evaluators conducted interviews, observations and school surveys with some of the participating schools, and findings revealed that the teachers were largely very supportive of growth mindset ideas in the classroom and several teachers were already familiar with it as a concept. The teachers reported that they benefited from

learning about 'praise vocabulary' and the language of mindset. Teachers also felt they developed new ideas for teaching and learning, developing display boards, assemblies and developing whole-school approaches. Teachers also appreciated the opportunity to share learning and experiences and gain further ideas for activities using the resources available. Teachers perceived that growth mindset was easy to implement and they could see it being useful to address other barriers to learning, such as difficulty identifying with academic success, lack of self-belief and social deprivation. However, what the teachers did not provide was information on *how* growth mindset could address barriers such as social deprivation. This is important because growth mindset is perceived as an intervention to support children from underrepresented groups that struggle academically (Blackwell et al., 2007).

In addition, teachers also noted that similar approaches to process-orientated praise were being implemented, albeit without it being considered a growth mindset intervention. The survey found that nine of the twelve schools that participated continued to use a growth mindset approach and some of the schools extended it to younger year-groups. However, despite the positive feedback from teachers, a comparison of students' academic grades pre- and post-intervention training showed there was no significant post-intervention improvements in academic grades, even in those who were previously low-academic students at baseline. Rienzo et al. (2015) felt that the reason why the INSET training did not result in significantly improved results was because the schools were already implementing similar kinds of approaches. Overall, this study highlights a number of 'soft' benefits of growth mindset that the teachers highlighted, such as sharing ideas and developing practices with a group of other professionals, learning new knowledge and how theory informs their teaching practices. They also identified possible benefits for children who may

struggle in their education; however, the data suggests that the primary goal of improving academic outcomes does not materialise. Barriers to the success was also in part put on parents who continued to praise or admonish the performance outcomes of their children while neglecting the effort that was put in. Another barrier identified was the length of time students had been taught in a growth mindset style, suggesting it should be something introduced at a younger age. As such, it is important that research in the area of growth mindset explores these 'soft' and unmeasurable outcomes in more detail and nuance.

On a much smaller scale, Truax (2018) conducted a teacher training intervention with four experienced primary school teachers in Australia over a period of 25 weeks, with participants that were divided into an experimental and control group. The training intervention involved giving teachers pre-reading material on growth mindset with the popular psychology book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2006). The training consisted of an hour-long professional development session on growth mindset-orientated feedback, where teachers learned about the kind of language that promotes a beneficial growth mindset or a detrimental fixed mindset. Teachers were given a chart with growth mindset feedback scripts that they were expected to follow throughout the study so that consistency was maintained. The aim of the study was to look at the effects of teacher language and the inclusion of growth mindset feedback on writing motivation of pupils aged between seven and nine years old. The study evaluated pupil progress by measuring their motivation to write with a motivation for writing profile, but also by evaluating pupils' reflections after each of the sessions using a 14 question exit slip. Truax (2018) filmed the sessions so the interactions could be discursively analysed. Truax (2018) found that specific and objective feedback about student choices positively impacted their writing motivation, that criticising, correcting and drawing attention to mistakes undermined students writing

motivation and student writing motivation was enhanced by growth mindset feedback. This study did not evaluate the experiences and insights that teachers had to offer, rather, Truax (2018) focused on comparing strict growth mindset messages against typical everyday practice of experienced teachers. This study did not consider the wider use of growth mindset or similar practices within school settings or consider other situational variables, such as teaching and learning or behaviour policies and practices. Therefore, it is important for further research in the area to consider the socio-cultural influences that affect the delivery and implementation of growth mindset.

Another small-scale study that incorporated growth mindset training for teachers was carried out by Seaton (2018). Seaton (2018) trained teachers to teach in a growth mindset fashion so that their pupils' resilience, perseverance and motivation towards learning improved. However, this study did not evaluate pupil outcomes, instead it focused on evaluating the training itself. Thirty-seven teachers participated in an initial training day and seventeen continued with a further five sessions. The seventeen teachers were designated as 'mindset champions' in their respective schools. The study evaluated the teachers' change in growth mindset using an adult version of Dweck's (2006) theory of intelligence scale. The impact of the teacher training was evaluated using daily mindset incidence reports completed by the teachers, a structured debrief which used the Gibbs (1988) reflective model and a follow-up questionnaire three months after the intervention took place. Seaton (2018) did not describe what the training involved in the study, but based on the evaluation, it appears that it was a combination of delivering content knowledge around growth mindset and organisational change and reflective spaces for teachers to share resources and practices. The teachers who participated in Seaton's (2018) study appreciated gaining knowledge and resources and developed a greater awareness of their own teaching

practice. The teachers felt the most significant learning was around their own potential impact on the students. The teachers understood their own influence on a child's growth mindset as a result of the kind of language they used with students and the emphasis on mistake making. The teachers were reported to be open to growth mindset, took time to reflect on and reassess their own teaching practices, developed an awareness of their own mindset (and the implications that has on their teaching) and developed an awareness of individual pupil potential. The teachers aimed to continue to use growth mindset as a cluster/whole-school approach, which in this case meant raising growth mindset as an issue on across planning meetings involving their partnering schools, and staff being supportive to others through dialogue, sharing resources and developing further training for other members of staff. As mindset champions, they believed it was important to meet with the management in their schools to develop strategies, while also continuing to develop, locate and view further resources. Lastly, they felt it important to support parents in understanding the implications of growth mindset research by engaging them with it. This study further demonstrates that teachers hold strong beliefs around growth mindset and its usefulness in schools and classrooms, and it also references the role of parents in the implementation to prevent fixed mindset language. This research suggests that parents should learn how they are psychologically impairing their children by the way they are talking to them, and that growth mindset practices that come from the school can help parents change to a more ideal kind of language. In the context of pressures around pupil performance it is possible that parents could be unfairly blamed for their children's lack of growth mindset and therefore academic performance. Qualitative research is needed to explore these real-world contexts in more detail.

Unlike the previous studies, which utilised external experts to train and facilitate growth mindset knowledge and practices, Fraser's (2018) study evaluated a school in Scotland that had independently trained its teachers to use a growth mindset approach. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups with children and six observations across several classes, Fraser (2018) explored the application and implementation of growth mindset approaches to teaching and learning within the participating primary school. The school staff had undertaken significant amounts of professional reading to develop their understanding of growth mindset and then shared their understanding with parents. Classroom culture was seen as key to the development of growth mindset within the school setting. Fraser (2018) identified four key themes that promoted an appropriate classroom culture so that growth mindset could be implemented successfully into teaching and learning. Firstly, preparatory reading around growth mindset gave teachers the confidence to trust their approach. Members of staff who held a greater depth of knowledge around growth mindset were reported to have supported those less familiar with the topic. Secondly, the classroom culture that was created was dependent on the removal of ability groupings, teaching children about brain malleability, the promotion of mistake making, teachers developing their own growth mindset and changes in teacher language. Thirdly, influences outside of the classroom also contributed to a successful implementation of growth mindset, predominantly the role of friendships and parents. Fourthly, the children's approach to learning were noted to interact with the classroom culture; this included where children embraced challenges or not, where pupils recognised the importance of mistake making to their learning, whether they took a growth or fixed mindset approach to learning, and their ability to perceive their own learning processes (metacognition). Fraser's (2018) study adds depth and nuance to the existing literature by notably reporting the potential

limits of growth mindset within a classroom setting and demonstrating that systems and situations around the child can change how they think and behave. However, this study examined the implementation of growth mindset as something intrinsically good and does not offer critical insights into potential issues or the unforeseen consequences of teaching a strictly growth mindset-orientated teaching and learning policy.

Another study that evaluated a primary school-based, teacher-led growth mindset intervention study was carried out by Foliano et al. (2019). Foliano et al. (2019) was the second 'Changing Mindsets' effectiveness control-trial on growth mindset by the Education Endowment Foundation. Fifty schools were allocated to the intervention group, which equaled 2,502 year six pupils, and 51 were allocated to the control group, which equated to 2,516 year six pupils. All year six teachers were given a one-day training session on the delivery of growth mindset and then were expected to deliver an eight-week programme to their students. They were also given a supplementary training manual that included comprehensive lesson plans and a USB memory stick with additional material, including information on ways to support their interaction with parents, plus access to learning resources and videos supplied by an educational consultancy. Material found on the education consultancy's website included a video on Charles Darwin designed to demonstrate the power of mistake making and how failure leads to improved knowledge and intelligence. The project team also provided teachers with pupil quizzes and posters to place around classrooms and the school environment. The outcomes of the eight-week programme found that pupils did not make any additional progress in academic outcomes or non-cognitive outcomes compared with pupils in the control group. Foliano et al. (2019) explained the lack of measurable impact by the ubiquitous nature of growth mindset being

prevalent across education in the United Kingdom. They argued that the growth mindset intervention was not able to show measurable differences because growth mindset practices were not distinctly different from the teaching practices within the control group.

To assess the implementation of the intervention Foliano et al. (2019) conducted nine interviews with year six teachers, three deputy/Headteachers and four teachers from other year groups. They also held three focus groups with eight to ten year six pupils that received the intervention, three observations of the final Changing Mindset session and participating schools were asked to complete end-of-project and fidelity surveys. The participants were very responsive to the Changing Mindset programme, commenting on its suitability to promote metacognition among all pupils, supporting them with a more demanding curriculum, and providing a framework to promote coping strategies. Some participants felt that the training was too focused on the theory and research behind growth mindset (a number of teachers were already aware of this) and not enough on the practical skills of delivering changing mindset programme. The training manual that the teachers used was reported as beneficial; however, many teachers decided to adapt them to suit the needs of their pupils. The most notable change reported in whole-school practices was the way in which teachers gave feedback as many schools omitted fixed mindset feedback and instead focused on process-orientated feedback. The training made the teachers conscious of passing on a fixed mindset to their pupils but also how they incorporated their learning into preparing display boards that promoted the importance of mistake making around the school. However, teachers reported that they were a lot more careful about what they said to pupils to prevent teaching them from developing a limited fixed mindset. This was formalised by some schools that integrated process-orientated praise into the marking and



feedback process so that all teachers in the school would be required not to praise achievement. Teachers were reported to find growth mindset useful when teaching mathematics due to the numerous opportunities to make mistakes. However, some teachers were conscious of the amount of time taken up by the growth mindset training lessons and felt that other aspects of the curriculum were being excessively limited because of it. Overall, the participants were positive about incorporating growth mindset into their teaching practices. The participants who were originally hesitant about growth mindset were reported to change their minds as they perceived the benefits it had on their pupils. However, teachers felt that impact on pupils academic progress would take a longer time to develop as they thought that the intervention was too short and pupils would likely forget the principles over time. Additionally, the impact of the training was felt to be inhibited by families as parents were seen as a barrier for pupils to develop a growth mindset, and the teacher's awareness of parents displaying fixed mindsets around their children was highlighted. Teachers did however notice positive short-term changes in attitudes, enthusiasm, and perseverance in their own learning. Some of the teachers planned to use growth mindset moving forward, ranging from delivering growth mindset-orientated classes, making attempts to integrate growth mindset approaches in maths and English and trying to engage parents in the school's growth mindset values. Some schools did put limits on plans if the initial training sessions were deemed unsuccessful, but others planned to continue the approach as they didn't see any adverse reactions from implementing growth mindset.

The findings from Foliano et al. (2019), are like previous studies outlined in this chapter in that there is an underlying assumption that growth mindset in schools is a good thing.

Although teachers do not report that the findings around growth mindset research tend to

show negative effects, they do report that they feel comfortable practicing something which has a solid research base behind it (Seaton, 2018), and some teachers reported that trainers were 'preaching to the converted' (Foliano et al., 2019, p. 31) during the training sessions. This suggests that there is already a form of widespread understanding of growth mindset that has emerged from a variety of different sources external to researchers conducting field experiments; both studies commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (Rienzo et al., 2015; Foliano et al., 2019) acknowledge this. As such, further research in the area of growth mindset needs to be explorative and qualitative as it is clear that in a real-world setting where macro factors promote growth mindset, making it 'ubiquitous' (Foliano et al., 2019, p. 44) in nature, it is not possible to find a controllable and uninformed sample which is essential for experimental research. The phenomena of growth mindset being implemented in primary schools is reported to be widespread, but literature has yet to highlight what this look likes from the perspective of teachers in a real-world setting. Since there has been an abundance of implementation of growth mindset approaches in primary schools, Savvides and Bond (2021) noted it was surprising that there is a lack of research on real-world, teacher-based studies on growth mindset in primary schools. There is a need for more research. As noted in the above-mentioned studies, it is not clear whether primary schools are delivering interventions that constitute what Yeager and Dweck (2000) would agree was genuine growth mindset intervention. It is possible and likely that schools create hybrid growth mindset interventions that are influenced by culture and existing practice. It is also possible that growth mindset ideas can be used in informal ways with children. Savvides and Bond (2021) noted that these hybrid designs could have more ecological validity, and this is what Yeager et al. (2016) attempted to do with the development of a more ecologically valid growth mindset intervention. However, the

balance between what could be viewed as ecological validity could tip an intervention understood as growth mindset into something that is not growth mindset. This is why socio-cultural studies are necessary to explore the implementation of a growth mindset where competing understandings of growth mindset theory, teaching practices and community converge.

### 1.7.2 Factors contributing to the implementation of growth mindset

As the studies that are focused on teachers implementing growth mindset discussed above, have shown, the use of process-orientated praise and feedback, and emphasising the importance of mistake making are the two most common characteristics of growth mindset practices. Growth mindset is regarded with positivity and the research presented to teachers during training sessions and through literature gave them a belief in the use of growth mindset in their schools and classrooms. Teacher training and personal reading of growth mindset literature also gave teachers a heightened awareness of the use of language, and in particular, the social influences that enable or inhibit growth mindset development in students. This included an awareness of how a teacher's belief systems around ability and intelligence can be conveyed negatively to students. Most prominently, teachers became aware of the negative impact that a fixed mindset view from parents can have on children..

### 1.7.3 The importance of language in growth mindset training

A major part of growth mindset training emphasises the use of language when giving feedback to children (Seaton, 2018; Truax, 2018). A key problem identified in experimental research and by key proponents of growth mindset is the impact of 'fixed mindset language'

(Mueller and Dweck, 1998) as it is associated with reducing the resiliency of a pupil (Yeager and Dweck, 2012) and increased learned helplessness (Elliott and Dweck, 1988). The research presented above emphasises the importance of words to discourage fixed mindset ways of praising children, prevent helplessness and discouragement in their learning (Truax, 2018). In Foliano et al. (2015), teachers noted the omission of fixed mindset language, while an emphasis was made process-orientated praise. What research has not been able to do so far is explore, over a prolonged period of time, what this might look like in a real-world primary school. For example, it is not yet clear how teachers use and feel about growth mindset over a period of more than eight weeks.

After learning that performance-focused feedback meant that pupils were more likely to 'view their later mistakes as failures' (Kamins and Dweck, 1999, p. 843, Rienzo et al. 2015) participants felt that INSET training provided them with terminology to use when praising children. Truax (2018) went one step further and encouraged teachers to adhere to a feedback script when working with pupils in their growth mindset training lessons. Growth mindset scripts excluded phrases such as 'You must be smart at these problems' (Dweck, 2007, p. 3), 'Wow, you did very well on these problems. You got [number of problems] right. That's a really high score' (Mueller and Dweck, 1998, p.36). Instead, the focus attempted to be more process-oriented so that teachers could help children develop a growth mindset by praising them for their effort and persistence, rather than their innate intelligence for example., 'well done for working really hard' (Rienzo et al., 2015, p. 5), 'I can tell you put a lot of effort into this writing piece. You helped me learn more about insects' and 'You tried all kinds of strategies to figure out the spelling of that word until you got it' (Truax, 2018, p. 136).

The use of scripts is unsurprising considering that teachers have been trained to perceive performance-focused feedback as detrimental to a pupil. Truax (2018) underpinned this by pointing out that

*“If they [teachers] do not fully understand the power their words can have on students, they cannot use these words to propel students’ writing motivation forward in a positive direction”* (Truax, 2018, p. 149)

This could also be interpreted to mean: ‘If they do not understand the power their words can have on students, they cannot use these words [growth mindset language] to prevent their writing motivation moving backwards in a negative direction’, as demonstrated by Foliano et al. (2019, p. 38):

*“Teachers were now far more aware of how their own feedback could put limits on what pupils believe they are capable of achieving and how they respond to challenges.”*

As such, teachers participating in growth mindset training understand that there is a way of giving feedback to children that can become demonised and harmful. That certain language can inhibit growth and motivation and can also reduce the resilience within a child. This acquired way of thinking is demonstrated where teachers admonish others presenting fixed mindset traits to pupils, such as the pupils’ parents. So far, qualitative research in growth mindset has not been able to explore the long-term consequences of this type of thinking on teachers themselves, their practices and also the children they are working with. Real-world research is necessary to understand how understandings of growth mindset research gets practiced, but also internalised by professionals working in schools.

#### 1.7.4 Emphasis on mistake making

A key aspect of growth mindset is that a child who is goal-orientated when it comes to education develops mastery responses and is more likely to have a growth mindset (Elliott and Dweck, 1988). Truax (2018) reasons that teachers should use growth mindset if they want their pupils to view mistakes as opportunities for learning. This theoretical position is used by educators as an attempt to reframe those children with goal orientations focused on their performance, and subsequently are more likely to develop tendencies towards learned helplessness and a fixed mindset (Chen and Tutwiler, 2017).

The way in which mistake making is framed varies. Seaton (2018), Rienzo et al. (2015) and Foliano et al. (2019) actively taught teachers about the benefits of mistake making and teachers were found persuading their pupils that making mistakes was a good thing. This characteristic of growth mindset teaching was also corroborated by Fraser (2018). Seaton (2018) found that teachers recognised mistake making as one of the most significant things that impacts a child's learning, and they spoke about promoting mistake making as part of their teaching process. Foliano et al. (2019) found that some of their schools put up a 'my favourite mistakes' display board, in both staff and pupil areas, so growth mindset ideas were visually communicated to students. The promotion of mistake making was also found in classroom interventions where children would watch videos about famous scientific discoveries that would not have emerged without mistakes being made (Folano et al., 2019).

This research does not explore the meaning behind mistake making beyond the construct of learning. As section two discussed, in a high-stakes environment, mistakes can have detrimental effects on schools, teachers and pupils; therefore, lauding mistake making in this context is contradictory. As a result, it is important that in-depth research which is

sustained over a longer period of time can explore these and potentially other unknown contradictory elements within an educational setting implanting growth mindset.

#### 1.7.5 Forces of influence – external powers that interact with the pupil and teacher in the delivery of growth mindset

The literature indicates that the growth mindset model is wholeheartedly believed by researchers and staff. This is demonstrated by the lack of criticality within the research, and when potentially critical points are made, they are focused on the inability of surrounding environments to positively influence growth mindset. This is evident when findings tend to go against growth mindset theory, and researchers suggest that environmental issues outside of the intervention are the reason for the growth mindset approach being unsuccessful (Foliano et al., 2019; Dweck and Yeager, 2019).

Research conducted by Rienzo et al. (2015), Truax (2018) and Seaton (2018) in primary schools has identified some of these problematic forces that disrupt ‘delivering persuasive yet stealthy methods for conveying psychological ideas’ (Yeager and Walton, 2011, p. 267), such as growth mindset. This section outlines the environmental influences identified as disabling the development of growth mindset in pupils that are reported to occur in real-world settings.

#### 1.7.6 Parents

An omnipresent theme found in research by Foliano et al. (2019) and Rienzo et al. (2015) was the importance of parents on a child’s growth mindset. Parents tend to be problematised as having a fixed mindset, which can lead to growth mindset work in school being undone at home. This was attributed to parents undermining the growth mindset

messaging promoted at schools, and the lack of reinforcement at home was attributable to the student's slow progress (Rienzo et al., 2015; Foliano et al., 2019). An example of this was demonstrated by a Headteacher interviewed by Foliano et al. (2019, p. 5):

*“What happens is that we do stuff here and it gets undone again at home because parents haven't changed their approach or attitude. I sit with children who are finding maths really hard and Mum says, 'I can't do maths either'. Those sorts of things, [...] that's what you want to stop.”*

This desire for uniformity in parenting is evident in the Headteacher's comments, but at the same time teachers responding in Foliano et al. (2019) remained cautious to attest to the positive long-term impact of growth mindset approaches because of the prevailing social conditions found at home and within the child's community. The perception of the Headteacher above gives potential insights into an aspect of the reproduction of social disadvantage across generations. To mitigate social disadvantage, some schools suggested various ways to engage parents in growth mindset approaches, including child-led workshops where children act as experts in growth mindset to demonstrate their understanding and experiences of learning about it (Foliano et al., 2019).

Schools that have made efforts to integrate growth mindset approaches have also been found to include parents in their endeavours. Fraser's (2018) evaluation of a primary school in Scotland found that parental involvement was an important part of the integration of growth mindset teaching in the school. However, the degree to which parents were involved was not made clear. Training in evaluation studies by the Education Endowment Foundation encouraged participating teachers to engage parents in the integration of



growth mindset; however, few schools reported to do this (Rienzo et al., 2015; Foliano et al., 2019).

A study by Andersen and Nielsen (2016) showed how schools could potentially utilise growth mindset in subject-specific areas with the help of parents. This study used growth mindset ideas within a reading intervention. Parents were asked to watch videos and read a booklet that emphasised the key aspects of growth mindset, including information that proves reading abilities can be improved at any level, and guidance on how to make constructive, mastery-focused approaches. The literature for parents also informed them how to support their child's self-supporting, autonomous, and engaged reading; how to pose open questions; the importance of taking time to answer a child's questions; and making sure that the experience was positive. This study demonstrated that children improved in their reading and language skills, particularly those children that without the intervention would spend less time with their parents. However, so much emphasis is made on an intervention and not necessarily the kind of relational space that is created that improves relationships between school and the home.

#### 1.7.7 Individual teacher mindsets

Research on the use of growth mindset has also identified individual mindsets of teachers as an important factor in its implementation (Rattan et al., 2012). If teachers do not hold a growth mindset themselves, it is difficult for them to pass a growth mindset on to the children they are working with (Rattan et al., 2012). Dweck and Leggett (1988) and Gollwitzer et al. (2001) argue that these interventions work at their best when the educator holds a growth mindset. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is possible that the use of scripts and manuals can mitigate the perceived danger of a teacher having and passing on

their fixed mindset to pupils. Without tools, such as scripts, Rattan et al. (2012) argues that the teachers fixed belief of intelligence is likely to be communicated to children through inappropriate performance praise, which results in counter-productive educational outcomes for students.

#### 1.7.8 School systems

The school as an organisation has been found to be an important factor in the implementation of growth mindset approaches. Teachers that were trained by Seaton (2018) identified that the future use of growth mindset would benefit from being included on school cluster improvement plans and developed into whole-school approaches coordinated by growth mindset champions. Kam et al. (2003) found that support by the Headteacher, alongside quality-intervention delivery, was a crucial influence on the overall success of school-based interventions. This was supported by Fraser (2018), who reported that successful implementation of growth mindset approach at a school system level depends on school management support but also a positive belief in the growth mindset approach by the teachers implementing it.

#### 1.7.9 Growth mindset in the early years

Even though teachers have been implementing growth mindset ideas in the early years setting (Rienzo et al., 2015), research is even more limited in this context. The majority of studies that have researched growth mindset in this context are based in the United States (Cancelliere, 2016; Schrodts et al., 2019; Cortes, 2020; Lu et al., 2022). One other study in Australia looked at early childhood teachers' perspectives of growth mindset (Boylan, Barblett and Knaus, 2018). As a result, there is a lack of research on the use of growth

mindset in real-world early years settings across the world, particularly in the United Kingdom. It is important to explore how growth mindset is integrated within these specific contexts, in order to understand why, how, and the potential structural barriers or enablers to successful implementation. Ethnographic research can provide valuable insights into the complexities of implementing growth mindset in real-world settings and inform best practices for educators.

Cancelliere (2016) collaborated with a school psychologist to deliver a bespoke ten-week growth mindset research intervention with 19 kindergarten children. This was a typical field experiment where pre-experiment and post-experiment tests were carried out to ascertain effectiveness. In this study, effectiveness was evaluated against pupil understanding of brain functionality and assessment of their mindset with a mindset survey. In this small-scale field study, they found that 100% of the children aligned with having a growth mindset after the ten-week intervention had been completed. This intervention focused heavily on explaining a plastic and malleable brain that acquires knowledge based on the book *Your Fantastic Elastic Brain: Stretch it, Shape it* (Deak, 2010). This study is limited by quantitative evaluation because it is limited to just a few measures. Additionally, it does not consider classroom observations or qualitative perceptions of staff.

A study by Schrodtt et al. (2019) adapted Kindergarten writing workshops to incorporate growth mindset concepts. The 'enhanced writers' workshop and growth mindset intervention focused on writing, self-regulation strategies and growth mindset. Initially, pupils received writing instructions and had time to practice before receiving the growth mindset intervention. This intervention aimed to teach children that their brains grow when they learn new things and encourage them to persevere even when faced with difficulties. Growth mindset interventions commonly include teaching children about specific aspects of

the brain, such as using metaphors like "the brain is like a muscle." Additionally, growth mindset-oriented characters were highlighted in stories that were read aloud.. Day-to-day teaching was facilitated by a pair of fictional characters that represented growth and fixed mindsets respectively. Ziggy ,representing growth mindset, was portrayed as someone who enjoyed the learning of new strategies and increased effort when encountering new challenges as he believed practice would help grow his brain and improve performance. Nash, representing fixed mindset, was portrayed as a character that sticks with activities he finds easy, while not pursuing new strategies when facing difficulties. Ziggy and Nash became humanised with language and phrases. For example, students in the intervention group were encouraged to think like Ziggy and say: 'I can do it! Bring on the challenges!' Other mantras included: 'With a little effort and time, I can do this!' or 'A mistake? Great! I can learn from my mistakes'. Schrodt et al. (2019, p. 431) understood this indirect self-talk training to help to 'train their brains to push through difficult learning challenges with increased effort and motivation'. Interestingly, an additional aspect of the research by Schrodt et al. (2019) included an intervention which aimed to increase perseverance and build motivation and reasoning skills. However, this task had a focus in which children were rewarded with stickers that could be viewed as being counter to growth mindset ideas that children should not be motivated by extrinsic rewards.

This particular study is important because it represents a variety of interventions functioning together which could be representative of a typical school environment. The study found that children in the growth mindset group showed increases in basic, contextual and journal-writing abilities. Additionally, Schrodt et al. (2019) found that children were likely to take on more challenging tasks. A strength of this study was that qualitative interview with children could identify the impact of the intervention beyond

quantitative indicators. Interviews were conducted before and after the intervention that to find what disables and enables children seeing themselves as writers. They found that children were averse to making mistakes and found comfort in spelling easy words. Children were not convinced they would become a writer and doubted their skills to get improve. Compared with the control group, those in the growth mindset group considered mistakes important for learning and could articulate strategies to use when they got stuck. Children in the experimental group were able to provide writing advice, while those in the control group could not or provided vague advice. Those in the experimental group felt able to write on their own compared to the 92% in the control group who felt they could not write on their own. This small-scale field experiment demonstrates that growth mindset-informed practices could have a place in education.

Apart from typical intervention research, Cortes (2020) carried out an ethnographic study of an alternative learning environment that integrated growth mindset into teaching and learning practices. Cortes explored how teachers develop home-to-school collaboration with parents to foster a growth mindset concept in the children, how parents foster growth mindset with children they are home schooling and how teachers and parents collaborated in monthly consultations. This study was carried out across school year groups and provides an important contribution to research on the perspectives of teachers and parents of the use of a growth mindset approach in real-world settings. Cortes reported that teachers perceived an increase in the levels of persistence among pupils and teachers believed their mindset was transferable on to the children. The teachers also believed that mindset was important to teach children at the earliest ages in education because it prepared them for later years. The teachers reported using language tracker sheets to support the integration of growth mindset language into their daily teaching and collaboration between teachers

and parents was key. This level of collaboration included the sharing of strategies of what might work so that parents and teachers were 'playing on the same team for success'. Cortes (2020) reported that teachers found growth mindset-orientated teacher–parent consultations a good vehicle for identifying areas where children were struggling in the context of social and emotional development. Teachers believed this enabled them to instil the right tools into the child. A parent described how they saw improvements in their child's social and emotional development, which they perceived to be a direct result of the growth mindset intervention. This linked with another theme where children were perceived to meet new challenges by replacing self-talk that suggested they were stupid with more realistic self-talk that they hadn't learned how to do something yet. Some teachers at the school perceived growth mindset as an improving through working harder and believed that growth mindset provided a framework to explain improvement.

Boylan, Barblett and Knaus (2018) conducted a survey in Australia that looked at early 95 childhood teachers' perspective of growth mindset. They sought to find what these teachers knew about growth mindset in their classrooms, how early childhood teachers felt about fostering growth mindset and what early childhood teachers regarded as important for children success for learning. Within this cohort, 63% of the teachers had heard of growth mindset and this reflected with 58% believing that it was their role to nurture a growth mindset in their pupils. However, only 14% felt they had the right knowledge to do so and 20% strongly agreed they were good at fostering a growth mindset in the pupils they taught. An interesting finding from this study was that 92% of the early childhood teachers believed that a child's mindset would have an impact on their learning. This latter finding demonstrates that the term 'mindset' has an important cultural meaning beyond the technical psychological term 'mindset'. Therefore, there is potential for alternative

perspectives on what 'mindset' means across a population that misinterprets a psychological research-based mindset, instead of a general cultural interpretation of mindset. When the results of the factors early childhood teachers perceived as being extremely important were ordered from highest to lowest, developing a growth mindset was in sixth position. This was behind (from most important to least): feeling safe at school, social and emotional learning, engagement and motivation, teaching quality and parental support and engagement. The most frequent qualitative themes that relate to children's success in learning were around children developing positive relationships with peers, educators and parents and the implementation of a developmentally appropriate pedagogy. This suggests that these educators value developing relationships and observing relationships to support individual development, instead of focusing on targeted messages to promote the development of individual differences, such as growth mindset.

#### 1.7.10 Summary

This section has identified that, from the available evidence, growth mindset is an approach that teachers receive training on and carry out their own independent study to develop their teaching practices. From these learning exercises, teachers in primary schools are made aware of negative performance-orientated language to avoid and positive process-orientated language to use with their pupils when giving feedback. Some teachers develop their own scripts based on growth mindset literature so they can maintain growth mindset-orientated praise with students. Alongside developing awareness of fixed and growth mindset language, some teachers attempt to shift children's goal orientation from a performance-focused goal orientation to a mastery learning orientation by emphasising the benefits of failure. This reframing of failure as being positive is done through feedback and

modelling and has also been reported to be part of school display boards. Research has reported other influences that affect the outcomes of growth mindset approaches in schools, most notably, the impact of parents with a fixed mindset 'undoing' the growth mindset work being done in the school. Other aspects that may affect the implementation of a growth mindset approach is the teacher's mindset and the need of backing from school leaders to implement it.

## 1.8 Concluding the literature review

This review of the literature has highlighted many gaps in the research relating to the implementation of growth mindset approaches in primary school settings. Section one provided the introductory context outlining that epistemological and ontological base of growth mindset is situated in the socio-cognitive paradigm, which develops theoretical knowledge through the quantification of social phenomena. The overview of growth mindset also showed that it can be understood in a variety of ways, either as an individual difference, an approach or intervention and as a conceptual model. The key functions of growth mindset within the educational context are presented as improvement in learning and academic attainment, increasing the resilience of pupils, providing desirable employability skills and traits and providing a low-cost intervention for schools to teach these values. Section two positioned the educational context within the United Kingdom as a performocracy by outlining the influence of the OECD PISA framework on the UK education sector. As such, policy has adapted to this by driving improvement in educational standards with the use of market mechanisms, high-stakes accountability and the standardisation of the curriculum. Growth mindset is positioned within neoliberal structures



as part of the Department for Education's character education policy. This is a mechanism for state-funded schools to teach pupils individual traits that will enable them to be resilient and increase their academic progress. Section three explored research carried out in primary schools in the United Kingdom and showed that there is a lack of criticality exploring why and how growth mindset is used and the surrounding structures that affect its implementation.

The literature review identified three key gaps in the research that have not been explored in depth. Firstly, research on growth mindset has yet to investigate why primary schools adopt growth mindset of their own free will. Research has so far either recruited schools to take part in interventions studies or schools have participated as exemplars of growth mindset practices. These studies have not explored in detail why these schools either participated or took on growth mindset. This demonstrates a low level of criticality within the research as it is assumed that growth mindset is good and works effectively.

Secondly, the research focuses on how growth mindset approaches are used within a primary school. Research has covered aspects of implementation and also tried to identify what growth mindset looks like on the surface – e.g., encouraging pupils to make mistakes and developing new feedback structures. These practices are carried out under the assumption that they would increase a child's growth mindset. It is also assumed that these practices are uniform and follow a model or a formula where a teacher gives a certain type of feedback to a child and that child's perception of intelligence is modified. However, research does not explain how certain ways of using growth mindset may proliferate across a primary school setting.

The literature review demonstrated that multiple influences could operate within a school. This means that field experiment research designs do not take place in a closed laboratory

environment and the outcomes of a growth mindset intervention can never be certain.

Research is therefore required that considers socio-cultural influences on teaching practices more broadly, exploring the factors that lead to schools to adopt growth mindset approaches. Additionally, because research in growth mindset has largely consisted of field intervention studies, there is a distinct lack of understanding regarding the unexpected interpretation of and uses of growth mindset.

Growth mindset could be viewed as technology of agency (Cruikshank, 1999). A technology of agency is a social practice that attempts to augment the capacities of groups so that they can help themselves (Spohrer et al., 2018). In this case, growth mindset could be seen as the social practice and the children as the group being manipulated to help themselves by the school and teachers and teaching assistants at the school. All technologies of agency, such as growth mindset, are ultimately used by individual teachers, with their own subjective experiences of teaching, but they are equally situated in context dependent school systems. According to communities of practice theory (Wenger, 2006), one could argue that this combination of teacher subjectivity and structural influences would shape how a particular technology is used. So far, growth mindset research has not considered the influence of subjectivity and how structures around teaching staff not only develop those subjectivities but also the practices of growth mindset within primary school settings.

The literature review demonstrated that the distal educational context is a key influence in how primary schools in the United Kingdom function (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2021). The dominant structures of neoliberalism situate schools in a high-stakes, competitive space, which is characterised by a performance agenda (Brown, 2013). The pupils in a primary school are assessed on their academic progress, and this reflects on teacher and school performance (Williams-Brown and Jopling, 2021). This is important as growth mindset

theory and practice try to reframe goal orientation away from a focus on performance and towards a focus on learning or process (Fraser, 2018). There is a clear mismatch between theory and the prevailing education context that is yet to be explored by research. There is a need to conduct research on growth mindset that considers subjective, contextual and distal parts that influence why and how growth mindset is used. This research aims to address these factors.

## Chapter 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research aims

This research proposes that socio-cultural research in this area can capture an understanding as to why growth mindset might be useful, as well as, it also captures teacher understanding of why it might be useful to the specific school's socio-cultural context. This provides deeper knowledge into the acceptance and perceived necessity of growth mindset, or not, by teachers and their school. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding into why schools have readily accepted and integrated growth mindset into their systems and potentially unearth wider structures of influence that have yet to be considered by research in this area. As such, this research aims to qualitatively explore the use of growth mindset in a UK primary school. In doing so, this research will use a combination of participation observations, focus groups and one-to-one interviews (ethnography) to:

- Understand why a school may choose to adopt growth mindset.
- Explore how growth mindset is used in a school.
- Describe how context-specific training in growth mindset influences teacher perception of opportunities and subsequent actions.
- Identify how socio-cultural factors may influence the use of growth mindset in the school.

The proceeding chapters will describe how this research was conducted, focusing on the theoretical influences guiding this study, the school setting where this study took place, the use of ethnography, and the ethical considerations and the stages of analysis.

## 2.2 Ontology and epistemology

### 2.2.1 Critical realism

This research is methodologically influenced by critical realism. Critical realism emerged from the paradigm wars between Positivists and Constructionists in the 1980s (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and has since gained popularity as a social scientific framework (Fletcher, 2017). Critical realism is a comprehensive philosophy of science, attributed to Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 2010), as it applies both Positivist and Constructionist approaches to provide a detailed account of ontology and epistemology (Brown, Fleetwood, and Roberts, 2002). A key aim of critical realism is to search for causal processes to help explain social phenomena with a view to addressing social problems by providing practical policy recommendations. An aim of this research is to uncover why growth mindset (the social phenomena) is being used within the school, and it will draw on wider theory to help explain the rationales for the use of growth mindset.

Critical realism functions as a general methodological framework for research; however, it is not associated with any method, thus making it suitable for real-world research that may require a variety of data collection techniques. Critical realism asserts that an objective world exists independently of fantasy, imagination, and perception, while maintaining that interpretations of that world influence the way in which it is experienced (Edwards et al., 2014). This balanced view is unique within social sciences and allows for a wider range of research approaches and increased levels of flexibility within the research process and especially within an ethnographic study (Rees and Gatenby., 2014). This is unlike positions that purely see knowledge as something to be measured externally (objectivist, Positivist or reductionist) as in the socio-cognitive paradigm where growth mindset research is usually

set. Positivist approaches would not allow for identifying structures and mechanisms that can help explain how growth mindset was practiced and used.

Therefore, critical realism accepts all forms of research as relevant sources of knowledge that can, to different degrees, describe, explain and predict social phenomena. Critical realism does not wholly prescribe to subjectivist beliefs that realities are created through localised and fragmented discourses (Burr, 2003). Although it appreciates that there are multiple ways of explaining phenomena, some theory offers greater explanatory power than others. As such, a combination of knowledge is desired to make reasoned explanatory conclusions or predictions.

A key difference with critical realism compared to the Positivist position adopted by Dweck to develop growth mindset theory, is that it views the world as theory-laden. It does not see the world as determined by theory; however, different theories can provide knowledge that is closer or more distant to reality (Danermark, et. Al, 2019). Approaching qualitative research in a critical realist way can allow the research to engage in explanation and causal analysis, therefore, making it a useful approach for analysing social problems and making recommendations for future change. In the case of the current research, explanations regarding why and how growth mindset is being used can be understood through the use of empirical data and further explained with appropriate theoretical analysis.

Critical realism sees reality as a stratified, open system of emergent entities (Edwards et al., 2014). An open system contains a variety of entities, or parts, which interact to form social phenomena. However, unlike a closed system, such as in a laboratory, the open system of a society, a community or a school contain complex feedback loops that are unpredictable, which means that the expected outcome of events is never certain. Within open systems, there are entities that have combined powers to create social phenomena or conceptual

reality. Theory, such as in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), discussed further in this chapter, contains several entities that theoretically exist and help explain the complex development of a child for analytical purposes. Each different entity can present a different power which can create the social phenomena that a child experiences with other people in their bioecological system. Entities within a system exist at different levels, and greater explanatory power can be achieved where it is understood how different entities relate to one another. However, the layered nature of a system does not necessarily indicate the power of different entities. Entities can demonstrate emergence, which means that parts combining to constitute the whole of an entity can have a power greater than the sum of its parts. For example, a pair of teachers may work well together in delivering content for an hour to a class of children, but if they taught the children one after the other they might not have the same sense on the children's learning. Whether teaching together or separately, the two teachers have what is known as emergent properties. This emergent property may manifest as a unique style of teaching that would not happen unless they were both teaching independently. Emergent properties might be found in two separate schools that have trained their teachers in different styles of teaching. Entities can also be understood through their essences or causal powers. For example, a teacher may possess causal powers such as the ability to teach, to punish, to praise and to give feedback while a pupil may have causal powers to learn, keep quiet and walk-through corridors. These causal powers can be possessed, exercised, or actualised. For example, a pupil possesses the causal power to learn, and this power may be exercised once a teacher explains something, but this power may not be actualised due to countervailing circumstances that impede learning from happening. So, a school system has many entities each with their own powers and influences that can circumvent or catalyse another power

from actualising. The child worried about the power of a bully to ridicule them at lunchtime might inhibit their power to learn. A teacher may perceive a quiet child learning but not actually know the reality of a child's worry that is redirecting their attention to other matters. This demonstrates that reality from one position can never be certain, that objective realities exist outside the consciousness of people working within the same open-system and that there is a need for a variety of research methods, positions, and perspectives within an open system to provide stronger explanatory understandings of causal processes that, in the example above, leave a child finding it difficult to learn and engage.

Critical realist ontology stratifies reality into three separate levels for analysis (Edwards et al., 2014). The empirical level is the first level of this strata. The empirical level categorises experienced and observed events, including how events are understood through perceptions. So, at this level, objects and events can be measured but these are always mediated through human perception. This is known as a transitive level of reality, where making, actions, decisions and social ideas occur (Bhaskar, 2010). The middle stratum is the actual level where there is no filter of human experience. At this level, things happen outside of consciousness in the world around us, whether a person is directly involved or conscious of those actions actually taking place. These true events are often different from what is observed at an empirical level (Danermark et al., 2019). The third and final stratum is the real level. The real level is where mechanisms exist in an object or structure that act as causal forces to create events that can be perceived on an empirical level (Edwards et al., 2014). The main goal of critical realism is to explain social phenomena by reference to causal mechanisms and how they influence the other stratified realities.



As a critical realist researcher, I believe that there are deeper levels awaiting discovery because events occur beyond my current knowledge, but also because what is known to me is also transitive. My understanding and perception of growth mindset has changed significantly over the course of this research. And it is on this journey that my perception of the influence of socio-cognitive psychology, education and research has changed and will continue to change. As such, I appreciate that there are multiple ways to interpret the data that was collected.

### 2.3 Theoretical influences

The literature review demonstrated that most of the research on growth mindset is quantitative. Growth mindset theory has been developed through quantitative analysis of descriptive and experimental datasets. And most of those studies assert that growth mindset has the potential to see universal use in schools. However, the literature lacks rigorous explanatory power beyond the causal associations between measures of individual difference. This research argues that there is a need to understand in greater depth what is *actually* involved in the outcomes of schools that attempt to take growth mindset theory and develop teaching practices.

Qualitative research that has been carried out on growth mindset takes an uncritical position of the theory, highlighting that growth mindset is a construct that plays a real role in development. Consequently, qualitative research focuses its attention on explaining why growth mindset interventions do not achieve expected outcomes (Foliano et al., 2019) or seeks to offer explanations of potential causal powers that would enable growth mindset to be integrated through training and whole-school approaches (Fraser, 2018; Seaton, 2018). To date, research in the area of growth mindset has not explained the mechanisms that

explain the reasons or ways it is used. While research describes growth mindset practices but does not explain contextually dependent uses of growth mindset. Given the unpredictable nature of an open system, it is appropriate and necessary to understand the research question through a distributive and socio-cultural lens, while also considering the dimensions of power in a classroom setting.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) bioecological systems theory is a suitable theoretical position to take within this study as it provides a conceptual framework for describing complex social phenomena. Bioecological systems theory is not bound to a measurable reality and is flexible in that it can use a variety of data to explore and understand complex systems that precipitate otherwise unexplainable social phenomena. The use of multiple methods enables the researcher to gain deeper understanding of how important entities outlined in bioecological systems theory work together to form social phenomena that direct a person's development. In critical realist terms, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) bioecological systems theory provides researchers with a coherent laminated system to explain complex social phenomena in consistent ways, which can be understandable to an audience familiar with the notions of bioecological systems theory. The following sub-section goes into important aspects of bioecological systems theory in more detail.

### 2.3.1 Bioecological Systems Theory

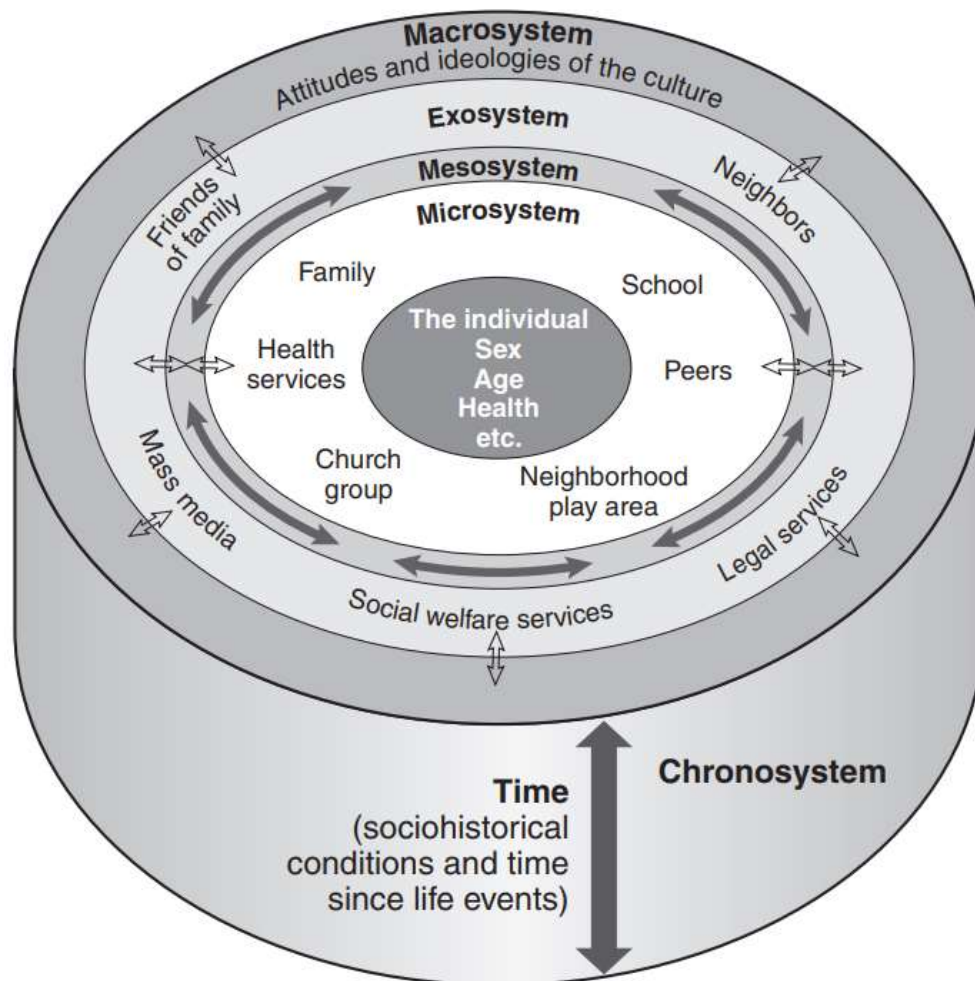


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. Santrock (2011)

Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued that contemporary research in human development removed the individual from the context they naturally interacted with. This is something that the research base of growth mindset theory can be criticised for as typical and highly cited studies, such as Blackwell et al., 2007, take a focused but narrow view of quantitative measurements. For studies to develop greater explanatory power, bioecological systems theory argues that exploring interrelations between a human's context and themselves as a developing person is key. The bioecological systems position argues that

*“the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts within which the settings are embedded.”*

(Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 21)

The complexity of a human’s socio-cultural environment and the array of interconnecting influences which impact on their development is highlighted by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005). The ecological system consists of five environments as shown in Figure 1 (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem) that inform the development of an individual. These separately defined but interconnected systems are positioned along a continuum from proximal to cultural practices that interact to influence the development of an individual.

### 2.3.2 The microsystem

In the context of growth mindset practices, the microsystem refers to the interpersonal relationships, roles and processes experienced between children and teachers within a specific context, such as a classroom, but also families, friendships, and other settings, such as youth or after-school clubs. These processes and relationships are the foundations and building blocks that describe the microsystem and the quality of the relationships that may be influenced by wider structures and ideas within those structures. For example, a group of teachers learning and understanding growth mindset could influence the kinds of interactions, i.e., practices, with children within a classroom microsystem. Teachers in the school may occupy multiple microsystems, ranging from teacher–child interactions in the classroom to formal meetings held by senior leaders and breakout spaces to have lunch and

socialise with other members of staff. The various microsystems are a key focus in this research, and they were accessed using observations of classroom practices and interviews with teachers and teaching assistants.

### 2.3.3 The mesosystem

The mesosystem can be analysed as a system that links the setting in which a person is actively involved. These include linkages between classroom and family microsystems.

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.46) describes the mesosystem as

*“the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant [such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighbourhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life].”*

Within the context of a school, this could be how teachers interact with parents, but also what sort of perceptions teachers or the school have of parents. The importance of the mesosystem lies in the congruence of the interrelationships. For example, McHale et al. (2014) argue that if socialisation is experienced and practiced similarly in microsystems in which a person develops, they are likely to familiarise themselves quickly with the group they are engaging with. However, if socialisation is different, such as in different cultural family backgrounds, then this can be problematic as the person has to navigate conflicting values and rules for behaviour.

Conversely, the mesosystem could be objects with symbolic meaning, such as physical borders and security measures at entrances to buildings. The mesosystem between two countries would include a border and perhaps passport and custom checks. Likewise, in a school, the mesosystem could include the interfaces between family and school, such as

entrances, playgrounds and the routes children and parents take to access the school. Mesosystems could also be influenced by 'transitive' knowledge about each group. For example, the interrelations between two warring countries may be characterised by negative tribal judgements towards one another. Within the school context, the judgements of parents and teachers, and even children and teachers, influence the quality of the mesosystem for a particular person. Bronfenbrenner (1977) summarised the mesosystem as a system of microsystems; however, if this was read in isolation, the complexity of the mesosystem latterly being presented in a more complex way as 'linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing a developing person' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148).

Mesosystems are systems that consider ecological transitions. Bronfenbrenner (1977) considered these transitions between microsystems as key developmental moments, whether positive or negative. From an ecological perspective, how well-connected and understanding different microsystems are informs how well a child can develop within their ecological system. Where microsystems are at odds with each other, such as between warring football fans, for example, the possibilities to develop new relationships and increase the complexity of relational knowledge and positive experiences in life is diminished.

In the context of parental involvement in schools, the research supports the notion that children's outcomes across a range of indicators positively increase where parents are more involved with the school (Seginer, 2006). This is important because it demonstrates the power of the system to influence the development of a child. To what extent growth mindset increases the likelihood of upwards social mobility on its own is still unclear.

However, what is clear, particularly from an ecological systems perspective, is that socio-cultural influences shape the development of children.

#### 2.3.4 The exosystem

Exosystems can be understood as systems that influences microsystems that a person develops in but that person is not physically involved in. How different systems perceive and plan for actions that involve other people they might not have direct contact with can impact on their development (Swick and Williams, 2006). As such, in the context of growth mindset, an example of a child's exosystem would be in teaching meetings and training on growth mindset. These activities are separate from the classroom activities; however, they do influence the interpersonal relationships and processes within the classroom microsystem. Moreover, when considering the development of a child, the school does not exhaust exosystem possibilities. Multiple exosystems exist around people that they do not have any direct contact with but that still influence their lives. For children, this could include parental employment, local services and opportunities for learning and development for their caregivers.

The school setting within this research is in an area with high levels of deprivation that has experienced the impact of ongoing austerity carried out by the coalition government and subsequent Conservative governments. The Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights of the UN (United Nations, 2019) found that exosystems such as social welfare became unsupportive and punitive in their approaches for supporting people to find work and highlighted examples including the two-child policy, which meant that only two children would receive financial support and cases of parents who were disabled having their disability-specific welfare payments removed from them unfairly. Additionally, the

issues of digitalisation of the welfare state meant that some families struggled to access the mechanisms needed to apply but also demonstrate they were job seeking. This shows how the changing nature of wider supportive systems can put families into absolute poverty. The UN report also found that creeping austerity in the United Kingdom also removed legal aid and 70% of funding for youth services. From an ecological perspective, these different parts of children's lives can make a big difference in their day-to-day transitions between different microsystems. As such, research in growth mindset has not considered the impact of the exosystems on children in school.

### 2.3.5 The macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner (2005) identified the macrosystem as a container of 'cultural blueprint' that determines the quality of activities within each sub-system; the microsystems, mesosystems and exosystems. The macrosystem character is shaped by formal policies and the interrelationships of cultural beliefs, history, structure for opportunity and those policies. As such, these influences contribute to decisions made by school-based policy makers, such as Headteachers and governors, who plan whole-school approaches to education by giving guidelines and developing a wide variety of policies, including teaching and learning, behaviour, attendance, child protection and safeguarding, human resource policies and equality, among others. The development of these guides to practice, or decisions to develop new teaching processes, such as growth mindset, are examples of the exosystems that influence the quality of the participation of teachers and children alike within schools. Bronfenbrenner defines the macrosystem in the following way:

*"The macrosystem consists of an overarching pattern of the micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social*



*context, with particular reference to the developmentally-instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, life-styles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems. The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context.” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, pp. 228–229)*

As the macrosystem is nested in the societal context, there are significant effects occur at environmental levels when there are changes to the macrosystem (Cross and Hong, 2012). Therefore, it is important to consider education policy and cultural beliefs and values regarding teaching in primary schools in the United Kingdom. Some of the key findings in this study reflect on the perceived deficits within the community from the teachers. I draw on of the concept of ‘underclassism’ (Tang et al., 2015) and demonstrate how perceptions of teachers follow a particular pattern of neoliberal ideals around the importance of self-responsibility (Bradbury, 2019). I argue that the macrosystemic influences, that underpin teachers’ assumptions about families and community, play an important part in justifying why the school sees growth mindset as an important approach to take with these children.

#### *2.3.5.1 Governmentality*

A useful lens which I draw on to explain the influence of the macrosystem is governmentality theory (Foucault, 1978, cited in Cruikshank, 1999). As demonstrated in the literature review, the use of growth mindset approaches within primary schools in the United Kingdom is situated in a neoliberal context. As such, an analytical framework is needed to understand why and how growth mindset is used in these settings, which can provide the appropriate explanation of how the macrosystem interacts with other systems to result in growth mindset practices. As demonstrated in the literature review, growth

mindset is positioned by the Department for Education as an appropriate way for schools to instil an appropriate character within their students. As such, a theory which can help explain these phenomena is important.

Foucault developed the concept of governmentality as a way of understanding the characteristics of liberal democracy and this offers a useful lens to explain macrosystem influences. Foucault saw liberalism not as a theory or ideology, but as a way of doing things (Fraser, 2020; Gane, 2008). Foucault was interested in liberalism as a practice and observed governing practices became more focused on assessing and managing risk from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. A key characteristic in modern liberal democracies is that governing has become increasingly concerned with guiding, limiting, and correcting the behaviour of individuals by focusing the attention of governing bodies towards ways of acting on individuals and how individuals act on themselves. So, to effectively manage risk in a neoliberal democracy, practices are developed toward the creation of an ideal citizen, or as Foucault termed an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Foucault, 2004, p. 232, cited in Christiaens, 2020). These practices seek to create an active and self-determining self who can shape themselves, maximise their own human capital and develop a future for themselves of their own desired making (Rose, 1999). As such, a sense of duty towards self-governance, self-fulfilment and individual choice becomes conceptualised as what it is to be a free person or entity within a context of neoliberal governance (Cruikshank, 1999). This means neoliberal governance becomes distant yet ubiquitous. Regulations become infiltrated into the experience of subjects, and an understanding that subjects are required to exercise increased self-control to optimise happiness and success (Edwards, 2008). As such, developing a growth mindset becomes a quality of an idealised citizen who can masterfully choose and develop the necessary skills and competencies for success through continuous

self-improvement. The practice of growth mindset in schools is viewed as a mode of governing that aims to augment the capabilities of disadvantaged groups, which has been conceptualised as a technology of agency (Cruikshank, 1999) or a 'psy' technology (Rose, 1999). So far, no research has been carried that has sought to understand the implementation of growth mindset in this way.

### 2.3.6 The chronosystem

The focus of bioecological systems theory is on development, and development for Bronfenbrenner is intrinsically linked to time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It may be the case that a sudden change in leadership within a system could bring about a particular moment in time that was significant to the development of those connected to it. The chronosystem can highlight moments in time before and after a certain point. To consider chronosystem events, the data collection preceded between two academic years. In addition, teachers may have had fifteen years of experience prior to learning about growth mindset and had experienced previous initiatives brought in by Headteachers. And with that accumulated knowledge and experiences within their own nested systems, the influence of life is something Bronfenbrenner felt was significant to development. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of the teachers but also the history of the school when situating the need and practice of growth mindset.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory is a socio-cultural theory of development that explains how different systems, both directly and indirectly, influence the developing person over the course of their life. Therefore, this theory offers a useful theoretical framework to explore how and why growth mindset is implemented in a primary school and provides a theoretical lens with which to analyse the data.

## 2.4 Doing the research

This chapter will provide an overview of the setting where the research took place and explain how I came to conduct research in this school. Following an overview of the setting, this chapter will present and discuss the use of ethnography as the chosen method for conducting data collection in this school; justifying why ethnography was deemed the most suitable method to achieve the overarching research aims. I will present a detailed overview of the data collection process, focusing on observations, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the ethical considerations I considered throughout this research, especially as I also held a role as a voluntary counsellor in this school prior to and during this research study.

### 2.4.1 The setting

This research took place in a large primary school academy, located in a large but socially and economically deprived suburb in the North-West of England. The school itself is situated in one of the most deprived wards in the conurbation and is in the top ten decile for deprivation in the United Kingdom. As such, the school has approximately three times the national average number of pupils in receipt of free school meals. In addition, the number of pupils in receipt of special educational needs support is almost double that of England's average primary school. However, the number of students with special educational needs or healthcare plans was not significantly different from the national average.

At the time of data collection, there were 481 pupils in the school, aged between two and eleven, through pre-school, nursery, reception, key stage 1 (ages five to eight) and key stage 2 (ages eight to eleven). There were 28 teachers and 31 teaching assistants in the school,

eight of whom were designated as specialists in special educational needs and difficulties, and there were an additional seven auxiliary members of staff to support teaching and learning. Sixty-four of the 66 staff were female.

The roles of the participants included a project manager for the counselling service, a specialist Reading Recovery teacher, contracted physical education instructor and a school gardener. The leadership team consisted of an executive Headteacher, an acting Headteacher, two deputies Headteachers, and the line manager for the teaching assistants. As the field research commenced, one of those deputies Headteachers also acted as the designated special educational needs coordinator (SENCo).

As a large primary school, each year, the lower and upper part of the school was split into two classes comprising of one teacher and one teaching assistant. In the early years section of the school (nursery and reception), each year was split into two groups. Each group of children was designated a teacher and teaching assistant, and both groups were taught in large open-plan classrooms.

As I began the field work phase, several significant changes occurred. The head of the early years became acting head of the school, who was supported by the executive head of the academy group. The SENCo, who had been at the school for eight years, left along with an additional eight teachers. This change was remarkable and significant for the school as the staff turnover had historically been very low. The implications of these changes were significant for this study.

#### 2.4.2 My role in the school

Prior to commencing this study, I was a voluntary school counsellor at the school for three years. The charity I volunteered with was commissioned to provide support for the social

and emotional health of the pupils. My role as a volunteer counsellor involved one-to-one work with children aged five to eleven years, carrying out interventions in classrooms and at times carrying out observations alongside the counselling service project manager on children that teachers raised concerns about.

As a longstanding volunteer within the school, I was familiar to the school and the school was familiar to me. I had built good relationships with the teachers and children at the school, notably the special educational needs coordinator, who was also the deputy head, parent support worker, the school administrators, and the site manager. I also had good relationships in the lower and upper school.

In 2015, I was approached by the then head of the early years group who asked me to be involved in the new 'growth mindset' think tank. She explained that the school had decided to work towards building growth mindset psychological practices into the school setting to support children who struggled with self-esteem and to make progress in their education, in particular, they were focusing their minds on supporting white British boys who struggled to make expected progress. This event coincided with my initial ideas about developing a proposal for doctoral research with the University of Huddersfield. After familiarising myself with growth mindset research, it was clear that there was very little in the way of qualitative research that had been carried out. As such, I suggested to the head of the early years that this would be a good opportunity to do some qualitative research on the area and that my intention was to do this as a doctoral researcher. After that meeting I was confident that an informal agreement would be made, and I would have access to the school in principle to conduct a piece of research on growth mindset.

I subsequently began developing my doctorate proposal and initially planned a piece of participatory action research. However, through conversations with the early years lead, it

was decided that participatory action research was not appropriate for this context. Firstly, the school was already carrying out their own informal work-based study on growth mindset, which was led by the head of the early years group and, secondly, teachers and teaching assistants did not have enough time to commit to this kind of research. As such, I reflected on my position as a researcher in the school and decided that taking a less participatory stance to research was more appropriate to the setting. I then began to formulate a piece of ethnographic research to explore the implementation of growth mindset in this school.

Over the course of my first year preparing my proposal and developing my research questions, the school was busy developing growth mindset practices. This was particularly the case in the early years part of the school as the lead for developing growth mindset was also the head of the early years. Although I will discuss this further in the ethics section, at this point I had to make ethical decisions that ultimately shaped the nature of the research and access. As I carried out long-term one-to-one counselling with children in the school, it was not appropriate for me to carry out classroom observations in parts of the school where those same children were taught. I had to manage my professional boundaries as a researcher but also as a volunteer counsellor so that those boundaries were clearly positioned. As I had not developed therapeutic relationships with children in the early years it was more ethical for me to focus my research on this part of the school.

I had to balance both my concerns about carrying out research in the school as I transitioned from Richard the counsellor to Richard the researcher, while also considering the concerns of the organisation I volunteered for. It was important that this organisation was satisfied with the limitations I put in place for the emotional protection of the children I

developed therapeutic relationships with; I drew clear professional boundaries and had made plans to transition my professional identity in the school.

Thinking about this in the spirit of bioecological systems theory, the appropriate action was clearly that my presence in the school was more appropriate to the early-year setting.

Firstly, the early years was separated from the lower and upper parts of the school, which limited my presence with children I had developed therapeutic relationships with. Secondly, the early years had apparently been much more exposed to the efforts of developing growth mindset practices by the school. As such, from a research perspective, both ethically and in developing knowledge of the implementation of growth mindset within a primary school context, it was clear that the appropriate access would be primarily based in the early years. However, over the time that I was preparing for field research and entering the field as a researcher many things happened in the school. With it being in an unpredictable open system the school experienced a period of turbulence. The Headteacher decided to leave the school after seven years. This meant that I had to renegotiate access for a second time with a new Headteacher, which was, thankfully, successful. However, there were then internal issues and a clash of culture between the new Headteacher and the remaining school staff, and after three months the new Headteacher resigned. As such, the executive Headteacher of the primary school's academy trust situated herself within the school and appointed the early years lead teacher, who also developed the growth mindset initiative, as the acting head of the school. As such, access was successfully renegotiated for a third time within a year.

I was acutely aware of the high levels of stress within the school, for both students and teachers, and I entered the field sensitively and cautiously. I held initial meetings with the then SENCo to discuss the nature of my proposal and how my data collection techniques



and presence in the early years group would be met, and agreements were made to move ahead with data collection.

### 2.4.3 Data collection process

To explore why and how growth mindset is used in a primary school, an ethnographic approach was used. Ethnographic studies are used widely across areas of psychology, sociology and anthropology and involves multiple methods of collecting data that required sustained and direct contact with participants through participant observation, focus groups and interviews (Willis and Trondman, 2000). Because of the variety of methods used in ethnographic inquiry, it is an appropriate approach for studies that take a critical realist stance towards the development of knowledge (Rees and Gatenby, 2014). As mentioned in the section on ontology and epistemology, critical realist approaches seek to find causal mechanisms to help explain social phenomena within an open system (Edwards et al., 2014). By having a variety of different epistemological techniques, I was able to compare and contrast teacher perceptions and observations of actual practices. Ethnographic studies therefore enabled me to access a different kind of socio-cultural knowledge to offer explanations that work towards a better understanding of what was going on in the setting. Ethnographic studies can be overt or covert and can take part in public spaces (open) or specific organisational contexts, such as schools (closed) (Bryman, 2016). In this case, the sample school was aware of my researcher position, which meant the project was an overt-closed ethnography. Ethnography allowed me to analyse the context-dependent meanings around implementing growth mindset by taking the position of a participant observer within that school over a four-month period. As ethnography is a flexible design, I was able to observe at a distance but equally be drawn into the activities in the classroom setting as

they unfolded. This allowed me to gain an insider perspective within the early years setting and delve deeper into shared cultural meanings within the school (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This approach allowed the central focus of the study to emerge. As I will discuss in further detail later, my presumptions of the kind of knowledge which would emerge changed over the course of the field work. Ethnography allowed for the scope of the research to change, because by taking part in the setting, observing, listening and enquiring it was clear that my presumptions and a priori theoretical-orientations would need to change to explain the ongoing narrative as it unfolded.

#### 2.4.4 Access

The organisation I volunteered for required reassurances and information about what the research project would involve and how I would mitigate any potential risks to the organisation and the children on my case load. In addition, I needed to negotiate access to the school so that they were fully aware of my intentions, plans and practices for carrying out the research. A key contact to begin the initial negotiations was the school counselling project manager. The counselling project manager acted as a champion of my research and provided professional reassurances, in addition to the conversations I had with the area manager for the service. The positive regard the school had for the school project manager, in addition to the already good relationships I had with individuals in the school, the school were satisfied to listen to my initial proposals to make an agreement in principle that the ethnographic study was going to be respectful to the needs of the children and staff.

Through emails and discussions, I explained that my observations would be carried out over a four-month period from May to the summer holiday, and from September through to November 2017. I explained that I would be carrying out observations of teacher–pupil and

pupil–pupil learning interactions, while also conducting informal interviews with teachers and teaching assistants. My observations were carried out over 2.5 days a week over those periods. I outlined that I would also seek to carry out individual interviews and focus groups, but also that I may request documentation that would aid my research. I stated that my observations would be carried out in a discreet manner to avoid impacting on the teaching and learning in the classrooms.

The school leadership team were encouraged by my doctoral study and were keen to support my development, and the head of the early years was appreciative that I was carrying out research on growth mindset, which was something that she was passionate about. With access to the closed system of the primary school secured in principle, I carried out some initial meetings with senior leaders to gain contextual information about potential anxieties staff might have, but also so the school could support my change in identity from Richard the counsellor to Richard the researcher.

## 2.5 Ethics

### 2.5.1 Sources of distress and informed consent

Before the ethical application for the research was finally submitted and approved to the university ethics panel, I held a meeting with the SENCo, who was also the deputy head, to gain further insights into some particular ethical issues that were relevant to the setting. I was primarily interested in the framework the school had in place in case I encountered a pupil or a teacher who was distressed during my research. The deputy head highlighted that the school had robust safeguards in place, and if a child were found to be distressed then they would utilise the schools counselling provision and the SENCo would carry out some of her own assessments with the child. She also emphasised that the school's business is

children, and that they sought to provide a nurturing environment wherever possible to minimise distress. The deputy head was confident that little distress would result from me observing teaching in classrooms as this is something that happened on a regular basis anyway. She felt that the children were accustomed to observers that were not directly teaching staff. Nonetheless, we did discuss ways of introducing myself to the class in an age-appropriate manner, so the pupils were familiar with my presence and purpose in the classroom. Even for young children, this could be seen as another layer of negotiating access. We decided to ask teachers to introduce me with my first name and explain that I was also studying at a school for grown-ups and that I was learning about how children learn.

Something else we discussed was how I would respond to pupils that were interested in any notes I might be taking in the classroom. The deputy head told me that if she was making some notes and children were asking her what she was writing she would reply 'It's like a shopping list for my brain', emphasising the age-appropriate language for children.

Although I had not planned on doing observations on children in the upper parts of the school, we did discuss some practices, including finding the limits of each classroom by checking in with children to see if they were happy with my presence in their classroom and making it clear that they had the right to not be observed. The deputy head felt that this process of introducing me in this way also worked with the schools UNICEF Rights Respecting policy.

I felt it was important that these early ethical negotiations and introductions were carried out in a collaborative fashion. On reflection, this gave the school a power and stake in developing how I went about my research. Additionally, I saw this as something which could

be done coherently with the school's culture and identity that respected the rights of children.

It was not considered necessary that parents informed of my research in the school as I had not planned to carry out field interventions, formal interviews with children or take photos.

The deputy head felt that the research was similar to other professionals that were in the school doing observations on teaching and learning. Interactions with children would have been on an informal basis as their natural curiosity would lead to interactions with me. The Headteacher was given an information sheet and a loco parentis consent form (Appendix 1).

The term 'distress' brought on a lengthy discussion about the lack of a distress policy for adults in the school. The deputy head was quite adamant that there were structures in place to support teachers experiencing stress, such as access to occupational health, and that they could discuss difficulties with her. However, it was felt there was a distinct lack of policy for understanding and dealing with issues surrounding 'distress'. The deputy head went on to list several issues which she felt were distressing for teachers. Firstly, that teachers were most distressed about a student's lack of educational progress for significant periods of time, which she described as 'plateauing'. The source of this pressure was considered to come from government expectation that pupils should make 'good or better progress', and that teachers get very worried if pupils do not make a progress point as they tracked the pupils learning each month.

Another point of potential distress for teachers was related to pupil's bad behaviour. The deputy head found that teachers who were distressed by poor pupil behaviour were often concerned with the impact on the rest of the class's progress, and this was compounded when they felt they did not know how to solve the problem. In these sorts of situations, she

encouraged teachers to discuss these issues with her to relieve them of the mental pressure.

The next source of distress was thought to come from the new Headteacher, who had been in her position three weeks prior to that meeting with the SENCo. The SENCo, who had been at the school for seven years, argued that the stress on teachers coming from the Headteacher should not be passed onto the children, and that staff should feel that the Headteacher cares for them. At this point in time, I was aware of the challenges that the children faced when adapting to new behavioural standards brought in by the new Headteacher; however, it was the first time I learned that there was the possibility that the teachers themselves found working under the new Headteacher distressing.

Information around the sources of distress not only supported more sensitive and ethical practices during the fieldwork phase, but also gave some initial insights and explanations to what I was to go on to perceive in the school.

### 2.5.2 Developing informed consent and my dual role in the school

Soon after this discussion with the SENCo/deputy head, things changed significantly in the school as the new Headteacher's contract was ended. Subsequently, the lead teacher in the early years (and growth mindset leader) was made acting head and her teaching duties were replaced by a contracted teacher. At this point, I arranged a meeting with her to continue to confirm that she was comfortable with me conducting my research in the destabilised primary school she was managing and, fortunately for my study, she was happy for me to go ahead. I also discussed the plans for the research and some of the ethical issues surrounding my dual role in the school as a counsellor and a researcher. In the same spirit as in the discussion with the deputy head, I engaged the acting Headteacher in a collaborative

conversation to see how the dual role of being a counsellor and researcher could be enhanced within the school. Two key groups needed to be made aware of my changing role: the teaching staff and the children. Firstly, the teaching staff were notified by the acting Headteacher in a periodic staff meeting and I also attended a staff meeting afterwards to go over the changes in my role in the school. Secondly, the acting head suggested it would be useful if she told the pupils during an assembly that I would be ending my time as a counsellor, but they may still see me in the school as I was at university and learning about teaching and learning. I agreed and felt that this would benefit what I had already done as I made endings with the children on my case load.

As a counsellor, I collaborated with the project manager of the counselling service on how I would approach the endings. The children I worked with were told that our therapeutic relationships would end but that they may see me in school from time to time. These endings were carefully managed alongside the counselling service project manager who provided ongoing clinical supervision. In order to safeguard the children, I worked with, I felt it would be more appropriate not to carry out observations in areas of the school where they would be. This would narrow the focus of observations in the school; however, it was deemed necessary to minimise the risk of harm to those children. I, the school project manager, and the counselling service area manager were all in agreement with this.

Partway through the fieldwork, a terrorist attack took place in the North-West of England which did have an impact on the school community as some children in the school were affected. At this point, I suspended my observations in the school for two weeks. I felt it was important that the school were able to manage the anxieties of the children and staff without the presence of an external observer in the school. Observations were

recommenced after I contacted the lead of the early years and the acting Headteacher directly to get a sense of the appropriateness of my presence.

### 2.5.3 Ethics in practice

Before the study began, ethical approval was granted by the University of Huddersfield ethics committee. At this point I informed the school about the date I planned on visiting for the first time, and the acting Headteacher brought up my change in role with teachers during a staff meeting. On my first day, I carried out a meeting with the teaching staff in the early years section of the school and explained to them what the study was about and that I may be familiar to some of them as a volunteer counsellor but that my researcher role was separate from that. I also went through the information sheet before asking them to complete the consent forms (Appendix 2), which they all did in that first session.

To help staff and myself to discern between my two roles I wore different clothes. Typically, on the day I worked as a volunteer, my clothes would be 'smart-casual' and I would not be concerned if my clothes got stained with paint. On the day I worked as a researcher, I wore a shirt with no tie, smart trousers, smart shoes, and a university lanyard. Additionally, I signed myself into the school's visitors' book as a researcher from the University of Huddersfield, rather than a volunteer counsellor from the counselling service. Earlier on in the research, the teaching staff in the early-year setting were keen for me to observe children as if I was a counsellor that they wanted additional advice about. This clearly was not my role in this setting. However, I still dealt with their concern compassionately and recognised their concern before suggesting they raise this issue with the special educational needs' coordinator.



Informal conversations in ethnography can raise several ethical issues, including navigating informed consent, confidentiality, power imbalances, and privacy. Participants engaged in informal conversations may not be aware that they are participating in the study, which means that they may not have given informed consent to participate.

My position on the use of informal conversations as data followed similar ethical positions as Swain and King (2020). Although this study was not dependent on informal conversations as a data collection method, the process of managing ethics in the field was similar.

Prior to the research study, I explained my role and provided some information about the research during a preliminary conversation. Once the participant agreed to take part in the study, I provided them with an information sheet and consent form and answered any questions they had. This initial part of the informed consent process involves a binary and contractual exchange. However, informed consent in informal conversations is never binary. Even if participants have agreed to take part in the study, they may still have a preference to exclude certain informal conversations from the data being analysed.

This could include personal and sensitive information that participants expect to remain confidential. For example, during group discussions, my participants reminisced about their younger experiences of nightlife in the local city. While this conversation gave an impression of group closeness, it was not within the scope of the research and participants would not expect me to disclose their nightlife preferences.

The decision to include or exclude data from unexpected moments in fieldwork from the study relates to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call the micro-ethics of fieldwork. The micro-ethics around informed consent and informal conversations often arise concurrently

with issues around my dual role in the school. It was periodically important to address the issue of 'Richard the researcher' during informal conversations, where teachers sometimes saw me as 'Richard the counsellor'. However, this provided another opportunity to ensure that the participant understood the nature of the study, my role as a researcher, and to re-establish and maintain their informed consent.

Power imbalances are inevitable in ethnographic research, particularly during interviews (Abell et al., 2006). Swain and King (2020) contend that informal conversations provide greater authenticity and representation since the spaces where conversations occur are familiar to participants. For instance, I refrained from using audio recording devices or taking notes during informal conversations. While such conversations may partially mitigate power imbalances, the research agenda remained the ethical foundation of the study, with the aim of assessing the contribution of these conversations to the project, the participant's intent to contribute, and whether the conversation informed the understanding of implementing growth mindset in the school. At times, I approached participants and asked them to elaborate on their practices, thereby holding the power in the conversation that could potentially interrupt their day-to-day activities. Although I had the privileged position of gaining valuable insights, I was mindful of not disrupting the rapport established with the participants during their teaching practice.

The importance of rapport and trust was central to me throughout the fieldwork. As a man participating in a space where all the teachers were women, but also as a known counsellor in the school that carried the trust of the organization that allowed me to carry out research, I was conscious of the importance of respecting the teachers in their work with

the children. This made me more of a passive participant, as I was anxious to ensure that invitations to participate in classwork were intended for me and not assumed as a given. A key component of every research project is that no physical, psychological, or emotional harm is experienced by the participants (Delamont & Atkinson, 2018). I considered the mitigation of emotional or psychological harm to be preventing the conditions that gave rise to relational rupture. As such, I accepted the advice from the deputy head around reacting to children's inquiries about my presence in a child-friendly way, but equally, my observations also informed which participants were approached for interviewing. For example, a teacher in the reception class appeared to be more uncomfortable with my presence, and this reinforced an insight that another layer of informed consent existed and needed to be respected by myself. While the teacher consented in writing to me observe their practice, I sensed an avoidance of my presence and less willingness to participate in day-to-day conversations with other teachers in my presence.

Some teachers actively approached me to conduct interviews, while I approached others who I believed would be comfortable with me sharing their space as a participant.

Interviews and informal conversations were carried out with these participants. However, in instances where I observed active anxiety from the participants with me being in their presence, I refrained from pursuing interviews with them. Although Hollway and Jefferson (2000) primarily advocate for collecting dialectical data through interviewing, the philosophical standpoint of accepting participants as defended subjects informed my actions in the observational field as well.

Mitigating risks, harms and power imbalances was of utmost importance, and I achieved this by obtaining informed consent and developing attunement with the participants in the spaces where I carried out fieldwork.

## 2.6 Employing ethnography

### 2.6.1 Timeline for data collection described

I entered the field in the spring of 2017 when the school was in a period of stabilisation after two Headteachers had left. The second of which had introduced a more zero-tolerance approach towards children misbehaving after a pronounced period of focusing on inclusive practices. I was acutely aware of the potential anxieties that teaching staff may have been experiencing due to my insider knowledge as a volunteer counsellor in the school. As such, the presence of an additional observer was an unnecessary burden on a school that had experienced two Headteachers leave the school in quick succession.

I mitigated this by initially reaching out to the deputy head of the school who also acted as the school's SENCo. I thought it was important that this was my first interview in the field because the SENCo was at the school for many years and was well placed to understand the potential anxieties children and teaching staff faced. I thought the interview was a success because I learned culturally appropriate ways of being alongside teachers and children. This included arranging an initial meeting with the early years and foundation teaching team to let them ask questions about the research and reintroduce myself as Richard the researcher, rather than counsellor. I consciously delineated my previous role as a counsellor and my new role as a researcher. For example, my researcher uniform was more formal and I wore a university lanyard. The SENCo was generous in giving their advice on ways of being with curious children in their classroom, such as explaining to children my notes are 'like a shopping list for my brain' and 'that I'm here to learn about learning because I also go to

school for grown ups'. Following Goffman (1989) approach, I employed these suggested expressions when children questioned my presence in the classroom. The SENCo explained that children were observed for many reasons, and it was a normal activity in the classroom for unfamiliar professionals to sit in lessons from time to time. In these moments I felt they were putting me at ease.

I would latterly discover from some teachers that certain kinds of performative observations evoke a fearful experience. However, early in the fieldwork, the SENCo highlighted performative discourses around pupil progress that were more likely to lead to teachers feeling distressed. As such, I was mindful of these when having informal conversations or when overhearing conversations in the field that related to pupil progress and children not performing as teachers wished. Additionally, I was mindful of the ethical considerations regarding observing and overhearing these conversations. While I was present when teachers and staff members were having various conversations, nothing was formally recorded outside of interview and focus group participation. However, being in the presence of these informal conversations did help me further understand the dynamics within the school and also contextualised further data collection.

I arranged an initial meeting with the EYFS team to introduce myself as 'Richard the researcher' and explained my role as a researcher in their setting. I explained the background to my research and how I came to request access to their setting. It was during this time that the teachers began to become familiar with me and an initial routine for observations were made in conjunction with the teachers who appeared more comfortable with my presence. I felt this was important so that observations were never a surprise and so that teachers were involved in the more proximal aspects of the research. This was even

more important given the context of the period of instability the that the school was going through.

*Table 1 Overview of data collection*

Method	Number	When	Where	With whom
Observations	22	Between May 2017 and December 2017. Split between academic years. Observations were carried out throughout the school day.	Nursery and Reception classes. The play area. School hall. Corridors between classes. Lunchroom. Staff breakout areas.	Teachers, teaching assistants, pupils, lunch duty staff, PE teachers.
Interviews	15	Between May 2017 and December 2017. Split between academic years.	Empty classrooms. Offices.	Teachers, teaching assistants, deputy Headteacher, parent support worker,

				caretaker and school counsellor.
Focus groups	2	June 2017.	Reception and nursery classroom.	Nursery and reception teaching staff, respectively.

### 2.6.2 Participant observation

There were several participative roles I considered: complete observer (i.e., no participation in the field); observer as participant; participant as observer (researching the field while participating fully in it); and complete participant (participating as a normal group member and concealing the research) (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). In this research, I was an observer-as-participant, as I do not believe that it was possible to be a complete observer since the teachers and children would have been aware of either my counselling or researcher role. Therefore, I will likely be reflecting on my observation as either a participant as observer, but mostly as observer as participant.

Participant observation was employed in the early years section of the school as my primary objective was to find out how a growth mindset approach was used, and more generally what was going on in the school that influences growth mindset practice. I followed a routine of alternating observations in the reception and nursery classes for two weeks for each year group over a four-month period, which stretched over two academic years. I occasionally used a notepad when I did not feel that note taking would be observed or

apparent to the teachers and further secluded myself to the staff room in the upper part of the school to write up my observations when they were fresh in my mind in a narrative form before they were then analysed into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Note taking in ethnography is important, and while Brewer (2000) argues that content could be missed if notes are not taken while observing, I felt there was a fine line between overt note taking, which inhibits the actions of the participants by making them feel uneasy about being watched. During my observations, I adapted Spradley's (1980) categories of ethnographic data to help identify different kinds of entities within the social space when making my notes. Spradley's (1980) categories include space, actors, activities, physical objects, language, events, time, goals, relationships, feelings, and symbols.

I observed and participated in several activities. In the initial few weeks, I was only an observer in the classroom, but as the weeks progressed, I was beginning to be seen as a member of the teaching team, albeit with a limited role. For example, my presence was sometimes considered as part of the staff-to-pupil ratio at break times, and I was often asked to help with walking children through the school if they were taking part in physical education or preparing for the Christmas nativity play. At times I found myself role-playing 'quiet walking' alongside the other teaching staff and repeating the actions of the 'spider song'. I was on the trajectory of becoming 'native' to the classroom setting. Sometimes in the classrooms I sat alongside teachers and teaching assistants as they were working with small groups of children before being transformed temporarily into a teaching assistant in the eyes of the children and, ostensibly, the teachers. Initially, I imagined my observations to be non-participant; however, in a bustling classroom with curious children and busy teachers I was utilised and became part of the functioning fabric of those year group spaces.



My notes were written up out of sight of the teaching staff, either at home or within the staff room in the upper part of the school.

### 2.6.3 Interviews

Over the course of the research, I interviewed fifteen members of staff across the school. Although my presence as an observer was confined to the early years section of the school, my interviews did extend to teachers in other aspects of the school as they also received training and were involved in the development of growth mindset within the school. This was particularly important in understanding teaching staff perceptions on why growth mindset was being used in their school but also in helping to gain empirical knowledge on how growth mindset was being used and explanations of what the teachers perceived impacted on its development.

The time and location of interviews varied throughout the course of the research. The difficulties of conducting research in a busy school was apparent from the outset. The teachers had a lot to do and finding time in the working day to carry out an interview was challenging. Some interviews were conducted in large classroom spaces, which were frequently interrupted, but some interviews were carried out in small private offices. Interviews were arranged at various times of the day, ranging from 8am, through to 5pm. Interviews were recorded on an encrypted audio recorder before being uploaded on to a password-protected laptop for transcription.

The approach to the interviewing method was heavily influenced by the free-associative narrative interviewing approach outlined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). I took this approach as it allowed the research to explore personal and situational meaning around the events and actions happening within the school in a sensitive manner. The key

characteristics of free association narrative interviewing is the use of open-ended questions that allow the participant to structure their responses in a way that is unconsciously determined (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008). Free-associative narrative interviewing is not pure free-association, the psychoanalytic practice developed by Sigmund Freud. I did not sit in a room and blindly ask a participant what was on their mind, rather I asked them to tell me about the items on my interview schedule.

The interview questions (Appendix 3) were designed based on the literature review, conversations with the Headteacher before embarking on my research and from my own observations prior to undertaking the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the information sheet and consent forms, even if the teachers had already completed one at an earlier time, to ensure they were fully informed. After that I explained the rationale for the research was to explore a setting that had developed growth mindset practices, but I was also interested in finding out about other things, such as the participants role in the school, the school's ethos and background, about the children they teach, about teaching and learning practices the school had developed, the pressures they face in teaching and what works for them. I then gave the participants opportunity to begin talking about a topic of their choosing. This approach aided the research for several reasons. Firstly, the participants had agency in focusing on topics that they felt were relevant to them and their positions. Secondly, it allowed me to pick up on contradictions and avoidances that warranted further explanation. Thirdly, the participants had space to elaborate, explore and contextualise through their narratives. Fourthly, as an interviewer I was able to listen deeply and make prompts throughout the interview where appropriate.

By taking this free-associative narrative interviewing framework in my interviewing I did not feel like I was imposing an agenda or subjecting the participants to a series of questions. The

interview data was rich, fluid, and diverse. As an interviewer, I was able to follow the discussion, while keeping a watchful eye on the scope of the interview schedule, often finding that the narratives of the participants went between many of the topics on my interview schedule. The participant would say something that warranted further clarification, I encouraged them to tell me more. Moreover, if any staff presented contradictions in the narratives they presented in interviews, these were also explored sensitively.

A key philosophical reason for why I did not collect participant demographic data in this ethnography is to challenge the belief that people can be neatly categorised into fixed groups based on certain characteristics, such as race or gender, and that these categories have inherent, unchanging qualities. By not collecting demographic data, I avoided reinforcing essentialist views by focusing on the nuances and complexities of individual experiences and interactions, rather than reducing them to predefined demographic categories. Additionally, not collecting demographic data can be seen to resist the power dynamics inherent in categorisation (Foucault, 1991). When demographic data is collected, it can be used to reinforce social hierarchies and stereotypes and can also be used to justify discriminatory practices. I did not want to collect participant demographic data because this was a way of prioritising individual experiences and resist the categorisation and power dynamics that can arise from demographic data collection.

#### 2.6.4 Focus groups

Two focus groups were organised with the early years teaching team so that another interview space was created to elicit a different kind of interview data. Holding focus groups was important as unlike the free-associative narrative interview with individual teaching

staff, the focus group generated discussion between colleagues on the topic areas. The focus group facilitated a checking in of shared understanding where teachers and teaching assistants were able to listen to each other, reaffirm or reconsider their views. The focus groups created a much more unpredictable space which went in a variety of directions. During the study two focus groups were conducted with the teaching staff of the early years' groups. These focus groups were short due to the time commitments within the setting but included teachers and teaching assistants in their respective classes. Focus groups were used to develop greater depth by complementing the knowledge provided by in-depth interviews and observations (Bryman, 2016). The interview schedule for the individual interviews was used as to serve as an outline, however observations were also taken into account when asking for clarification on points of practice that were observed.

#### 2.6.5 My impact on data collection

It is important to note that this is a qualitative research study, which is subjective in nature. The aim is not to assume a specific truth, but to explore why and how a specific school in the Northwest of England implemented the growth mindset approach. The research aims were formulated based on my engagement with the literature, as well as my own interpretations of the growth mindset approach. I was also aware that I was entering the field with my own biases regarding the school, staff, and practices, because I was also a volunteer staff member there. As previously mentioned, I entered this research with a positive outlook of the growth mindset approach and was interested to see how growth mindset ideas were enacted in a school that I felt was also a positive and nurturing environment. However, through a process of reflexivity, my initial assumptions were challenged. This was done through the data collection process, by reflecting on my

observations, interviews, focus groups and informal conversations with staff. The changes that took place in the school during my time there also provided me with an opportunity to further reflect on my initial preconceptions. I also used my supervisory meetings as a source of reflection, where my supervisors challenged my thinking throughout the entire data collection and analytical process. As this thesis demonstrates, my initial pre-conceptions regarding growth mindset were challenged by this research, and this was the result of an ongoing reflective process that occurred throughout the time of writing this thesis.

As previously noted, due to my dual role in the school, I made a point to distinguish myself between Richard the Counsellor and Richard the Researcher on the different days that I assumed these roles. At times during interviews and focus groups, I got the impression that teachers were hesitant to talk about changes in the school, perhaps because they were aware that I was volunteer staff member and questioned my own alliances. I cannot guarantee that my dual role in the school did not influence how teachers spoke to me, nor can I be sure that if I was not already known in the school their responses would have been different. However, by using the Free Association Narrative Interviewing approach, the conversations were guided by the participating staff, which allowed them to choose what to discuss. I do feel, that my friendly and informal approach, also made them feel comfortable in talking to me.

## 2.7 Data

Data were managed in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All audio data was stored on encrypted devices before being destroyed after it was transcribed and analysed.

Observation data was written up as soon as reasonably possible in spaces out of sight of those being interviewed, to limit any concern they might have had about being written about. Initially, observations were recorded in direct speech form directly to a functional laptop. This data was then stored and organised in the qualitative data management software MAXQDA before it was analysed. These observations comprised descriptions of events, which were subsequently developed into analytical themes, such as the 'ideal child', 'self-responsibility', or broader questions that required addressing, such as why growth mindset and what growth mindset looks like. These observations were subsequently clarified with the teachers throughout the study and informed the development of interview schedules. This clarification helped me to consolidate my understanding of how particular practices linked with growth mindset. For instance, the teachers devised a character-based merit system, which rewarded children for demonstrating idealistic behaviour. In this instance, I was able to explore this approach directly with the participants by asking them how growth mindset had influenced these practices, and the significance of this approach. Consequently, my interview guide evolved throughout the project and was adapted based on the teacher I was interviewing, particularly where clarification of practices in the classroom was necessary.

Interview and focus group data were stored on an encrypted device and initially listened to multiple times. This helped to immerse me in the data and to reflect on some of the overarching ideas, contradictions and to develop a coherence in thinking about that the

data. The transcript data was initially organised in MAXQDA for an initial review by inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The open-ended data was expansive and unexpected between the different participants. I perceived this approach to be overly descriptive; however, it was useful because the data collected was expansive and unexpected due to the contextual changes in the school. Of note were themes around the teacher's conceptualisation of growth mindset, the overall ethos of the school and how the teachers perceived growth mindset impacting on themselves. These initial themes and ideas developed into more mature themes with the use of template analysis (King, 2012).

Template analysis was useful because of the applied nature of the research. While the data was expansive, template analysis allowed for a focused analysis of the data while also allowing for iterative development of themes and thinking about the data.

Additionally, on reflection, I thought that template analysis allowed a focused analysis of an aspect of the data and allowed a containment of my own curiosity and analytical gaze. An inductive thematic analysis was perhaps too broad and offered too many options and ideas, which effectively paralysed my decision making.

## 2.8 Analysing the data

My analysis involved reviewing the data by template analysis (King, 2012) with the use of MAXQDA software. Crabtree and Miller (1992, cited in King, 2012) introduced template analysis as a suitable method for analysing text-based data and this approach has since become more mainstream through the influence and writing of King (2012). My template analysis of the interview data followed a similar pattern that King (2012) set out. In a pragmatic fashion, I began by using my research questions to form the basis of an initial coding of selected data. Incorporating a systematic approach, such as template analysis, was

found to be beneficial when conducting research with broad and explorative research questions. Combining this approach with free associative narrative interviewing, as outlined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), yielded a rich data set of participants' thoughts and experiences on the implementation of growth mindset psychology in their primary school. Free associative narrative interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves asking open-ended questions and allowing participants to freely share their thoughts and experiences. This method provided detailed narratives and insight into individuals' lived experiences and perspectives.

It is essential to note that free associative narrative interviewing is not the same as the free associative experience between an analysand and their analyst. The interviewer still must ensure that the conversation stays within the research objectives while skilfully allowing the participant to narrate their answers meaningfully. The technique uses open-ended questioning to explore phenomena in rich detail while recognizing that the participant is a defended subject. The free associative element of the technique indicates that the participant unconsciously protects themselves from anxieties by placing psychological boundaries around the content they are asked to discuss. Respecting the participant's boundaries and applying the psychoanalytic method of free association are core principles of the free associative narrative interview.

On the other hand, template analysis is a systematic approach to analysing qualitative data that is produced through free-associative narrative interviewing. Template analysis involves organizing data into pre-determined categories or templates. This is akin to coding and developing analytical themes as in thematic analysis. However, unlike being entirely inductive, the analysis in template analysis begins with a focus on exploring the data to



discover useful information that can contribute to knowledge advancement in that area.

Template analysis is both deductive and inductive and should not be interpreted as a purely deductive analytical method like Framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). It is a helpful tool for identifying patterns and themes in the data and can lead to the development of a more structured and rigorous analysis. Combining free associative narrative interviewing and template analysis allowed me to capture both the richness of participants' narratives and the structure provided by the developed templates.

King (2012) suggests that template analysis is useful for reasonably large datasets, around ten to twenty transcripts an ideal amount to use with template analysis.

Template analysis is an analytical approach that combines top-down and bottom-up approaches to analysing data. Rather than coding every transcript from the bottom up, such as in grounded theory (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004) which had no a priori assumptions, I started out with my research objectives before the foundation for my template was subsequently modified.

The template could be seen as a structured list of hierarchical codes, which is not too dissimilar from typical thematic approaches to analysing data, such as thematic analysis. In this case, broad themes are made of codes and subsequent subcodes that were nested within that hierarchy. In many cases there are set levels of coding, for example, in interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2015) there are three levels of coding. Or in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis there are three different levels. But, in template analysis I was able to have as many levels as I found useful. This meant that aspects of the analysis could be analysed in greater depth. This is something which appealed to me from the outset as I was able get a visual representation of depth in aspects of the

data, and thus on an initial inspection pragmatically identify and present the most pertinent theme.

The template analysis that I conducted took an iterative approach. King (2012) suggests that the template is continually reviewed on and adapted and strengthened through reappraisal of the data. Template analysis was appropriate for this explorative study as it encourages an open-endedness towards the data. This was in the spirit of using free-associative narrative interviewing that developed rich and contextual data. King (2012) highlights that there could be two initial starting points to the initial template. This involved a mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. It is quite common to begin a priori themes, which may be theory driven. Or it could relate to practical issues concerning the aims of the research. In this study, the initial template was driven by the aims of the research: why, how, and what structures influence the implantation of growth mindset. I took a bottom-up approach and coded the data according to relevance to the research aims that could help explain and increase my understanding of those aims.

Unlike a typical approach to thematic analysis, instead of going through all the data and developing a coding scheme, I selected a subset of the data to develop the initial template. This was done retrospectively after reviewing the data and identifying transcripts that I felt formed a representative sample. For example, I identified a senior leader, a teacher in the upper school, a teacher in the early years and a teaching assistant in the early years. Initially, I coded data from four interviews to develop an initial template of the data. Across this initial phase of coding, I created 262 codes. I then compared these codes, using the research aims as an overarching framework, until I had an initial template, which was then used to analyse the remaining data. I found the process particularly useful for working with complex data sets before further refinement. I had made previous attempts to analyse the data with

the use of inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which proved a useful exercise for familiarisation of the data, but I found that King's (2012) interpretation of template analysis enabled a good balance between exploration, creativity in thinking and organising the data, while the iteratively developed template contained the process. After the initial template was developed, this was used against the data not analysed yet. However, where important findings relevant to the research aims were found, this was then adapted to the template, hence the iterative nature of developing the template. King (2012) points out that the template should not be fetishised, meaning that the template should not be sacrosanct for the research and is always open to development and change. Because the work has implications for real-world applications of growth mindset approaches, it was important that the aims and objectives of the data were borne in mind. Template analysis allowed for this. In summary, the template analysis does not start with the 131able rasa approach of grounded theory, which does not have preconceptions about the data and, as such, the codes are grounded within the data. In practical terms, template analysis allows for those a priori research aims that helped guide me through the complex data that was collected.

## Chapter 3

### Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Introduction

Using a combination of interview and focus group data, and influenced by the observational notes taken throughout the course of data collection, each of the presented themes and sub-themes in this chapter, presented visually in Figure 1, provides a separate nuance and situational focus on the use of growth mindset in the school. The first section of this chapter focuses on research question one: why was growth mindset being implemented? This theme is important because it provides insight into why growth mindset was introduced by the school, which is something that other growth mindset studies do not focus on.

The teachers and teaching assistants highlighted a need for children to become self-responsible learners and that growth mindset is perceived as a skill for children to learn. The teachers and teaching assistants perceived growth mindset as supporting pupils' ability to take advantage of opportunities and develop an inward psychological resilience. The teachers and teaching assistants perceived the need for psychological resilience because parents and the local community in general were problematic for the pupil's development by exposing children to their fixed mindsets. Much of the data around the rationale for growth mindset surrounded perceptions of the negative impact of parents and community on children at multiple levels. Some teachers and teaching assistants blamed the parents for their children not being self-responsible, inwardly resilient and having a growth mindset. Teachers perceived growth mindset as one way they could remedy the impact of problematic parents and community and another perceived generation of worklessness. Another less prominent but important rationale emerged of teachers viewing growth

mindset as being beneficial for those children that did not get as much attention as was necessary. Teachers perceived a lack of support and resources meant that much more time was being spent with those children who had additional needs. They perceived children who could make good or better progress were disadvantaged by this deficit in teacher–child interaction. However, it was perceived that for those pupils learning to adopt a growth mindset this would enable them to be self-responsible learners who did not need as much support from the teacher or teaching assistant. The notion that a growth mindset fosters internal resilience in contexts where relationships may be difficult to form is an important finding. A teacher outside of the early years perceived the utility of children learning growth mindset, as it enabled them to alter their outlook and mood after relational conflicts at home. The teacher perceived that this helped children make responsible choices about their behaviour. The final part of this section discusses the implications of the drive towards a neoliberal ideal learner and what part growth mindset must play in it. I explore the use of growth mindset within a performance-focused school setting by arguing that the way teachers in the school perceive the utility of growth mindset leads to the belief that children are responsible for producing good or better progress. A psychological contract implicitly emerges where pupils are perceived to be able to implement growth mindset and learn independently as self-responsible learners. I argue that this is problematic because structural influences are not considered. This leaves the pupil open to self-blame as they internalise the cause of their lack of progress because of deficits of their self. I argue that focusing on children becoming self-responsible learners promotes the idea that no level of dependency is legitimate.

The second section focuses on how growth mindset was used in the school but also provides insights into the structures impacting on the operationalisation of growth mindset. The overriding theme in this section is how the school operationalised growth mindset to develop the self-responsible learner. This data is based on the perceptions of teachers and teaching assistants, building on their historical evaluations and accounts growth mindset practices prior to the original Headteacher leaving the school. This is an important finding because it explores growth mindset being understood and utilised in a context that is predominantly performance-focused; a frame of reference that has yet be explored by the literature. The second key theme is how growth mindset is practiced with pupils. I focus on the sub-themes of the use of key phrases and teachers modelling growth mindset to pupils. These findings are important because growth mindset is perceived to teach a good and a bad way of talking to children. Teachers and teaching assistants mitigated against the risk of harming pupils by using a fixed mindset language by developing a list of key growth mindset phrases to use with the children.

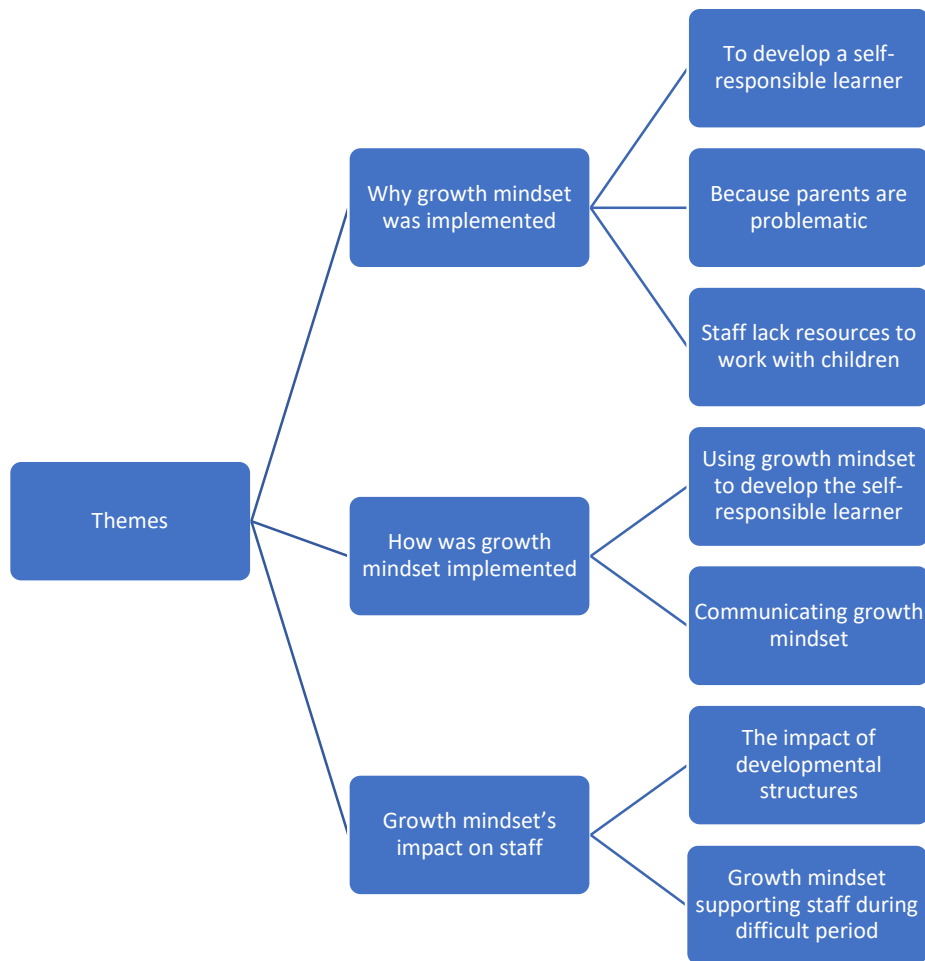


Figure 2: Thematic tree

The final section in this chapter focuses on a key unexpected finding: how growth mindset impacted teachers and teaching assistants, contributing to all three research aims. This section is divided into two parts with the first part explores the the impact of the structures used to develop growth mindset on the staff. Here, the structures include the use of formal and informal meeting spaces where professional reflections and sharing of experiences and practices occur. The second key theme explores the reports of teachers who felt that their own growth mindset supported them through various situational and individual difficulties while the school was undergoing a period of instability, but also to achieve personal goals. this section provides insights teachers and teaching assistants beliefs about growth mindset,

is to them, as well as the acting Headteacher and main proponent of growth mindset in the school. Free-associative narrative interviewing (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) was used in the approach of interviewing, allowing the participants to discuss the topic using open-ended questions. This approach led to a depth of knowledge that contributes to important yet previously unexplored understandings of growth mindset being developed in a real-world primary school. This happened because teachers had the space to reflect. This enabled unique and individual associations of their time in the school while growth mindset was being implemented.

The following sections will now present the findings from my analysis, and I will discuss them in relation to wider literature and theory.

### 3.2 Section 1: Understanding why the school implemented growth mindset

Based on my interpretation of the teachers and staff interviews and focus groups, as well as my time observing in the school, it appeared that the most prominent rationale to implement growth mindset was to develop an ideal self-responsible learner. This idea was a common feature, as one teacher said:

*“These children need to become self-responsible learners that make good behavioural choices.”* (Teacher)

At the time of my observations in the field, I was not aware of the link between growth mindset and the discussions I encountered. My assumptions around growth mindset were quite naïve, I expected to hear staff talk about nurturing mastery responses so that children would learn differently and hear positive accounts about student engagement. Instead, what I often found was language from teachers about children making good and bad choices, and the need for them to be self-responsible. But it was during the analysis of



interview data, the perceptions of teachers and teaching assistants made links between developing the self-responsible learner and growth mindset.

Connecting sub-themes to the self-responsible learner emerged from both interview and observation data. The first sub-theme was a perception of teachers and teaching assistants that the parents cause the deficits in their children's self-responsibility and character.

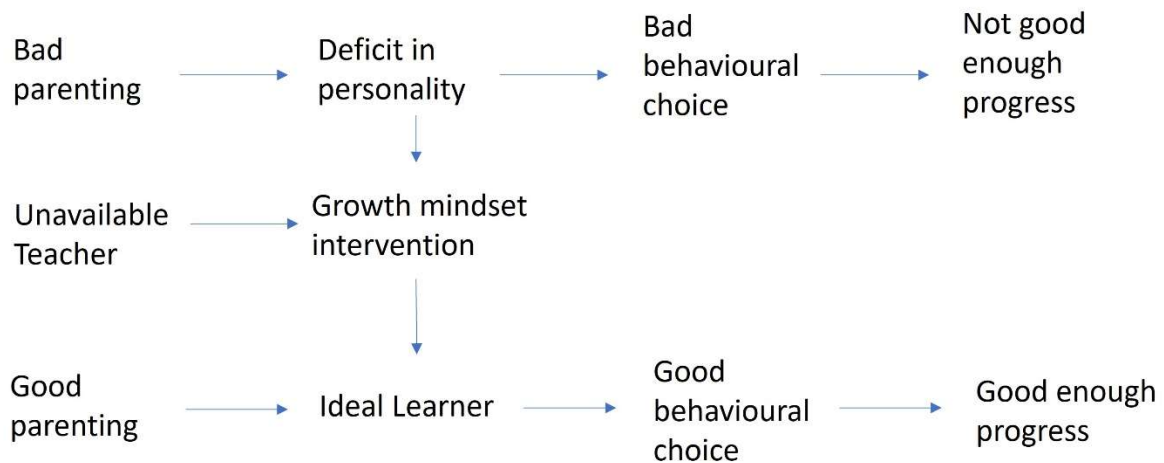
Further sub-themes make sense of this as some teachers perceived the community, and the parents within the community as being poor role models that expect things to come to them in the context of depending on state support. This was evidenced by the presence of fourth generation worklessness, which was believed to limit the aspirations of children at the school. Children were perceived as coming from 'fixed mindset bubbles' (acting Headteacher). Some teachers perceived common problems of parents claiming that because they were not good at certain subjects their children wouldn't be, and these comments were made by parents while in front of their children. This was particularly difficult for some teachers to bear given that this was seen as fixed mindset language. Teachers and teaching assistants further perceived parents as being problematic if they did not interact with their children effectively when they picked them up from school. For example, this was evidenced by parents ignoring their children as they showed them their schoolwork. Teachers and teaching assistants therefore felt that training children to develop a growth mindset would make them more resilient and limit the effects of a psychologically negative family and community.

The second sub-theme related to the overarching theme of 'the need for the self-responsible learner that makes good behavioural choices' was linked to teacher resourcing. Teachers perceived that they and their teaching assistants spent most of their time with a few students who had additional needs. They perceived that the school did not provide

them with adequate resources to meet these children's needs, so they had to spend more of their time working closely with them. The teachers said that as a result the children that could make expected progress were not receiving adequate levels of teaching support. The teachers felt that growth mindset benefited those children more, because they had a better chance of making good or better progress and growth mindset was perceived to give them resilience and self-responsibility in their learning, compared to the children who needed more support. Primarily, there was an implicit expectation that these children would not get sufficient contact, and growth mindset was seen as a mitigate against a deficit in teacher/teaching assistant–child contact time. It was also felt that growth mindset enabled children to solve their own problems and as a way for children to choose to have a different mood and choose to start the day in a way that prevented their difficulties at home from affecting them at school.

This section aims to examine why the school decided to implement a growth mindset approach. The analysis shows that, on the surface, growth mindset was introduced into the school so that the children learned to become self-responsible learners that made good behavioural choices to enable them to make good or better progress. Growth mindset practices were therefore believed to be address individual deficiencies in several individual deficiencies that did not promote good behaviour choices. These include low resilience, self-esteem, low-perseverance, high dependency, and low aspirations. The analysis also found that teachers perceived low-quality parenting and family and community systems as being the precursor to individual deficits. Teachers also rationalised the need for teaching growth mindset in response to an under-resourced teaching context, explaining that they were unable to provide adequate attention to children who could make good or better progress

as they had to direct their attention towards children they perceived as needing additional support.



*Figure 3: Why growth mindset is being used derived from the reported perceptions of teachers and teaching assistants*

Figure 2 shows a simplified model of how teachers and teaching assistants understood the need for growth mindset. I say simplified because there is clearly multiple determinants and such a deterministic model does not show the full picture, as this section of the research will discuss. However, this is a representation of the perceptions of teachers at the school as to why growth mindset is being used and provides a rationale for integrating growth mindset at a surface level.

Individual interviews with additional observations within an early year setting and additional interviews with other members of staff at the school over two terms facilitated an in-depth understanding as to why the primary school used growth mindset with their pupils. I

consider the implications of my findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory and neoliberal discourses around the child, but also a disadvantaged community.

### 3.2.1 Growth mindset to help develop the self-responsible learner

The teachers perceived production of self-responsible learners as a key reason for the school to be implementing growth mindset. The school perceived self-responsible learners as children who can learn by themselves with limited support. This would be important for children that have less support from their family microsystem or receive sufficient support at school by teachers. This section brings together the participants' perspectives on the self-responsible ideal learner.

#### 3.2.1.1 *Growth mindset and the ideal learner*

Growth mindset and an implied theoretical ideal learner were often discussed at the same time. As the staff's understanding of growth mindset was closely linked to a perception of an ideal learner (Archer, 2007), like that found by Bradbury (2018) in her work reporting on the development of 'little neoliberals'. The acting Headteacher talked about their idea of an ideal learner:

*"So, we want them to have a growth mindset to think 'If I don't have this skill, and I want to get better at this what do I need to do to be able to get there? And I need to take some responsibility for it. I need to practice it and I need to learn about it' ... ultimately sort of their own responsibility."*

(Acting Headteacher)

The ideal learner was conceptualised broadly by the teachers and teaching assistants and meant a slightly different thing to different teachers, depending on their status in the school, proximity to the community and perspectives on education. The SENCo discussed the importance of children needing to be equipped with 'soft skills' like being able to

communicate and talk with each other, while also being independent. They also implicitly saw the need for the ideal learner to remain calm and resilient in situations that could cause them frustration, therefore allowing them to transition into adulthood effectively. However, the resilient ideal child that believes in themselves and demonstrates high levels of self-esteem was not discussed in *actual* terms, although it was mentioned from time to time. This theoretical ideal child appeared to be discussed implicitly when talking about the unideal learner.

Many of the terms used about the theoretical ideal learner by teachers are psychologised, and growth mindset psychology comes from the same field as cognitive behavioural therapy. The acting Headteacher emphasised the need to do ‘a lot of work around [measurable] self-esteem and resilience’ and understood growth mindset to ‘encompass all of that’ and as being especially important in an area of ‘high challenge’.

The good or ideal learner, as created with the support of growth mindset, becomes many things. The acting Headteacher additionally pointed out the importance of the politically minded learner that can be self-aware and self-understanding – different from the fixed mindset families that they come from. The child with the growth mindset is implicitly believed to be better at making more rational decisions like the homo-economicus of rational choice theory (Ailon, 2020), based on greater knowledge and understanding about the contemporary world they live in, and based on the perception of teachers. In the view of teachers, growth mindset intervenes to try to produce children who will not grow up like their insensitive, inexperienced, and overly dependent parents.

In the teachers’ eyes, the implicit ideal learner understands the implications of consequences but also wants to do well in life and meets their endeavours with

perseverance and resilience. The theoretical ideal learner is thought to be able to pick themselves up from a bad morning and then continue to love learning; something that stays with them throughout life. The acting Headteacher pointed out that the children 'will be doing jobs that don't currently exist' so they need to have these 'skills and certain psychological characteristics, like resilience and growth mindset, to enable them to learn and develop throughout life.

Within the school, growth mindset was to encompass the characteristics which would help pupils to enable a love of learning, but more importantly, for them to become self-responsible learners. An independent and self-responsible learner was commonly lauded by the teachers and teaching assistants. And as I shall discuss later when I cover the implementation of growth mindset in more detail, children were taught particular 'characteristics' that were perceived as contributing to a growth mindset.

The implication here that the children from these communities were required to be self-responsible and love learning because their community was perceived to be uneducated and posed a risk to the school community, which I observed, was symbolically shown by new security systems put in place.

Growth mindset was understood to be needed in two respects. Firstly, growth mindset was introduced because it was believed to be an intervention that could prevent children from making bad choices:

*"... we looked at it [growth mindset] initially thinking this is really going to tackle and support the behaviour of our students who don't make good choices." (Acting Headteacher)*

Growth mindset interventions were seen as hopefully leading children with deficits in personality to make good behavioural choices and sufficient progress in their academic attainment.

Secondly, growth mindset was described by some teachers as a way for children to make sufficient progress in the circumstances unavailable to support children that could make good or better progress:

*“So we realised that [there was] a lot of work to do around self-esteem and resilience. So the growth mindset approach encompasses all of that, so of being high levels of challenge building resilience for the long term, you know better citizenship in and beyond them leaving primary school. And hopefully better academic results as well because they are seeing the benefit. Being the best they can be and to challenge themselves when it’s tricky. Because our kids give up easily when it’s tricky historically here.”*

(Acting Headteacher)

As such, the interview data suggested that teachers perceived the importance of children maintaining resilience to work and learn while unsupported, believing that children must be able to work with limited direction and interaction and become, as the acting Headteacher said to me, ‘self-responsible learners that make good behavioural choices.

### *3.2.1.2 The problematic learner*

The ‘problematic learner’ is characterised as having deficits in character and psychology that explain ineffective learning and can often be presented in pathological ways (Archer, 2007).

This sub-theme reaffirms Bradbury’s (2013) work which considered the education policy and the implicit ideal learner. Bradbury found many of the same ideals, notably that of rational

choice and individual responsibility for learning. However, this theme extends on Bradbury's findings by demonstrating that teachers place blame on parents for limiting these perceived ideal subjectivities and that growth mindset is viewed as a tool to support the development of these ideals. The acting Headteacher said:

*"And it's the same with the kids we want them to develop the skills, not like sit, like some of our kids have got like, they sit and think like it should all just come to them."* (Acting Headteacher)

And a teaching assistant described the conversations from a child she worked with:

*"I can't, I'm not going to be good, I'm gonna leave school, I'm not gonna get a good job, I'm not bothered"* (Teaching assistant)

The teachers presented the problematic learner as a child that doesn't have confidence in their learning and presents a world that is limited, but also unwilling to engage with it. It may well be the case that a child's experience of poverty places real limitations on them, as was the case with the potential shame of receiving support if they are unable to be a self-responsible learner. However, the children appeared to be presented a world of unlimited potential, if they could just give the set task the teacher had asked them to do a go. But the anti-ideal learner was expected in this area, a teaching assistant said:

*"They didn't have anything to grip on to. Like we didn't have that language going on, and like coming from this area there's a lot of children with a lot of behaviour issues and anger problems and they very like low self-esteem"* (Teaching assistant)

This quote presents a slightly different perspective on the problematic learner who is perceived as angry and frustrated and displaying behavioural issues. Something problematic with the problematic learner is also their trajectory in the school. A teaching assistant in



reception perceived that as the work became more challenging, the problematic learners capacity to make good or better progress was not maintained. This seemed to suggest that pupils struggle to keep progressing at a level deemed necessary by the school system , leading to frustration. One of the key areas that was identified by the deputy head during interviews was the progress of children:

*“Because actually [teachers] feel like they are failing, because ‘why can’t I make that child make progress, why isn’t that child making progress?’ And they start analysing lots of different things, so you start looking at attendance and how they are within the classroom? Have they had any interventions? What do they need? And actually, it gets quite pressured from that point of view. There’s the pressure from government on schools to get children to make good or better progress and actually, for that, you’re looking at progress points in the year and if they’re not making progress points every term then actually people start getting very worried about that. And they’ll say: ‘He’s nearly made a progress point and she’s nearly made a progress point but they’re not quite there yet’, you know, but that can have an impact.” (Deputy Headteacher)*

The impact on maintaining progress throughout school, coupled with the anxiety teachers had of children not making good or better progress, could create a conflicting and fraught set of circumstances that teachers would rather not have to focus on. Some teachers felt that the behaviour that emerges from family and community circumstances lead to children being defiant, confused and disrespectful, but also frightened in the school. The pressure on progress was something I noticed on some of the children’s faces in reception. At the age of four, the children were getting scared when they were waiting to be asked to answer a math

question. I observed a boy anxiously trying to do sums on his fingers. He looked tired and stressed while making an obvious effort to calculate each sum in preparation for his turn. I perceived the pressure that pupils and staff feel about making good or better progress to be manifestly real in the classroom.

Growth mindset was viewed as an appropriate approach to mitigate against the low aspirations of pupils, as a reception teacher discussed:

*“So, the children don’t have great aspirations to achieve so I think the growth mindset and all the positivity and the super learners, those children really need that here because otherwise they will become the fifth generation with no aspiration and no job.”* (Reception teacher)

This is a particularly interesting discourse because aspiration has also been explained as a technology of agency during an analysis of education policy (Spohrer et al., 2018). In this context, growth mindset became a tool to help improve academic progress, but it was also perceived as increasing aspiration which is itself perceived as a tool to improve academic progress (Gale and Parker 2015). As such, aspiration and growth mindset are both seen as tools to improve academic progress, and have been used in schools in deprived areas. This highlights the wide interpretation of growth mindset.

Throughout the data collection, teachers informally discussed the intergenerational worklessness in the community that the children belonged to. I was told by numerous members of staff that most of the pupils’ parents were unemployed and this informed teachers perspective about some of the barriers the children were perceived to face. One such barrier was the perceived low level of aspiration in the school which was intrinsically linked with the pupils’ identity, as the SENCo pointed out:

*“So, we have to try to raise the aspirations ... because all that fits in with nurture, it’s raising and being able to see yourself differently, and seeing yourself differently from your parents and having that motivation and that love of learning and wanting to become a life-long learner.” (SENCo)*

Here, the stance of the SENCO presented the school’s aim to separate the pupils from the identity of their parents and their community to become self-responsible learners that made good behavioural choices. This position is also striking in that it implies that there was a culture of the school protecting children from their own parents and community. This reflected the staff’s beliefs that the parents were viewed as the cause of children not making good behaviour choices which would lead them to dislike education and not see the point in learning once they left school, or even while still at school. The acting Headteacher said:

*“And it’s the same with the kids we want them to develop the skills...they sit and think like it should all just come to them, there’s an air of expectancy and a little bit of that is cultural from the community.” (Acting Headteacher)*

The characterisation of the community as being oppressive to the child was consistent with political narratives found in policy seeking to ‘empower’ children and young people by engendering aspiration (Reay, 2013). Aspiration was seen as a psychological attribute, like growth mindset, which has been consistently highlighted in policy discourses as a deficit to be increased as a solution to pupils not realising their potential and achieving at school (Reay, 2013; Paterson et al., 2014; DfE 2016; Spohrer et al., 2018). Aspiration in policy discourses presents as a solution which targets the self, but also describes and *others* the community as lacking in aspiration and not providing children with developmental role

models that limit potential. However, within the current study, growth mindset was regarded as something the children and the community lacked alongside aspiration. The acting Headteacher said:

*“We need to educate them to understand about politics and to understand about themselves as a member of the local area and of the wider area they live in, and the UK, Europe or not, and how it all fits in to everything else because our kids again have limited experiences of that ... Most children won’t realise there’s other choices to them about how they can be in the world and I think as a school we’ve got to equip them with that and make sure we turn them out knowing what choices they’ve got really which is a challenge for schools in our area.”* (Acting Headteacher)

The children were not only perceived as being at risk from a community lacking aspiration, they were also perceived to be at the mercy of a community that had a fixed mindset. When considering literature that pathologises communities as psychologically deficient, it is understandable that one psychological attribute can be easily replaced by another. However, what is not consistent is the application of understanding child development using mindset theory. The acting Headteacher went on to say:

*“So, we found the growth mindset approach ... initially thinking this is really going to tackle and support the behaviour of our students who don’t make good choices. But we have found that it’s starting to impact on our high achiever learners who are more susceptible to having a fixed mindset because ... they found learning easier and therefore didn’t challenge*

*themselves and that did play out in behaviour for some of those pupils but also played out and lost learning opportunities.” (Acting Headteacher)*

Here the acting Headteacher demonstrated that a fixed mindset was not just attributed to children who made poor behavioural choices and equally they do not discuss the family context around high-achieving pupils. In fact, high achieving pupils were understood by this participant to benefit from developing a growth mindset and their fixed mindset was assumed to develop because they were not challenged in the classroom. What the acting Headteacher did not acknowledge were other systemic factors, such as their own preoccupation with attainment and progress, which is a performance-focused goal and associated with having a fixed mindset. So, while the acting Headteacher’s discourse others the community as lacking aspiration and creating a fixed mindset bubble, it is also possible to argue that the school itself was nested within a fixed mindset bubble. What is surprising is that there is no acknowledgement that systemic practices, such as the focus on attainment, were a contributing factor to the mindset children adopted in the school.

### *3.2.1.3 Children making good behavioural choices*

One of the most common words I heard around the school while teachers were talking to children was ‘choice’. Teachers believed the choice-making abilities of children were key in their learning and general behaviour. For example, an observational account of one interaction with a teacher read:

*“The teacher spoke about a child and how she was the only teacher he trusted. She differentiated between behaviour where they weren’t making choices and behaviour where they were. She went into a script I’ve heard other teaching assistants use about children making choices in their*

*behaviour and how this child made choices to behave badly. 'I try to teach children to be more self-responsible so they can make better behavioural choices.'*" (Observation)

The connection between choice and behaviour, regardless of whether they were good or bad behaviours, was reflected in interview data that explained why growth mindset was adopted in the school. The deputy head said:

*"Because it benefits you in the long run 'cos that child will hopefully make the right choice and therefore their behaviour is going to be better and therefore their work is going to be better, and therefore it seems like a more helpful tool rather than a 'This is going to be lots of work for no reason'."* (Deputy Headteacher)

There is a clear link within this school that teachers perceive that progress begets behaviour, and behaviour begets choice. I have demonstrated that teachers see growth mindset as a psychological tool that can make children think differently, to make 'better choices' and therefore better behaviour, or being 'empowered' to do as they are told. This demonstrates a thinking which puts the responsibility of a child's behaviour in the hands of the child. A teacher in the upper school spoke to me and emphasised

*"that children need to know that it is their decision, they can sort their behaviour out, and sort their outlook out as well."* (Teacher in the upper school)

This kind of perception makes assumptions that children coherently process knowledge that is presented and make a rational decision thereafter, whether it is deemed good or bad. In other words, children can be perceived to be making rational decisions, i.e., choices, to go against what teachers have told them to do. It emphasises a child who is isolated and

manages their problems and learning. That they alone will determine their own success in life, independent of others. The evaluation of growth mindset from the teacher's perspective suggests that when children learn growth mindset, they don't need to be provided with support and will manage on their own.

A socio-cultural perspective argues that children's lives are shaped by the contexts in which they are raised (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and not merely the sole creators of their behaviour. The findings show that teachers perceive one part of the family system influences the outcomes of a child, the parents. Children are recognised by teachers to come to school having bad experiences at home and not being supported by their parents through those bad experiences, and that these experiences could well be traumatic and neglectful, and this subsequently impacts on how they perform and behave at school. However, rather than encouraging children to engage with the relationships in their context, growth mindset is rationalised as a tool so children can choose approaches to learning that demonstrate coping and learning behaviour independently of problematic relationships (the busy teacher or the neglectful parent).

### 3.2.2 Teachers' perception of parents

The most prominent theme out of this collection was the perceptions that teachers had of parents. This was also key as it is not something that has been explored in previous literature in detail. These findings demonstrate that within the context of a school developing growth mindset, parents were consistently seen as the cause for pupils not being an ideal learner or having a growth mindset. This is an important finding as growth mindset might engender a mesosystem disconnect between the school and parents. More

research is needed on parental perceptions of schools that have integrated growth mindset to understand more about their experiences within these complex systems.

It is in this sub-theme where teachers locate reasons for the pupils' deficits and reasons for a lack of self-responsibility. This sub-theme will outline teachers' perception of what is ostensibly a presentation of perceived parental failure. Teachers and staff spoke in abstract and psychological ways about parents and the impact that they had on the internal resilience of their children:

*"The resilience isn't there."* (SENCo)

*"Because their parents haven't got it, and it feeds down doesn't it."*

(Parent support worker)

*"The in-built resilience doesn't happen."* (SENCo)

This perception of resilience is suggestive of a more traditional psychological form of resilience explained by Masten et al. (2009). This is consistent with the focus on individual deficits of traditional psychology that growth mindset also comes from. In the above discussion, the perceived deficits in the parents are attributed to the perceived deficits of the children. This seemed to set up a focus on parents and the community being bad for children in a way that had overtones of 'underclassism' (Tang et al., 2015) and victim blaming narratives. Within these narratives, parents were perceived as problematic because of their fixed mindset; they came from a background of worklessness; they did not provide children with the right role models; they were perceived as either over- or under-loving; they did too much for their children; and they were perceived as not being interested in their children.



### 3.2.2.1 *Generation of worklessness limits aspirations of children*

The teachers and teaching assistants made it clear that they believed families play a key role in the development of learner identities of children:

*“We’re looking at fourth generation of worklessness within the area so there are lots of people who haven’t ever worked and there’s no role model within the family who has ever worked.”* (Reception teacher)

This perception of parents experiencing poverty holds a similar discourse that Tang et al. (2015) might consider underclassism. This discourse emphasises the inferior position of parents and children, while blaming the family for the anticipated eventuality of a child becoming part of a fifth generation of worklessness. Powell et al. (2019) suggest that only 4% of the population in the area were claiming universal credit who were deemed fit and able to be in work. It is probably more likely that these jobs were precarious and low-paid, as noted in the United Nations report on the impact of austerity (United Nations, 2019). This shows that there is a tendency towards a classist prejudice and class discourse towards parents at the school.

Additionally, the mental health of parents was raised as a concern, and I observed a conversation where a support worker suggested that most of the children who lacked resilience were observed to have parents who lacked resilience in a conversation I observed where a support worker made this suggestion. Contextual circumstances that were often discussed were the levels of unemployment in the area, and the suggestion that some children at the school would become part of a fifth generation to be workless:

*“Because four generations of families not working is massive.”* (Reception teacher)

*“We’re looking at fourth generation of worklessness within the area so there are lots of people who haven’t ever worked and there’s no role model within the family who has ever worked so that then becomes difficult because actually then they don’t know what the world of work expects of children and of young adults now, so we have to equip the children with the skills and the soft skills of being able to communicate and talk with one another, and to be independent, all of those things are nurtured within the family environment but what we tend to find is that with the little ones, the parents are very loving with their little ones but then they don’t help them to grow up and they get stuck at an emotional age really of three or four.” (SEnCo)*

This was attributed by staff due to the lack of family and community role models who were in work. This notion buys into the myth of the underclass being perpetuated in the media, while none of the data supports the existence of this underclass. Notions of feckless parents and victim-blaming narratives and that poverty is a condition in which people live that is found in some media representations (McKendrick et al., 2008; Sippitt and Tranchese, 2015).

Some teachers believed because of the high amount of worklessness and dependency on the welfare system among their local community, some teachers believed that some parents had an air of expectancy that things would be done for them and suggested that some parents were lacking initiative, strength of character and were irresponsible:

*“And it’s the same with the kids we want them to develop the skills, not like sit, like some of our kids have got like they sit and think like it should all*

*just come to them. There's an air of expectancy and a little bit of that is cultural from the community.” (Acting Headteacher)*

Importantly, this victim-blaming discourse (Jones and Novak, 1999) situates an argument that children and the community are psychologically deficient. Growth mindset is perceived as a tool which not only supports children, but in some cases is seen as something which might provide a positive influence on the family home:

*“So, the [growth mindset] language that you're using, the children are taking that home, and the parents are hearing it, so that they're learning it.” (Teaching assistant)*

The staff perceived potential mechanisms into why they thought there were four generations of worklessness in the area, and their understanding was located within the psychology of the parents and not the social circumstances that have been shown to have an impact on people within the community.

The notion that growth mindset informed practice in primary school settings being useful for working with children who are socio-economically deprived is consistent with findings from Savvides and Bond (2021). These findings show that it is possible for prejudicial views of socio-economically deprived communities and understandings of growth mindset to intersect. The following section highlights potential discourses that can emerge through this intersection.

#### *3.2.2.2 Fixed mindset bubbles*

The teachers and teaching assistants discussed different parental circumstances that resulted in what they perceived as problematic parenting that negatively influenced the

personality and character of children at the school. Parents were generalised as not possessing growth mindsets themselves, as the acting Headteacher said:

*“They’re in their own little, sometimes, quite fixed mindsets bubble, going back to families who are having very fixed mindsets on things most children won’t realise there’s other choices to them about how they can be in the world and I think as schools we’ve got to equip them with that and make sure we turn them out knowing what choices they’ve got really which is a challenge for schools in our area.”* (Acting Headteacher)

The acting Headteacher perceived indicated that if families did not have psychological deficits it was not for the psychological deficits the families have, then they would know what choices were available to them. Because of this, the school rationale to use growth mindset was to equip children with skills the necessary so the pattern of passing on a fixed mindset to the next generation stops. The reception teacher said:

*“I’ve gone into families’ homes, and I’ve seen how they live at home. Some great experiences and some awful experiences, and somehow just by giving, and again, going back to the growth mindset – some of those parents have never had that.”* (Reception teacher)

The teacher perceived that they were providing something to the children that the parents hadn’t given them, and then perceiving parents as being underdeveloped themselves. The teacher believed that growth mindset would enable parents and children to break out of the poverty cycle. Although the teacher explained that they encountered awful experiences at home, there is a perception that it is the individual psychology of a parent that needed to be fixed.

Each one of these statements gives a different perspective on similar mechanisms. Whether it is the perspective advancement of aspirations or particular mindsets, the teachers and teaching assistants point to the family microsystem and proximal process between the children and their parents as being problematic. This could be self-serving in the context of audit cultures that measure progress, and this deflection of the problem onto parents could be seen as a way of internally negotiating where the responsibility of a child making progress settles. It demonstrates that there is a variety of different socialisation contexts and processes that teachers and teaching assistants join to explain their understanding of what constitutes 'maladaptive' development and how growth mindset can address it. The problematisation of parents' interactions with children has been made in longitudinal studies by Gunderson et al. (2013; 2017). They evidenced the idea that parental process praise increased the likelihood that their children would develop a growth mindset. Gunderson et al.'s research suggests a splitting between good and bad praise, with process praise being good and person praise being bad. Additionally, they give examples of potentially damaging praise, such as parents using 'hyperbole' like 'that was an incredibly amazing catch!' (Gunderson et al., 2017, p. 407) or praise which 'consoles' children. However, the assumption that all process praise is good, and all performance praise is bad, regardless of the context, is also problematic. The teachers at the school demonstrated an awareness that certain language is bad for children, and that doing 'the growth mindset' language is good and creates an idealised learner with a growth mindset. A teaching assistant said:

*"Then you work alongside somebody who hasn't had that training, some of the language that they use makes you cringe ... only because you're more consciously aware of the power of what you're saying. And I probably used*

*language in the past that I wouldn't use now after having the growth mindset training.” (Teaching assistant)*

This anxiety with using bad language was shown by members of staff creating ‘key phrases’, which are agreed and circulated internally by teachers (see the next chapter). What is important here is that research in the area promotes a polarising debate around families and their influence on the child as a learner. From a scientific perspective, researchers, such as Gunderson et al., can make simple assertions of what is good and bad based on narrowly focused research. But, because socio-cognitive research is largely devoid of context, simplistic assertions and models can develop and have the potential to be problematic, as from an ecological perspective human development is not as simple as inputs and outputs as can be inferred from socio-cognitive research. This model of relating to children with only process praise became a legitimate way to give feedback to a child under the growth mindset philosophy (see Truax (2018) for an example). As such, teachers in the school learned, practiced and shared an understanding of growth mindset that formed a focus on the kind of language used in an interaction. From a wider perspective, this view can be seen in reports by the World Bank (World Development Report, 2015). This report highlights the importance of growth mindset for teaching parents how to praise their children.

Gunderson et al. (2017) championed the application of process praise but did not consider how this kind of praise impacts on relationships. Something that is startling with Gunderson et al (2017) recommendations is the lack of importance of relationships. In fact, what appears to be of greater importance is the cognitive instructions and feedback. An image of a uniform child with inputs of technology (as communication) and outputs proliferates, as in the cognitive tradition. With the appropriate process praise, a child is visioned as an asset to be sweated until they cannot produce any more, and growth mindset is a tool to do that.

Educators who have been trained in growth mindset literature could easily become attuned to different kinds of language, and their consequences, but this can also lead to quite simplistic models of causality.

Teachers' perceptions revealed a pen portrait of an archetypal problematic parent. They perceived parents as unemployed and set in their ways. They lacked motivation and because of their fixed mindset were not aware of the choices they could make to improve their lives. The parents were perceived by teachers at the school as feckless and expectant of things being given to them. Because of this, the teachers perceived that those parents of children at the school would not be good role models.

### *3.2.2.3 Poor role models*

Teachers and teaching assistants gave numerous examples of parents who were perceived to be poor role models. These ranged from examples that might predispose children to developing a fixed mindset and others undermining the culture the school was trying to project onto the children. The following are some examples of perceptions of teachers regarding parents as modelling fixed mindsets to their children:

*"[I] think a lot of the children here are very much 'Aww I'll never be good' you get a lot of parents 'I wasn't good at maths so therefore my kid won't be good at maths' and they pick it up and go 'Ooo my mum wasn't good at maths, therefore I'm not good at maths'." (Teacher)*

*"I had a parent recently in one of my last cohorts of children who came in the first lesson to watch and just said: 'He can't read, he'll never be able to read,' in front of his child – 'He can't read, doesn't know how to read, he*

*doesn't want to do it at home, I can't help him, there's no point blah blah"*

(Reading Recoveryteacher)

In some cases, teachers perceived some parents as not seeing the point of education:

*"And also having parents who have had a bad experience of education themselves or have attended very lowly, they don't see the importance of education because they've managed without so that motivation to learn isn't always there."* (SENCo)

Here, the participants are perceiving incoherences between the microsystem of the family and of the school. The teachers perceived examples of how not to be and blamed the parents for this. Ahl (2008) would argue that the discourse of blame, and the passing on of poor motivational traits, is typical where a motivational theory such as growth mindset is in the minds of teachers. Ahl (2008) points out that a key assumption to all motivational theory, such as growth mindset, is that motivation, or a psychological construct of a motivational model, such as growth mindset, resides within an individual. Therefore, if this model is taken as truth, which it is perceived to be by the teachers, then there is an avenue open to blame the parents. In this case, the teachers blamed parents with perceptions of laziness and expected 'everything to come to them' (Acting Headteacher). Here, they are following the same sort of discourse Ahl (2008) would anticipate, that

*"it becomes possible to blame the individual for social problems and constructs the individual as insufficient while simultaneously disregarding social circumstances and rendering government invisible".* (Ahl, 2008, p. 156)

The teachers and teaching assistants blamed the parents for the deficits in their children, while they omitted discussions around structural issues the parents may have been facing.



#### 3.2.2.4 Parent–child interactions

The reception teacher raised the issue of children not entering the nursery with enough independence and explained that children have expectations of adults doing everything for them over the first three years of their lives. It was felt that the parents lacked a gentle patience with their children that allowed them the space to learn how to do things for themselves and to develop agency in their lives. The nursery teacher sympathises with parents' difficulties around getting their children ready for school,

*“which I appreciate is hard in the morning if you’re going to be late, but it’s hard if they asked them to do it themselves ... if you let them do it themselves then they get faster at it and help you in the long run because they’ll be up to do it themselves and your able to get out the house quicker.”* (Nursery teacher)

The struggles reported by teachers wanting to advise and support parents can be seen, and again demonstrates the link the teachers have with the key role that parents play in children's development towards self-responsibility, as perceived by teachers. In the early years, teachers and teaching assistant gave their perception of some parent interactions that came to mind:

*“Because you don’t know what they are coming in with from home, and if we hear it at the door and the parents are freely saying it in front of them, in front of a member of staff, then you just think to yourself, what must have it been like when the member of staff wasn’t there? What’s being said to them, and that negativity, because it’s all mobile phones in’t it! And we’ve seen children leave here and gone out dead smiley and gone to mum*

*'Ooo, look what I've made you today!' and the parent's just taken it off them 'Oh right...' and just walked off, and I thought then the face on that child, you just think, I won't tell you what I think because it's unprofessional, but I thought my hands are firmly tied sometimes. It is upsetting and I thought that child was so pleased to show them that drawing.'* (Reception teaching assistant)

*"I see parents coming to pick up their children and they are on the phone and they don't even give you eye contact at the end of the day. Not every parents, but some, and you think 'You're picking your child up from school and you're not even interested in what I'm gonna say to you, "they've had a great day".' Too busy on their phones sometimes, although they wear earphones and will be on their phones when their child hasn't seen them all day and they are full of what they've done all day and they want to tell their parents."* (Nursery teaching assistant)

Both of the examples above show a common perception of parents not interacting with their children in the way that the teachers deemed appropriate. The perceptions highlight a discord between expectations of interactions with the teachers; however, the focus remains on parents, in general. There is no concern for the strains and difficulties created by structures in the parents' lives. Instead, the focus remains on the parent being at fault. It may well be that children are going home to difficult and potentially abusive experiences. However, by holding parents accountable without demonstrating appreciation of the context of those actions would limit the potential to form helpful relationships that can support the parent and child.

### 3.2.2.5 Psychologically neglectful parenting

Bad behavioural choices were blamed on 'bad' parenting, which was believed to cause deficits in personality. Growth mindset was seen as an intervention that could reshape a child with the personality and characteristics of the ideal learner, a nursery teacher said:

*"I find that a lot of children when they arrive don't believe in themselves, they had so much done for them they don't think they can do it themselves or don't want to do it themselves, they wouldn't even try to put a coat on because someone has always done that for them because it feels like they are able to do that."* (Nursery teacher)

Teachers and teaching assistants perceived that their role was to support these children by helping them think better and not be like their parents. A teaching assistant in reception spoke about how they try to 'turn around' and 'change thought processes' after a bad start to the day for a child who has just been told by their parents at the school gates that they 'were being stupid and naughty'. This sounds like a practice-based viewpoint and a clear understanding of the objectives of doing growth mindset, which aspires to change thought processes. I reflected on the discourse of changing the thought processes of children as it sounds similar to a cognitive behavioural therapist rather than an early years teaching assistant. Perhaps in the growth mindset-orientated space, teachers and teaching assistants felt enabled to change thought processes, so this has the potential for a change in the way teachers and teaching assistants practice education but also view children.

The family microsystem was perceived to influence pupils' development within the school in a negative way, thus the relationship between the school and the family, the mesosystem, was conflicted. In theoretical language, Bronfenbrenner (2005) would suggest that the teachers perceived the power and direction of that child's development within their family

microsystem to be on an anti-developmental trajectory. The mesosystem disconnects of the school believing that the parents were to blame for children not being self-responsible learners, between family and school, explains a rationale for the school to need growth mindset, while the staff's training and understanding of growth mindset appeared to add a new quality to that disconnect that potentially is reinforcing a disconnect between the school and the parents. The implications is that children from the community are understood to become dependent. Dependence is something that early years' teachers and teaching assistants were concerned about as well:

*"So, I think some of them, not all of them, some of them, have had three years of someone just doing it for them so they've learned that someone will always do it, so it makes them feel there is no point. There's quite a lot of them that come in like that isn't there?" (Nursery teacher)*

#### *3.2.2.6 Damned if they do and damned if they don't*

There was a perception by staff at the school that the children were not nurtured by their parents, and that those parents struggled to attend to the child's social and emotional needs. In some cases, parents were also described as being 'very loving' and not giving their children space to grow up, while this was contrasted with parents who expected that their children grow up much sooner, but without giving them adequate support to do so.

*"...we'll actually still get that at year five and year six with some children, because emotionally they've not been helped to grow but they say: 'You can get yourself to school, get yourself dressed,' and not being that gentle transition towards adulthood – it's expected much younger." (Deputy Headteacher)*

The above quote demonstrates the complexity in understanding the parents' ability to take care of their children. On the one hand, they infer the dangers and deprivations of too good parenting; however, they also understand children can grow up too soon without adequate parental support.

In some examples, teachers felt that some children's basic needs were not being met by their parents. This meant that some children would come to school hungry, but equally that their social and emotional needs were not being met at home. A teaching assistant explained that she was concerned about the severity of some of the children's lives at home based on her perceptions of their parents' behaviour as they collected them. Something staff presented as particularly troubling was that their efforts with pupils in the classroom were felt to be diminished by the parents. A deputy Headteacher said:

*"It's a big cycle, and I think the things that we teach them in school, some goes home, and for some families it's reinforced and for some families it's not because some families we get, erm, completely the opposite said to them so then we have to reinforce it again when they come back to school, so then they've got this real dilemma, some of these children, we're asking them, a lot of them, in order for them to change because they won't actually see the need for change, because well, 'You're not my mum, my mum says this', so that's quite an interesting one because they don't know what's true. It's like fake news isn't it. It's that analogy of school and home and real news and not real news, and which one is true, and they have to decipher that for themselves. Which information to choose to be right."*

(Deputy Headteacher)

Parents were perceived to undo schools' efforts as they were thought to contradict growth mindset and other messages the school gave to the children. From an ecological systems theory perspective, the connections between the child's microsystems and the mesosystems are important for a child to develop. This is because disconnects that emerge from perceptions of parents of staff inhibit the link between the school and the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As above, the deputy head did well to explain this discord for the child who was perceived to find it difficult existing in a group of microsystems that are perceived to be culturally at odds. However, what seems to emerge was a trend in teachers to share judgemental comments about parents, as other quotes have shown. Whether this was something to do with growth mindset or a wider issue, it is difficult to say. However, the judgments on the person appear to be the main concern when teachers are talking about parents. These relationships are important, as they can lead to important benefits for teachers, such as developing a better understanding of a child's needs (Liu et al., 2020), but they also seem to generally support improved academic outcomes for school children (Ma et al., 2015). The negative perspectives of parents, combined with increased security which serves as a barrier between the school and the parent could well be limiting. On the one hand, the school is looking to improve learning outcomes for children with the support of growth mindset, yet it could also be argued that growth mindset contributes to a certain kind of perspective of problematic parents. The combination of implicitly viewing parents as problematic, while initiating a barrier between them and the school is likely to develop the context for confrontation and a misunderstanding in the connection between parents and teachers.

### 3.2.2.7 *The ideal parent*

The teachers and teaching assistants portrayed an ideal parent as one that is in alignment with the examples and lessons which the school was teaching the children. Within a shadow curriculum, which may well be beyond the teachers awareness, the messages they convey present an *ideal parent* that would understand the philosophy of the school and showed willingness to engage with members of staff that were actively trying to engage with parents and support them. Parents were perceived to ideally be seen participating in school events that they are invited to. The teachers and teaching assistants also articulated the view that the ideal parent would tell their children that they are valued, their opinions matter and are worth their while. The ideal parent would also reassure their children if they got injured or would know when to actively seek medical attention. A teaching assistant pointed out that they really wanted parents to convince their children to believe in themselves:

*“We do parenting classes in the school with the parent support worker, she organises this, you know like, and it’s just getting them to understand our approach now to say to a child like you’ve got to try and convince them that they do believe in themselves. Even if it is wrong, as long as they are trying, and trying their best, they’re achieving, because at one stage they wouldn’t do that.”* (Teaching assistant)

However, these implied ideals were only ever discussed as ideals, and there was not a single account of a parent doing something right for a child in the interview data provided by the participants. The focus on parents was consistently negative. Examples of poor parental behaviour cited by participants at the school included parents neglecting children as they were seeking affirmation for class work or talking negatively about their own child in front

of them. Sometimes, teachers and teaching assistants suggested that parents would swear and talk negatively about the school in front of their children and while at the school:

*“And a lot of our parents swear and talk negatively about school in front of their children, so that’s actually not supporting school; that undermines everything that we’re doing and it’s about how they have to stay positive, and not run us down.” (SENCo)*

Something which was particularly frustrating for the teachers and teaching assistants in the nursery was the perceived impact of technology on parenting; where parents were perceived to be too distracted by their devices to properly acknowledge their child at the end of the school day. There was a sense of a judgement of inappropriate parenting that came from staff that pervaded the interview data but also during informal conversations. Participants did not perceive structural inequalities for the difficulties that may be influencing parents’ abilities to engage with their children or limit the choices children may encounter in life. The focus of the criticism was the parent as a person, and not an appreciation of the circumstances they may be in. This perspective is coherent with a way of thinking that focuses on individual characteristics being a determinant for success, as in growth mindset. As such, it is understandable for teachers at a school that has attempted to implement an approach which focuses on deficits of individual psychology to see the problem facing children at their school to reside in the psychological deficits of their parents.

During the fieldwork at the school, a secure entrance replaced the motion-activated sliding doors at the main reception during the summer holidays. I reflected on how prison-like this secure entrance was. Informally, the receptionist spoke of how much safer she felt in the school as the number of incidents of parents shouting and swearing in the foyer had



increased over the previous term. I could not help thinking what a physical and symbolic barrier it was, and especially how it contradicted much of school's stated intentions about engaging parents. The new entrance with an 'air-lock'-style passage to another locked meeting room which was the farthest point parents were allowed to enter the school.. I wondered how this could make parents feel, I reflected it symbolised a belief that parents could cause harm and that they must be controlled for the safety of the staff and children in the school. This further established a tension that parents were problematic to the children as the school were putting in place physical protections from parents for staff and. Towards the end of this analysis, I wondered whether growth mindset was thought to serve as internal protections for the children against their parents by teachers; however, that question did not occur to me during the fieldwork.

### 3.2.3 Growth mindset for children on their own

The next sub-theme around why growth mindset was introduced came from reflections on teachers' perceptions about being able to support children in their classroom. This is another unexplored area that emerged due to systemic issues found within the classroom. This is important because it gives further insight into the conflicts teachers harboured around supporting more vulnerable children in a neoliberal educational context. Growth mindset for these teachers was regarded as an antidote for them as they perceived that children were more able to work independently after learning growth mindset. One teacher in particular spoke at great length about the inequality in resources for the children with additional needs who took up most of her and her teaching assistants time, which redirected time and support from other children:

*“My class here is 30 children. I’ve got about six with an issue or with a behaviour problem, the other 24 are amazing, there are no problems at all, erm, and I feel sad in a way for those children because those children that are good all the time sometimes can get left because all of your attention is spent on those six that don’t do what they are supposed to be doing, erm, out of those six, four of those are special-needs children so they need a lot more support. So, a lot of my time and a lot of my teaching assistants’ time is spent with those four children and again, those 24 that do the right thing every day of the week I do feel that I’m torn because I want to give them more, and give these others less. But you can’t because when it’s a behaviour or a special need, like ADHD or autism, it can be quite a demanding position, so those children need a lot of our adult attention. I think the growth mindset works really well on those 24 because you’re building up skills like confidence, good self-esteem, erm, resilience ...”*

(Teacher)

In this context, growth mindset was viewed as a technique that was needed so children could learn independently of support from teachers or teaching assistants as their focus was on children with additional needs. This teacher highlighted key systemic issues that inhibited the amount of time they felt they should have with other children in the class. In both instances where growth mindset was thought to be needed, relationships were implicitly at the heart of the circumstances that led to the perceived need for growth mindset implementation. The interview data from teaching staff at the school suggests two perspectives that growth mindset is needed where children are unsupported. Behind the rationale for growth mindset is an assumption of an unsupported child where self-

responsibility and individual competency is idealised as a coping mechanism and training them to think in a growth mindset way will enable children to develop the self-reliance necessary.

Teachers mostly presented the theoretical rationale for implementing growth mindset as being something to protect the children from the harm of being socialised as dependent and lacking resilience. However, other accounts for using growth mindset came when teachers were talking about specific classroom and school issues which impacted on how they taught and the levels of interaction and attention they could give their pupils. This most notably came from a teacher in the reception class. She was relatively new to the school, having been chosen by the original Headteacher, but she began teaching just when the head left. This meant that she did not experience the development of the approach to growth mindset in the school over the previous two years and was introduced to growth mindset by the staff within the early years provision. This might have led to unintended consequence of her seeing the use of growth mindset differently to other members of staff, but equally other systemic influences appeared to be driving their understanding of growth minds. She perceived that growth mindset was something necessary to be able to support the more able children in the classroom. Although children across the school were often deemed to be from disadvantaged backgrounds, some children had additional special educational needs and presented teachers with additional difficulties. In the case of the reception class, the teacher highlighted those six children out of 30 took up most of her time. She felt guilty for not being able to provide most of the children with the support in their education because she had to 'deal with' and manage more 'difficult' children who had additional needs. This was something I saw in the classroom, and I reflected on how skilfully this experienced teacher managed to work with children who struggled to conform to the

cultural expectations of the school, while also maintaining her duties with the remainder of the class.

The rationale here was that the teacher understood that children were left to work on their own and that she could not provide them with the teaching she wanted to. The blame for this could be attributed to the lack of resources available to support the more vulnerable children, although it could be argued that many of the children did appear to be vulnerable.

The class of 30 had a teacher and one teaching assistant, and the teacher reflected that most of the teaching assistant's time was spent with the more vulnerable children. Growth mindset as a practice was perceived to be something that could be done quickly and had a high efficiency factor. A teacher I interviewed in year three explained that they did not have to have a big conversation that explained that if the pupils worked harder, they would get a better job, instead, one or two sentences instilling a growth mindset were all that was necessary to keep them on track and hopefully making progress. The same teacher evaluated growth mindset by saying the following:

*“Whereas this seems much more like a psychologically great way to solve your problems as a person and therefore I’ve found this one much more easy to get a hold of. Especially in this school ’cos I say it has really worked for those children who really do need to know that it’s their decision they can sort their behaviour out, and sort their outlook out as well, because, yeah, these children have so many difficulties and often at home they don’t have that network of people to support them and help them with those decisions, I think the growth mindset has been much, really useful to know that they are in charge of a lot of their own decisions, whether to come in cross, or if they’ve had a terrible morning and they can go ‘I can just sort it*

*out myself', whereas because they often don't have good friends to help them more and parents at home who are willing or able to deal with their social needs socially and emotionally, I would suggest. So, yeah, on the whole, it's been really useful."* (Teacher)

The insights from this teacher are important because they highlight a belief that after learning growth mindset, children can resolve their own psychological issues and function in school. Humanistic approaches to motivation, such as the classic Maslow hierarchy of needs (Lester et al., 1990) interpretation, would consider that significant changes to a child's foundational contexts, such as their living conditions and absolute poverty, would play a role in them functioning. However, psychological motivation theory of growth mindset does not consider structural elements as being important. In the above quote, it would appear that the teacher believed that even though this child that needed growth mindset had little support, they would be able to psychologically support themselves regardless of circumstances.

A final note, is that there was no instance in which it occurred to the teacher that they could be someone that could offer some sort of support, nor did they think about the other kinds of supports in the school. From a social-ecological perspective, this kind of perception would create a mesosystem barrier between the teacher and child, and between the teacher and home, and perhaps between the child and a counsellor that could potentially support them. Whether it's the teachers' perception of children having to get on with their work without sufficient input, or whether it's children needing to sort their psychological problems out because they are perceived not to have the support around them, growth mindset is perceived to fill some sort of relational deficit.

While teachers explained that the children's home environment was lacking or deficient in some way, they also acknowledged their own relational deficits with the pupils. As such, growth mindset was believed to be the tool that could mitigate against deficits in relational quality. This meant creating the self-responsible learner that is resilient to ecological conditions in school and home.

### 3.2.4 Making children responsible

During my analysis, I was drawn to a piece of research carried out by Peacock et al. (2014), who carried out a study on the health inequalities within a neoliberal era by interviewing women that have experienced inequality. I appreciate that this may be a jump away from child development, but children become adults and there are important lessons to be learned from this research which facilitates a deeper understanding of the current study. Peacock identified a particular discourse of 'no legitimate dependency' in the interview data of women who had experienced inequality. This discourse was represented by the women assigning self-responsibility for the negative things that happened to them. This meant that they tended to blame themselves as causal agents in their life outcomes.

Peacock et al. (2014) explained the discourse of 'no legitimate dependency' as an internalisation of neoliberalism and argued that these discourses focus on individualising responsibility. This then reflects a weakening of protective discourses of collectively and solidarity because turning to others is condemned through the discourse of self-responsible learning. The current study could be seen as an exploration of a neoliberal culture that eventually becomes internalised, and that growth mindset acts as a vehicle for the further development of a particular version of a neoliberal culture.

I would argue that, within this study, a 'beneath the surface' rationale for the use of growth mindset is also part of a casual mechanism for producing the 'no legitimate dependency discourses', and qualitative research can help to learn more about children's understanding of who is to blame for their situation in their work and lives. Hargreaves et al. (2021a) found that in a primary school context that had incorporated growth mindset approaches of learning, children expressed the belief that hard work and effort on their own would lead to a successful school career and they would go on to replicate that success into adulthood. However, the 'no legitimate dependency' discourse of growth mindset would likely cause a depressing attack on the self for those children that had unfortunate experiences that are outside of their control. After all, the children at this school were learning that to succeed in life they must become self-responsible learners that make good behavioural choices. If bad things happened to them that were outside of their control, the neoliberal narrative could well be internalised into them being responsible for that happening. SENCo demonstrates empathy for the difficulties children face if they exist between discordant and incongruent microsystems. However, they emphasise the struggle of deciding who to believe in isolation. Clearly, both microsystems are important and to be successful within each microsystem the child needs to develop the culturally accepted competencies (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The pupil is perceived to exist within two opposing microsystems. However, protest can exist in either system, creating complications for the children within the opposing setting. The acting Headteacher said:

*"Like you don't follow the rules, you break the law, there are consequences for that, so, but at the same time, you also want people to be doing things for a purely moral reason, and for citizenship reasons, don't you, so it's getting the balance for us, I think. So, in school we've got the rewards and*

*consequences, but we want to train them up to be able to do it. And what we talk to the children a lot about is choice.” (Acting Headteacher)*

Children at the school were implicitly presented with a choice of whether to be like their parents: This comes with attached negative consequences. Alternatively, children could choose to be a ‘little neoliberal’ (Bradbury, 2019), who is viewed as an ideal learner as per school instruction and they would therefore receive rewards. As such, growth mindset practices are considered to empower children that might not enter school as Bradbury’s ‘little neoliberal’ learner. Bradbury (2019) highlighted McGimpsey et al. (2017, p. 920) who said:

*“Different narratives become possible, different regulatory technologies are developed and deployed, and there are methodological shifts in education and youth policy making as economic theory is adjusted to incorporate a range of new assumptions about human nature and their individual choosing behaviours.” (McGimpsey et al., 2017, p. 920)*

I argue that this new wave of socio-cognitive psychology advances the neoliberal project in much more subversive way. The psychologisation of the child brings with it additional supports, which I believe the rationales for using growth mindset from the teachers and teaching assistants highlight. I argue that what belies the psychologisation of learning, and the surface-level protections of children against anti-relational trends, is what organisational theorists might call a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995). Typically, this theoretical lens is used in critical management studies, which examine the inequalities and dynamics between businesses and their employees (Dick and Nadin, 2011). However, the corporatisation of schools across the Western world (Stahl, 2020), while set within a competitive market, means that pupils of a school could be perceived as implicit employees



who specialise in producing good or better educational progress for the school. An idea such as psychological contracts becomes more relevant when trying to understand the beneath-the-surface rationale for using growth mindset in a neoliberal context.

The implied shape of the psychological contract is manifested through narratives of idealised children being self-responsible and rational, choice-making learners. This implies a child isolated in their learning process. Because there is an implied expectation projected onto children of them doing things on their own, the implication is that blame can be apportioned to them for failing to produce good or better progress. The children in Hargreaves et al. (2021b) demonstrated the no-legitimate dependency discourse, which is created using growth mindset:

*“If you didn’t listen in class ... then you won’t do anything and you’ll just be a McDonald’s cooker, just flip patties. You will be unsuccessful.”* [Saffa, VISIT01] (Hargreaves et al., 2021)

Foucault’s homo *œconomicus* ‘the man of enterprise and production’ (Foucault, 2008, p.147) becomes adopted and presents itself as ‘the self-responsible learner making good behavioural choices to produce good or better results for the school’. In this context, the rationale for growth mindset is that it provides a method for the self-creation of the school’s representation of homo *œconomicus*. And having been taught this, children are perceived to make a choice to become that self-responsible learner, producing good or better progress. This represents a transfer of educational responsibility or a governmentalisation of the children, carried out by the teachers and the school. The teachers themselves represent the governmentality of the senior leaders or Headteacher in the school, and the school reflects the governmentality of the government through the interpretation of policy and political discourse of the day. I argue that it is not a coincidence that within neoliberal culture,

characterised by the privatisation of public services and personal affairs, that through a series of exosystems, young children develop expectations that learning is typically done in isolation, and at times when they do not achieve good or better progress in school or life it is their fault.

Growth mindset is what Foucault (2008) would call a technology of the self, or what Cruikshank (1999) would call a technology of agency, which is used to further a governmentality of symbolically de-responsibilising teachers from their learners. Similarly, to how academisation de-responsibilises government from the quality of education (Papanastasiou, 2017), the quality of the child's progress is implicitly their own task. If the pupils do not produce good or better progress, the neoliberal school might find ways of excluding them physically, or culturally and interpersonally (Hedegaard-Soerensen and Grumloese, 2020). A culture of favouritism and exclusion could be achieved through a psychological contract, which assumes that a child has been given training to be a self-responsible learner and using this as the basis for exclusionary processes towards them if that does not come to fruition. Again, referencing Hargreaves et al. (2021a), the symbolic violence experienced by Ben in Hargreaves et al. (2021a, p. 86) demonstrates that the socio-cultural environment can mean that children can be left blaming themselves even if they put in effort and tried to tackle the task at hand.

Psychological contracts are 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement' (Rousseau, 1995). In the context of this field study, the exchange agreement are a child making good or better progress for the school and the organisation shapes a child to adopt a growth mindset to meet those ends. A high-stakes and marketised educational culture which can make schools feel precarious for both the

school and teachers can use learning or psychological contracts in performative ways to ensure expected performance standards in schools.

The version of neoliberalism which exists within corporations, including schools, is one which is a contract-based concept (Birch, 2016). Treanor (2005) argued that in this sense the characteristics of a 'market' would be characterised more by frequency, repeatability and the formalisation of transactions. Within an educational context (the marketplace), this would look like a narrow and prioritised curriculum which enables for more repeatable 'transactions' of prioritised curriculum. I noted that most of the teaching and learning revolved around maths and English. But there are some other characteristics, such as the increase in frequency of explaining and training children in the ideal 'little neoliberal' (Bradbury, 2019) or the self-responsible learner making good behaviour choices, a decrease in their duration of those encounters due to 'growth mindset's efficiency' (teacher) and intensified forms of contractual audit, such as merit-based systems to monitor performance of children such as class-dojos (Williamson, 2017; Hargreaves et al., 2021b). However, within this contract I would argue that pupils are significantly disenfranchised from it from the outset.

Within a contract-based context, people or organisations agree to the rules of the contract and implicitly accept an amount of risk for the actions they have agreed to take to produce something asked of them. Normally, that amount of implicit risk is associated with some compensation for carrying out the task. In the context of this study, teachers did not intimate that they had power to make a choice to enter a contract as it is implicit within the school's culture. The child does not have a choice in deciding what good or better progress is, as this is set out by government, yet because they are taught growth mindset, there is an assumption that they can achieve it in isolation. As such, they do not have insight into what

they produce for the school in this implicit contract. The pupils do not have choice in the cost i.e., the 'consequences' of breaking the implicit contract at their school. And these consequences can be implicitly understood, such as being excluded from teaching practices and developing a no legitimate dependency discourse, as Hargreaves et al. (2021a) demonstrate. Therefore, I argue that the implicit contractual relationship between the teacher and pupil holds the pupil responsible for personal progress.

Children who find themselves unable to maintain good or better progress even with demonstrable effort may feel implicitly responsible for the ineffective demonstration of learning and general inadequacies experienced, again, I direct the reader to Hargreaves et al.'s (2021a, 2021b) study that highlights children experiencing feelings of inadequacy. If the child carries out the psychological contract as expected, the school would receive their good or better progress, which would facilitate the teachers' performance measures and contribute to a higher OFSTED rating for the school. As such, the school and teachers would then feel in less of a precarious position due to them meeting the expected performance expectations. Alternatively, should they fail to make good or better progress, even with the lessons of growth mindset, this could suggest the pupil has an active and conscious role in not completing the contract by choosing not to use growth mindset and be a self-responsible learner who makes good behavioural choices. This is important because it means that growth mindset can become a key part in the mechanism of that psychological contract, and further a system of exclusion. These problematic discourses could also potentially impact vulnerable children such as those with special educational needs, or children from highly disrupted family backgrounds.

### 3.2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the utilisation of growth mindset within neoliberal settings is problematic because the individual child is not considered, and potentially key aspects of how they are could become ignored. On the surface, the rationale for growth mindset can appear to be merited for marginalised children that live in and around deprivation. It is positioned as a tool for empowerment of the self and a way for children to develop a sense of agency in their learning and improve their learning potential. However, by peeling back the layers (see Figure 2) and considering the implications and how the rationales for growth mindset can impact on a child, and what they mean discursively, complications begin to emerge.

Teachers projecting a wishful image of an ideal self-developing and self-responsible child that is expected to do most of their learning without support generates a depressing image of cold and steely resilience in the face of a lonely learning experience. An implicit belief that children are expected to do it on their own and that the behavioural choices of working hard and learning from mistakes determines success develops. Children can introject these belief systems when they make an effort, but the required performance does not materialise. The good intentions to develop growth mindset to empower children that do not make good behavioural choices can add another dimension of oppression to their lives. On a deeper level, assumptions exist where children learn they are responsible to produce good or better progress. However, this can bind the child that does not make good or better progress to a state of self-loathing or a rejection of the school. Secondly, it could also result in disengagement in the relationship that supports children's development. This creates a set of circumstances where teachers can feel less responsible for the children under their care to make good or better progress, and children can reject the experience of support.

Due to high-stakes accountability, neglect or mistreatment of pupils who are not making expected progress can happen. Teachers cannot ignore the pressure to improve pupils' progress, even if this leads to neglect or mistreatment of pupils who are struggling.

However, by developing a psychological contract where the pupils become responsible for producing the good or better progress required for the school, teachers can ignore and forget those children that do not make a choice to perform.

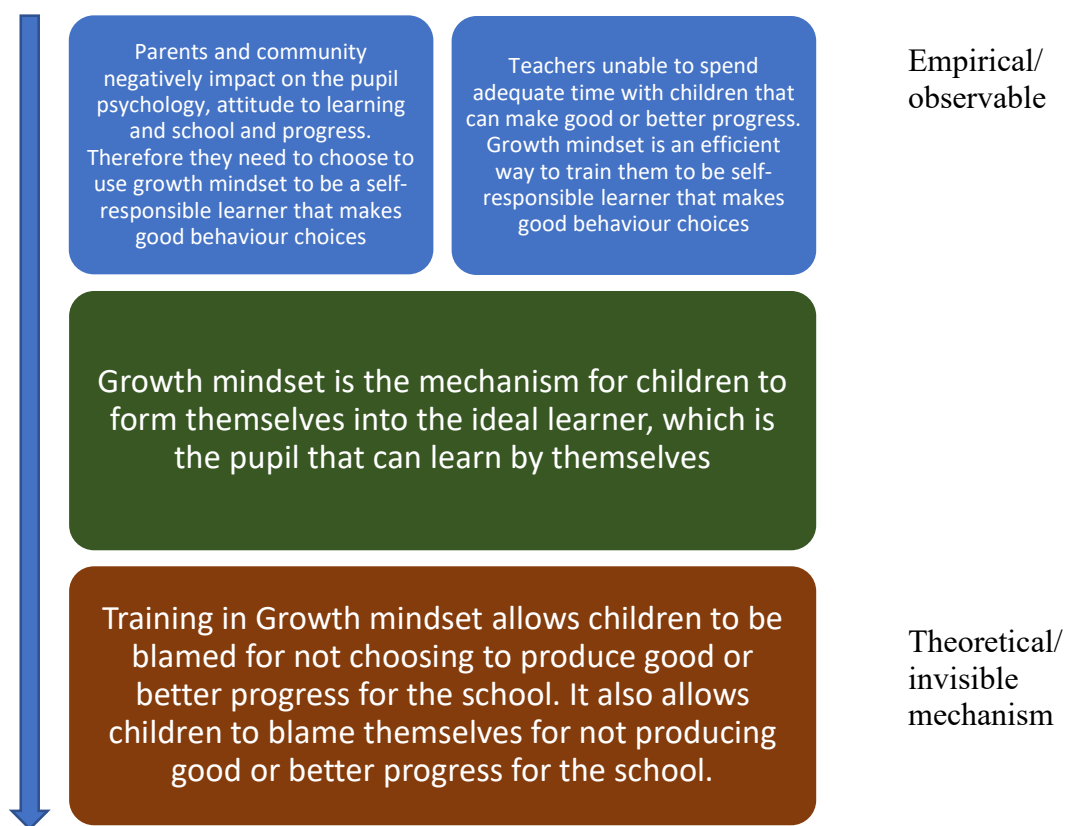


Figure 4: Key empirical and theoretical explanations

This chapter has explored the rationales for using growth mindset. I have explained that the data showed an underlying rationale to use growth mindset as a protective mechanism against the negative impact of some parents and the community in which the children live. The data also revealed situational reasons for using growth mindset in the school –that

teachers' time was taken up by children with additional needs, specifically, and so growth mindset was viewed as a tool that enabled children to work more independently, while also being rationalised by the teachers as a defence against the anxiety they felt for neglecting most children in the classroom.

These observations led to more theoretical analysis of children in the school. Specifically, I examined two theoretical explanations that advanced knowledge in the area. Firstly, I argued that behind the empirical rationales, the participants implicitly understood that children were relationally isolated. This meant that the implicit ideal learner that teachers and teaching assistants proposed needed to be able to be self-responsible and able to make good behavioural choices that enabled them to work independent of their teachers or parents.

Teachers and teaching assistants implicitly understand that children make conscious behavioural choices. This means that children could be viewed as purposefully breaking behavioural codes on purpose and were held responsible for their actions. Growth mindset was seen as an approach to learning which emphasised this belief system among teachers. Additionally, the growth mindset approach was perceived as having causal properties that enable children to become independently self-improving learners. The combination of these beliefs systems enabled the notion that children make a choice to make good or better progress or not.

Therefore, my research demonstrates an important theoretical implication about the use of growth mindset in real-world settings: that it is possible for the growth mindset approach to provide the context of a particular psychological contract. I argue that due to prevalent patterns of governmentality found in a neoliberal society, the ideas of growth mindset psychology become understood as a tool which, when used on children, means that children

understand how to learn, both academic knowledge and psychological attributes, such as resilience and the ability to manage emotions. This education in the perceived mechanism of learning enables the passing on of educational and social and emotional responsibility to children from teachers. As such, the child implicitly becomes the worker that produces good or better progress for the teacher while they manage their own temperament. On the surface, this might not seem particularly radical; however, in a high-stakes educational environment, I argue that this discourse which focuses responsibility of learning solely on children could be detrimental. The promotion of the self-responsible learner, while using growth mindset as a vehicle, in an educational context characterised by multiple levels of deprivation could create grounds for children to unreasonably believe they are at fault for not making good or better progress. This research argues that the reasoning behind using growth mindset to support children from deprived backgrounds can have unintended consequences.

### 3.3 Section 2: Implementing growth mindset

This chapter explores how growth mindset was used and implemented in the school. It will look at a key process of language and discourse of growth mindset in the school. I will demonstrate how teachers understood growth mindset as being the mechanism for change and I will also discuss the practices that the teachers employed to develop the school's ideal learner: the self-responsible learner who makes good behavioural choices.

There are several key characteristics found within the data that will be presented and discussed. Firstly, the notion that teachers perceived that part of their objective was to change how their pupils think, therefore demonstrating the influence of their adopted psychological approach to learning. Secondly, the school developed a pseudo-manualised



approach to delivering growth mindset. This was demonstrated by teachers who developed key phrases that were recommended by staff and appeared to generate a particular kind of discourse from the staff that constituted children with idealistic notions of a neoliberal pupil. Additionally, the staff spoke of other key metaphorical approaches that were agreed by a group of teachers, and these formed the basis for approaches to growth mindset.

Another key characteristic of the introduction of growth mindset was the hidden nature of the way it was delivered. This meant that children, or parents, would not necessarily realise growth mindset was being used. The implementation of growth mindset could therefore be assumed to be part of the cultural language used in the school, which, through modelling and repetitive interactions, would result in the socialisation of parents, children, and other unknowledgeable members of staff in the use of growth mindset. I will then demonstrate what the key characteristics of growth mindset language were in the school. Teachers that used growth mindset tended to profoundly believe in growth mindset and explained how powerful language was, but also that there is a right and wrong way to speak to children.

This chapter is important because it demonstrates how context can influence the conceptualisation of growth mindset and the implementation of growth mindset within a particular setting. It provides further context to the rationale for using growth mindset in these settings, but it also demonstrates that growth mindset presented in the foundational field, experimental studies, is not particularly useful in terms of growth mindset being utilised in a real-world environment. I will go on to argue that this is the case because of socio-cultural factors that influence the conceptualisation and uses of growth mindset within real-world education settings.

### 3.3.1 Using growth mindset to encourage children to take responsibility for their thinking and choices

The previous chapter demonstrated that teaching staff perceived that a crucial rationale for introducing growth mindset was that the pupils would become ideal learners who made good behavioural choices. This section explains how the growth mindset practices developed within the school worked towards these aims.

#### 3.3.1.1 *The psychological stance teachers adopt*

The way an individual perceives intelligence, whether in terms of their own intelligence or intelligence within others, can be influenced by, and influence, the nested systems within their ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

*“All human behaviour including intelligence, develops through an integration of influences from all levels within the ecology of human development.”* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 50)

As such, the teachers' and teaching assistants' conceptualisation of growth mindset is important to consider as this position is the starting point of the kind of practices and quality of interaction between the teacher and the child. To provide context around some of the practices, this theme focuses on the ontological position teachers take when viewing pupils at the school. These findings are important because they demonstrate that the conceptualisation of growth mindset is context dependent. Based on interview and observation data, I argue that the ecological system that children are nested within influences the psychological belief systems of teachers within the school, which means that these teachers' and teaching assistants' conceptualisation of growth mindset is significantly different from what typical research in growth mindset would expect. As such, it is

important to look at the prominent conceptualisations of growth mindset and demonstrate the socio-cultural links that influence the teachers' conceptualisation of it. A teaching assistant in the reception class said of growth mindset:

*"I'm a really strong believer of it, I do find it hard to do it all the time constantly, but then I just think to myself, if I can make just one child, change their thought processes themselves"* (Reception teaching assistant)

This shows a psychologically attuned teacher that implicitly believes that with the use of growth mindset they have the power to create a more autonomous thinking child. This demonstrates a key belief system in the benefits of growth mindset that children become more self-responsible learners (see previous chapter), but equally a notion that teaching assistants can feel empowered to support children to take control of changing their own thought processes. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, this reinforces the idea that growth mindset is perceived as a key mechanism that is seen to enable pupils to take control of their own agency and self-development, enabling them to become self-responsible learners.

The strength of the belief in growth mindset was also prevalent among other colleagues, and this correlated with the experiences of teachers in other studies where teachers used growth mindset in their schools (Foliano et al., 2019; Seaton, 2018). Seaton (2018) argued that having a belief in growth mindset was a key determinant in a teacher's ability to pass on growth mindset attributes to their pupils but stopped short of highlighting it as the only way. Research in growth mindset largely assumes that having a growth mindset is an incontestable positive and that teachers and the whole school should develop practices around growth mindset principles (Yeager and Walton, 2011). However, what this research goes on to demonstrate is that the nested systems that teachers exist in influence how they

conceptualise the practices they are implementing but also what they see as the valued outcome of psychological interventions, such as growth mindset. Growth mindset is primarily a belief that intelligence is not a fixed entity (Dweck, 2006); however, within my fieldwork, growth mindset appeared to be understood as a mental process that allows children to change their thinking patterns on their own, rather than just believing they can get better at maths or another subject or skill. This belief aligns with the reasons teachers had for children needing to develop growth mindsets, that a) their parents influenced their children in a negative way and could not support them with their education, and b) that teachers were unable to spend as much time supporting them with their learning due to classroom pressures. As such, it is viewed as essential that pupils are able to become autonomous, self-learning pupils. Accordingly, growth mindset is the mechanism for that to happen. This conceptualisation is echoed by a teacher who said:

*“I think the growth mindset has been really useful to know that they [pupils] are in charge of a lot of their own decisions. Whether they come in cross, or if they’ve had a terrible morning and they can go ‘I can just sort it out myself’, whereas because they often don’t have good friends to help them more, and parents at home who are not willing or able to deal with their social needs, socially and emotionally I would suggest.” (Teacher)*

As the aforementioned quote demonstrates, the teacher believed that after the pupils have been educated in growth mindset, they become capable of making choices to be in the emotional state appropriate for the classroom. I argue that this is a unique finding. If it was possible for children to quickly switch from one mood to another, irrespective of their lived experience and development, it would likely be one of the most significant breakthroughs in the treatment of mood disorders. It would be impossible to prove that the teachers’

statement is false, perhaps children trained in growth mindset were turning up to school and were able to switch feeling angry or cross into some sort of salient calm and become ready to learn and make good behaviour choices, as such, this perception strikes me more as an unsubstantiated wish. Nonetheless, it is an important finding because how children understand their latent capabilities has implications for their development, but also the quality of the relationships they hold with others. From an attachment perspective, which focuses on explaining how different kinds of emotional interactions between caregiver–child dyads are influenced through unconscious expectations of caregiver–child relationships (Tronik and Beeghly, 2011), the teacher’s positionality towards their pupils is key. If a teacher believes that children ‘just sorting themselves out’ should result in a more avoidant pattern of working with children, and one where children are likely not to expect support from their teacher. In this context, growth mindset could be understood as a social defence against anxiety to protect the teacher from the unseen and unverballed realities that children may bring to their classroom, but this equally expands on the notion that the mesosystem between the teacher and pupil becomes diminished. This fits in with the second empirical rationale for using growth mindset: that teachers do not have the time to maintain relationships with pupils they teach. A teacher said:

*“Personally, I find a good relationship with the children goes a long way, if you can be there for them when they need you, but also be strict when they’ve done something which is not acceptable in school, so the relationship with the kids is a huge thing. And obviously you don’t get a chance to nurture the relationship because in the first week in September it’s ‘Right, you need to get this work done’, whereas personally I’d like to have a lot more time to get to know the children and they can get to know*

*you. I just think calmness is something that is lost in school. Children are so quick to be, get silly and get off task, so I think calmness, and something really relaxed. Whereas children are very forced into SATS, 'it's SATS we need to get this done', I'm guilty of this myself, 'Kids we need to get this done before break time, otherwise you're going to stay in over break time', because the pressures are so large, but I think if everyone was a little bit more relaxed about things then I think the children would be more comfortable, and comfortable to make mistakes as well''(Teacher)*

Here there is a desire for more contact with children in the classroom; however, in this example, there is a classroom that is busy with a teacher who is directed by tasks, which makes the teacher become more controlling and less able to be relational. Although this teacher is not talking about the impact of children that take up more of their time, they do argue that the volume of work children is expected to do limits the amount of relating between the teacher and the pupil. As such, this further fits in with the notion of teachers being unable to provide the kind of relationships which they feel would be necessary for the pupils in their class.

Finally, the teacher depicted the classes to be nested within structures that restrict the freedom of learning and emphasise a system that focuses on high-stakes exams. The narrowness in the curriculum is representative of successive neoliberal education policies, which influences schools to focus on those subjects they are evaluated by, such as maths and English (Francis et al., 2017). During my observations in the nursery and reception, I reflected on several occasions just how boring the learning was. During a typical maths lesson, children were instructed to sit on the floor as the teacher or teaching assistant used a counting stick.

*“The reception teacher asked the children to keep quiet as the register was taken, and some of the children were very fidgety. By the end of the register the reception teacher chose a child to take the completed register to the school receptionist. One girl with pigtails (and who gave me a flower) was insistent on herself being chosen by the girl to help her deliver the register, but she instead chose a girl with a big blue bow to help her. The reception teacher reassured the girl with pigtails that she could help with the next maths exercise. The child with the pigtails held the counting stick with the reception teacher, who then taught counting in a wrote learning style. She counted along the stick the pattern of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... And then repeated it backwards. I couldn’t help think how dull and monotonous this type of learning was. The children were encouraged to count along and I observed some children who did not. One little boy at the back of the group with a pale complexion looked visibly anxious and disengaged with the exercise and didn’t count along. Then the reception teacher changed the pattern of the teaching by asking the children to start counting at different points, such as at 8 or 11 or 14, going backwards or forwards. She then asked the children to double the number, so 2 became 4 and 3 became 6. This then developed into asking individual children what questions, such as what comes after 6, or before 8. At this point I noticed my attention move towards the quiet boy with the pale complexion. I could see him visibly practising his numbers in preparation for being asked a question. He looked scared of being chosen to answer a question on the*

*spot. He did finally answer a question but was muddled up between whether the number was higher or lower.” (Observation from field notes)*

Francis et al. (2017) highlight research by Bleazby (2015) and Stinson and Saunders (2016) that demonstrate a focus on core subjects results in lower school engagement. This is important because the deputy head spoke about the importance of children loving learning, and growth mindset had a part to play in that:

*“We did lots of work on growth mindset and we decided to get rid of stickers, and all of the extrinsic things that made children feel good about themselves, and what we wanted them to do was make them feel intrinsically good about themselves, about their learning. Because the main aim was to help them to love learning and for them to want to learn more.” (Deputy Headteacher)*

The teacher quoted above recognised the clear contradictions of performance pressure negates the possibility of being comfortable to make mistakes, while they emphasised the importance of removing extrinsic motivation. What this demonstrates is that growth mindset can never be taught in isolation as empirical perceptions of pressures to perform, while fieldwork observations found merit-based systems used frequently to motivate children.

*“I then had a conversation with the reception teacher about the inclusion of Class Dojo. She reiterated that it was really good, and that the parents get to see what their children have done during the week. I noticed how responsive to rewards and how fearful of sanctions the children are. Some children in particular seek to please the children and are very responsive and sit perfectly as soon as the teachers ask them to. Other children that*



*are less responsive seem more despondent seemingly unaware of the competition to score points their peers are taking more seriously. This intervention appears to control children well, but it is reminding me of the 'me too' movement – is this part of a wider problem in culture that predisposes people to coercion and control of powerful others.”*

(Observation)

These findings suggest context matters greatly when an approach such as growth mindset can mean different things to different people. As growth mindset is anti-performance and pro-process in learning (Dweck, 2007), which is a notion represented within the discourse of the deputy Headteacher, competing performance focused realities exist. Typical practices found in other studies found that the implementation of growth mindset resulted in the use of process orientated praise to encourage pupils take on more challenge (Savvides & Bond, 2021). However, in this setting much of the 'choices' were actually mandated by teachers and often implicated with behavioural rule breaking. As such, a growth mindset context theoretically would make considerable efforts to limit the focus on high-stakes standardised tests. I would expect a school that undertook a growth mindset approach not to reference high-stakes testing with children because of this and develop ways of teaching that were much more focused on developing mastery through children making *choices* to explore their learning with more creative freedom and autonomy, like what could be found in a Steiner-Waldorf school (Oberski, 2006) or in some other kind of progressive educational institution. However, from my observations, I did not see much opportunity for children to choose learning activities, yet the discourse of choice was ubiquitous to the setting. I noted how teachers talked in terms of 'choice' and 'choice behaviour' 18 times throughout the 22 observations carried out. Nor did children have the choice or input in the ways they were

addressed. One observation suggests that teachers conditioned the children to react in certain ways, depending on their action:

*“The nursery teacher came in with her class and sat at the front and began settling them down. However, some children wouldn’t settle down and Jenny’s tone changed quite a lot. Initially she used a variety of behavioural techniques that signalled them to be quiet. These techniques included crossing arms, clicking fingers with both hands and another action which has slipped my mind. Eventually though, she got quite angry and strict because it would appear these interventions were not working with some children. One child who was wiggling around was forcibly removed and began screaming behind a closed door. The children sat down, looking on anxiously listening to the sounds and wondering what was going on. I felt quite distressed by what was going on and the atmosphere in general. The teacher said to the child: ‘You made a choice not to listen, so you have lost the right to sit in assembly.’*

*The teachers in general also had a quite a robotic way of talking to the children. In particular, they conversed in terms of choices. ‘Make the right choice’ was commonly said.” (Observation)*

Children within the nursery and particularly in the reception experienced a lot of maths and English teaching where the teachers were presenting information as the children sat and listened. They would then be directed to carry out structured learning by doing sums and practising writing. Most of the time I observed the teacher and teaching assistants being present with the most vulnerable children in need of support, which confirmed the reception teacher’s assertions that their time was taken up with certain children. However, I

made a concerned note during a reception class with a newly qualified teacher who seemed to be coercing and controlling children with emotional manipulation:

*“What I’m noticing now is that emotional bribery and at times baseless threats are being used. One little boy that I saw as more vulnerable than most children was brought into the registration area where children gather. The teacher told him that his daddy might not come to pick him up unless he stopped hiding in the bushes in the playground and sat quietly with the other children. When the children were all together, the teacher would use the merit-based system in a quid pro quo-style deal, where if they sat down quietly they would receive a dojo point. Even on an emotional level, I was used as a pawn in the room to influence children singing along to a song, the teacher said: ‘Sing well for our visitor so that adults hearts are happy with you.’ In each case the motivation for performance was external, and in my opinion questionable.”* (Observation)

As I shall go on to explore in forthcoming sub-themes, the school incorporated a highly invasive, online merit points system to influence pupil behaviour known as Class Dojo.

### 3.3.2 Growth mindset within an entrepreneurial discourse

The continued influence of wider cultural, or distal, systems was a consistent presence in the discourse of teachers. These macrosystem factors could be clearly seen in the practice of growth mindset as an entrepreneurial discourse with pupils. The acting Headteacher said:

*“‘If you’re unhappy about something, change it!’ One boy said to me: ‘It’s always going to be like that and I’ll always end up living here and it’s always going to be like this all the time.’ and I was just like ‘Why? You’re a*

*really clever boy, you're amazing at maths, you could be an accountant, you could be whatever you wanted to be, you don't need to be, if this isn't for you, you're not choosing this life, choose something else.' But you know 'Kids thrown a rubber at me so I've hit the' 'You didn't have to hit them, was there was an alternative there for you? Yeah, the alternative was that you ignored it, or you spoke to an adult, or whatever,' So that's part of that massive growth mindset approach, until we get children taking responsibility for their own choices then we're not going to be able to change some of their behaviours."* (Acting Headteacher)

This extract veers from one point to another, and attributes growth mindset as something unfamiliar, with traditional growth mindset ideas, which are straightforward notions of believing that intelligence is something changeable (Dweck, 2007a). Here growth mindset appears to be two contrasting ideas. Firstly, that growth mindset is about making the right choices which lead to success in life and, secondly, that growth mindset is a way of choosing alternative behaviour which won't result in a pupil facing negative consequences. This kind of discourse around freedom, choice and responsibility towards children is what Hall and Pulsford (2019) would argue supports a globally competitive economy. However, it also simultaneously disentangles responsibility from the teacher and puts it on the child.

From an ecological perspective, it is difficult for a child to 'choose' a new life as the acting Headteacher intimates. This is because the child's development does not just exist in an intrapersonal cognitive form, they also exist in the cognitions of those around them, who are also embedded within overlapping ecological systems they themselves are developing and growing within. A child does not have the power of an acting Headteacher to make choices, which mean their ecology would significantly change. Significant structures, such as

the school a child goes to and the homes in which they are brought up, require outside influence for them to be changed. Yet, there is a prominent discourse which appears to be haphazardly used by teachers promoting children to believe the idea that they have responsibility to make choices and changes to their life when ostensibly they do not. Using a growth mindset lens, the idea which was being implied by the acting Headteacher was the sense that the boy had a fixed mindset about his opportunities in life, and the acting Headteacher was trying to convince him that he had the individual capacities to elevate himself from the area which is implicitly believed by him to be holding him back. Growth mindset practice presented here is an indirect suggestion which aims to reframe the boy's perspective on his life. While it seeks to strengthen the boy's self-esteem by emphasising personal characteristics and life-course progression to a well-paid and acceptable job, little is done to help reframe the boy's negative view of his community. The encouragement of the child to seek control of his life by making the correct choices indicates an idealist path away from his current circumstances, but one that should be achievable. What the acting Headteacher does not acknowledge is that there may well be structural issues which make it difficult for the boy to progress in the suggested direction. Rather than providing a sympathetic response that acknowledges the difficulties he is disclosing and making enquiries into what is happening for him, the dialogue is focused on an entrepreneurial discourse. The 'growth mindset' informed language here is one that does not listen to the child. Instead, the neoliberal discourse used by the Headteacher presents a pupil with a simplified world of making good or bad choices. And that the pupil can remove themselves from the destructive choices made by the community and family around them. The pupil's choice is to reject his community while simultaneously choosing to behave appropriately and become self-responsible for their learning.

However, the second part of the quote above provides some context that this boy was taken out of the class for hitting another boy because he threw a rubber at him. The teacher then explains to the boy that they could have done a range of things that did not lead to a violent act, and this was interpreted as being part of the growth mindset approach 'children taking responsibility' for their actions. It is arguable that the boy did take responsibility for his actions by retaliating and freely admitting what he done. In this case, growth mindset is about children taking responsibility for actions and doing growth mindset from the teacher looks like presenting acceptable behavioural choices. Rose (1999) would describe this as 'a twin process of autonomization plus responsabilization – opening free space for the choices of individual actors whilst enwrapping these autonomized actors within new forms of control' (Rose 1999, p. xxiii). Typically, these discourses are experienced by Headteachers (Tseng, 2014), but what this research is demonstrating is that the neoliberal ideal of a school is being transformed into the neoliberal ideal of the child. What is clear, in the context of growth mindset research is that broader social structures shape teachers' understanding of growth mindset to the extent that the purpose of growth mindset is understood in the same terms as the neoliberal governmentality. I argue that my data demonstrates an internalisation of the structures of the neoliberal school within the teachers, who then project that structure onto the child by using growth mindset as a vehicle for doing so. One of the key challenges for any intervention within a school is the power of distal structures that have become so culturally entrenched those psychological approaches, like growth mindset, can be reinterpreted and understood differently to what academic proponents could imagine.

### 3.3.3 Making mistakes is okay

Teachers and teaching assistants at the school enabled the self-responsible learner by emphasising the importance of mistake making, the acting Headteacher said:

*“So our children find it really hard to sort of accept that they’ve made a mistake, so that’s part of the growth mindset approach is learning to make a mistake, because mistake is a part of learning and celebrating mistakes.”*

(Acting Headteacher)

Mistake making was one of the most common parts of the growth mindset model that was implemented by the staff. This was not surprising as mistake making has been emphasised by teachers in previous studies (Truax, 2018; Seaton, 2018; Foliano et al., 2019; and Rienzo et al., 2015).

This was one of the few and identifiable aspects of growth mindset I observed. In the reception class, the teacher would talk about the importance of mistakes as it enabled children to get better, while emphasising the ‘getting better’ to the children. At other times, teachers spoke about how making mistakes was a really good way for children to exercise their brains in a similar way to their bodies. The reception teacher said:

*“This makes us strong in our mind.”* (Reception teacher)

As in the example above, the teacher would explain that making mistakes was normal in quite a direct way; however, other teachers used different approaches to help the pupils understand that it was OK to make mistakes. A teaching assistant that worked in both nursery and reception explained how she would carry out deliberate mistakes and turn it into a performance:

*“Yeah, sometimes like you will make a genuine mistake, or sometimes it’s really beneficial for the children to see you make a mistake so you might*

*do it deliberately, so that they can spot your mistake. So, in reception I might deliberately write something wrong, I'll use the wrong letter, somebody is always waiting to point out you've done it wrong. And you can be quite theatrical with it: 'Oooo nooo, I've done it wrong, what shall I do? Shall I just give up?' And they'll come back to you: 'Noooo, miss, you've just made a mistake and it's OK that's how you learn.' So you say: 'Can you show me how to do it right?' So, it's shared way of learning. It's more of a team thing, it's not that we as practitioners are there to encourage growth mindset. We share it, and sometimes they'll use the language back at you, or they'll use it with their friends. I'm quite giddy about it – it does work it really does." (Teaching assistant)*

This teaching assistant also gave an example of implementing growth mindset ideas into a playful way which children would not necessarily realise is a growth mindset intervention:

*"Like playing games in circle time you know where children make mistakes and doing it in your maths and then taking that maths problem that someone's made a mistake with and say: 'Ooo, look' and modelling making mistakes with the children, it has to come from everybody it has to be the whole school, so even our admin staff are OK with making mistakes and they'll say: 'Ooo, did you fall over? Goodness me did you trip over those feet? Did you make a mistake, it's OK, let's not do that next time.'*

(Deputy head)

The idea of modelling mistakes was reportedly consistent throughout the school. The teachers believed reframing mistake making as something that is not negative enabled



children to be able to try things that were new or difficult without feeling ashamed of getting it wrong.

*“And you’ll hear children say now ‘I’ve made a mistake’ and it’s good and you’ll see display boards up around school with: ‘What mistakes did you make today?’ You know, we want the kids to know that and as adults we should be modelling that to our ‘Oh you’re right I made a mistake on the board’, that’s OK, and actually if they don’t take a risk and make a mistake they’ll never learn either so, erm you know, we’re trying to train our children because sometimes they can be stroppy and walk out of class, for example, we’re trying to train them that if they make a mistake or they do something wrong then that’s fine because they are a beginner, you know, and once you get better at that you’re a novice and once you get a bit better you’re a skilled learner, and once you’re an expert the end stage of that is that you are then able to either apply that learning elsewhere or you can help others with that learning.” (Acting Headteacher)*

This demonstrates another way that teachers in the school reframed mistake making as something that is to be expected and normal. Here, the acting Headteacher gives examples of the information boards around the school being used to promote the idea of mistake making, while also giving another type of discourse around mistake making, which emphasises the growth of pupils from beginner to expert.

I wrote in my fieldnotes that this aspect of growth mindset mirrored what seemed to me a forgiving and gentle stance towards children, but also potentially the staff as well. A teacher in reception said:

*“It’s OK to make mistakes so those kinds of beliefs really, that self-assurances becomes embedded with them, within them within the nurturing relationships of the team.”* (Reception teacher)

It was this forgiving tone that drew me back to the interview with the deputy head who warned me about the potential teacher distress that could emerge around the discussion of pupil progress. It occurred to me that the potential strain that teachers felt from the performance agenda in schools could also be relieved by this reframing of mistake making for themselves, although empirically this was not unearthed in the data.

The findings in this study were consistent with the arguments that growth mindset research makes around the importance of mistakes (Dweck, 2010). The participants wholly emphasised the importance of children being able to make mistakes. In the focus group with the nursery, all members of staff spoke positively of children feeling as though they can make mistakes. This included an emphasis on children feeling more confident about making attempts to provide an answer and not being in trouble if they got the answer wrong. The teaching assistant pointed out:

*“They get that confidence, don’t they, within themselves. ‘Well, I’m not scared of saying something if I’m wrong.’”* (Reception teaching assistant)

These acknowledgments appeared to be consistent with other research where teachers felt that the discourse around mistake making was the most influential aspect of implementing growth mindset (Seaton, 2018). My research demonstrates that even though there appeared to be a new forgiving tone developing within the teaching practices, teachers were ultimately aware of the pressures of performance, and the direct link between making mistakes in a performance managed context was rarely acknowledged. I think that this

omission is important. The incongruence between the policy messages and growth mindset practice are stark.

In the previous section, I discussed how a teacher pointed out this contradictory nature, citing their own performance management and the emphasis on preparing children for SATs. However, the direct link between growth mindset and the performance agenda was not made. As such, teachers may preach that mistakes are more than tolerable, but they perceive they must adhere to strict rules from senior leaders on their performance, but they are also reported to feel distressed at students not making good or better progress.

#### 3.3.4 Class Dojo and super learners

The fieldwork found several enquiries around growth mindset practices. One such enquiry was on the topic of the relationship between growth mindset and a cast of fictional characters the school termed 'super learners', which were a central feature of the early years delivery. Savvides and Bond (2021) also found the use of growth mindset alongside other interventions, but in this case, growth mindset was used to further character education. Each week, a different superhero character was used in the classroom. These characters had names such as 'Thinking Thelma' or 'Polly Problem Solver' or 'Indy Independent'. The teachers would give assemblies around these characters to the children each week, and they would use these characters in conversation when giving feedback. For example, a teaching assistant was observed saying: 'Now, let's put out Polly problem solver hats on it's time for maths.' I asked the acting Headteacher who came up with these characters and whether they related to growth mindset, and she explained that they were part of the growth mindset approach. The acting Headteacher said:

*“Here’s growth mindset, go and read the book, see what you think about it and, then, take it to your own department, year group, mess about with it, play with it and come up with a few ideas and report back to me’ [said the Headteacher at the time to the now acting Headteacher]. So, really open-ended. So, I just went back to the team, and I think it was when I was talking to a child who has now left actually, and at that point was in year one and I was thinking what is it with this kid. Her behaviour’s not great, she’s only five or six and usually five or six year olds respond to an authoritative adult sort of being cross or disappointed, yet she’s not bothered, and that’s the case for quite a lot of our children, so why is it that if you tell off a child and they’re not bothered or if you point out if they’ve not done something well behaviour-wise and they’re not bothered – what’s that about? Because actually, most of us really care about how we are perceived by others. But she doesn’t care how she’s perceived by others, so then I was thinking that’s probably because she’s got really low self-esteem you know, because if you care about how you are perceived by others it probably means you’ve got good self-esteem ’cos you want to be seen to be doing the right thing. So, I was just like pondering on it thinking: ‘So, we need to change how we deal with behaviour because we need to get the kids to do a bit more because they want to be doing it for themselves and we want to be building up longer-term skills rather than just carrot and stick things.’ You know, doing it for the teacher – what’s the point? Erm, so then that made me think about key learning skills, so when I went to the teachers in early years and said: ‘Right, what are the things,*

*skills, children should be having in early years?’ And they said:  
‘Independence, resilience, problem solving and communication, whatever,’  
so we decided on eight key learning skills and then created them into super  
heroes because we thought, that would just, ‘cos it’s a bit arbitrary.”*

(Acting Headteacher)

However, I felt that the acting Headteacher’s explanation of how the super learner characters were related to growth mindset was not clear. The acting Headteacher mentioned that after reading Carol Dweck’s book on growth mindset, it reportedly triggered a mixture of associations, which lead to her developing super-hero characters that served as role models for the children. Here, growth mindset has quickly been conflated with character education. In some respects, the style with which the character education was implemented was not unique to the school . White et al. (2017) described similar practices found in schools within a government report on developing character in schools, which I also observed in the field.

I observed the super learners being promoted in assemblies and registration times, and it was also incorporated into a point-based system known as Class Dojo. White et al. (2017) also noted a growth mindset influence in their case studies where effort was being rewarded by teachers rather than academic achievement. However, the difference from what White et al. (2017) saw and in my research was that super learners were used to demonstrate process. Pupils were being told they were being like a character, rather than a focus on the process of what they themselves had done.

The growth mindset approach to learning metamorphosed into a programme of training children to demonstrate specific characteristics, yet it was not evident that the teachers

understood that the super learner initiative was linked to growth mindset. A teaching assistant said:

*“But, yeah, the growth mindset, I can’t remember how long that’s been brought in? Was it last year or the year before? That was brought in and that was just for the children to understand that it doesn’t matter if you make a mistake, mistakes are good to make, you learn from your mistakes. ‘Cos, I know when I was in year one, I used to keep saying to them: ‘C’mon guys if you don’t give up,’ and they used to say: ‘If it’s tough, we don’t give up.’ You know, it’s something that they do understand, and I don’t think they access it as much in nursery, I’m not sure, I think we tend to look more towards the super learners, but I know throughout the school it’s a big thing about growth mindset.”* (Teaching assistant)

The characteristics of independence, resilience, problem solving, and communication were all seen as being the characteristics of an ideal learner within the school, and they were seen as being ‘skills’ that demonstrated that the pupils were self-responsible learners that made good behavioural choices. This holds several similarities with the Jubilee Centre for Character Education at the University of Birmingham position:

*“The basis that cultivating good moral character is possible and practicable. It is about equipping children and adults with the ability to make wise decisions and lead flourishing lives. The Jubilee Centre works in partnership with schools and professional bodies on projects that promote and strengthen good moral character within the contexts of family, schools, communities and the wider employment scene.”* (Arthur et al. 2015, p. 5)

I enquired more specifically about how the super learners related to growth mindset, the acting Headteacher said:

*“I suppose it’s things like never giving up, you know Polly Problem Solver ‘she never gives up’ she looks at different ways to tackle a problem, erm, you know Indy Independent, he has a try at doing things by himself so you know, or Coco collaborator: ‘You can get better at skills but actually you know sometimes you need to ask for help to get better,’ so it’s all of this linked to [the idea that] you are ultimately responsible for your choices.”*

(Acting Headteacher)

The emphasis on creating the self-responsible child who makes good behavioural choices appears to override points that do not necessarily appear to be directly connected. Such as the moralising effects of growth mindset is the same as the act of never giving up. However, there is a firm belief that growth mindset is closely linked to pupils understanding that they are responsible for their choices. In a final comment, the acting Headteacher and architect for this approach to learning, pointed out how they saw growth mindset creating the self-responsible learner:

*“So, we want them to have a growth mindset to think: ‘If I don’t have this skill, and I want to get better at this what do I need to do be able to get there, and I need to take some responsibility for it, I need to practice it and I need to learn about it, but that’s all, people will help me but ultimately sort of their own responsibility.’”* (Acting Headteacher)

Here, growth mindset becomes separated from the character education. This statement by the acting Headteacher maintains that children with a growth mindset can change their own character. The skills which they refer to are characteristics or learning ideals. As such, the

child becomes responsible for their own psychological presentation. They become ultimately responsible for their own behavioural choices because they have been taught a growth mindset and have been shown how these super learners might behave.

During the second term, I observed some new developments. A newly qualified teacher replaced the experienced reception teacher, the lead of the nursery became the lead of reception teacher, and the teachers were using an online point-based merit system called Class Dojo. Class Dojo appeared to tie into the super learner's framework well.

Over the previous year, unknown to me, Class Dojo was being implemented in the upper part of the school before it became implemented in the early years. A teaching assistant in the nursery, who recently moved from a year one class, explained Class Dojo to me:

*“Oooo, the good old Dojos, yeah, yeah. We started those last year, could be beginning of last year, no wait, the year before, I think. I think it started in kS2 and made its way down to KS1. Yeah ooo, that’s more like a competition. I thought it was more of a competition. I found that when I was working in year one and when I was giving out Class Dojos, and they were asking: ‘Why has Harry got so many?’ ‘Let’s think about it, let’s think about why Harry got so many more Dojo points than you. Let’s think about why you get a Dojo point. You get a Dojo point for being independent, you’re listening, on task and following instructions,’ and that’s how it turned out.” (Nursery teaching assistant)*

I reflected at the time on the incoherent nature of using Class Dojo and growth mindset, and whether growth mindset was even a thing being implemented at the school anymore. A key point of growth mindset is to move a child away from a performance focus to a process focus. However, as the acting head describe, operationalising ideal characteristics or ‘skills’,



, through the use of Class Dojo, could create a hyper-competitive performance-focused context for children. When investigating the function of Class Dojo I conducted informal conversations with teaching staff about its implementation and how and why they used it:

*“We use the dojo to get the children to do what we want them to.”*

(Teaching assistant)

I thought this contrasted hugely with ideas about children being self-responsible and making choices. The children at the school had no space for individual choices or showing self-responsibility in actions. It appeared that a system was created that was ostensibly used to control children and limit their behavioural choices. The newly qualified teacher in reception said to the class:

*“If everyone sits down nicely then they can all get a Class Dojo point for sitting beautifully.”* (Reception teacher)

Bribery and Class Dojo appeared to be a theme, such as emotional bribery in the form of a teacher telling children ‘How sad you will make me feel if you behave badly’, which is something I felt was quite distressing. A child who had very poor eyesight was placed on a red mat and excluded from playtime after being deemed to be making poor behavioural choices, and the emotional bribery appeared to continue while the boy appeared to quietly say to himself ‘I want my daddy’ several times before the newly qualified teacher retorted: ‘Your daddy will come once you’ve sat quietly.’ The boy’s father would always arrive as there was no connection between his behaviour and whether his father would arrive at the school, although a fantasy to the contrary was used to keep the boy still and quiet. It was close to the end of the day, but this comment left me feeling perturbed. There are parallels with using the Class Dojo system as a way for teachers to bribe children to act as they see fit. But importantly for this study, the implicit understanding was that children get rewarded

for socially acceptable actions. The implications of growth mindset are that a separate, dominant character-based agenda was brought in under the guise of growth mindset by the acting Headteacher.

In a different context, Class Dojo was described to be used differently by a teaching assistant in nursery:

*"[The nursery teacher] started it this morning and she said to me: 'Have any children on your carpet received a Dojo?' and I said: 'Yeah, there were some that did some really good listening and they were giving some really good answers, and they were going like "oh right, OK" and the others were like "Well, so was I?!" and I was like "Ahh, yeah, but you weren't following instructions, so can I give you that?" and they were like "oh right, yeah..." and another one said it was because I was rolling around on the carpet, and I said yeah could I give you a Dojo point? "no". And also, now that it's linked to like, erm, [Nursery Teacher] was saying it's linked to the parents as well. Because we're sending this information, the Dojo points out to the parents, so the parents can actually access it and see what they're child is seeing and what they're child is getting a Dojo point for. So then, hopefully they will take that back and maybe use that at home as well. So yeah, I do like the Class Dojo points, but it can be a little bit competitive. I think that my year one's last year thought it was a little bit competitive." (Teaching assistant)*

Here, the self-responsible child is being developed with the use of the Dojo reward system, but growth mindset does not appear to be perceived to be connected to it. Instead, a surveillance system appears to be set up which allows parents to track their child's

performance at school. Again, this is a performance focus on the child, and growth mindset has either been misunderstood or disregarded. What had not been disregarded was the ideal self-responsible learner making good behavioural choices. When I asked the teaching assistant why children received Dojo points, she replied:

*“It’s erm, being on task, following instructions, being a Lindi Listener, because obviously that’s one of our super listeners, erm, being Indy Independent. It’s mainly just given for everyday things, but it’s something we picked up on. It could be a child who maybe can’t write or struggles to hold a pencil and you’ve looked, and you’ve gone ‘you’ve just done it, there’s a Dojo point’, and you go to your board and think, right, what can I give that? And they’ll be like ‘Ooo I got a dojo point for that, so now I need to know I need to hold my pen or pencil’. Like somebody got one for helping his friend move his coat, being respectful, so yeah, he got one.”*

(Teaching assistant)

At this point it is important to reflect on the chronosystem. Since this research was carried out at the end of one academic year and the beginning of another, it was a short-term longitudinal design where I was able to capture the influence of a new cohort of students, but also the influence of a new team of teachers and the resulting processes coming from the changed context. Many members of staff left the school over the summer, some of whom left to follow the original Headteacher to her new school. As such, as I observed and interviewed members of staff at the beginning of the autumn term, there was a sense that growth mindset appeared to be forgotten. At times, I wondered whether instances of growth mindset practices, such as when teachers reframed their mistakes as positive experiences, only occurred because they knew I was present and interested in growth

mindset practices. However, after reflection and analysis emerging after the field study, I could see clearly how the impact of time and changing contexts influenced the processes. When using the dojo teachers sometimes focus on praising processes, but the way in which this is delivered is always with an extrinsic reward: a Dojo point.

From an ecological perspective, the proximal processes appeared to be dominated by teachers rewarding children for performing in certain ways. I felt that this was distant from the ideals of children having freedom to make choices to develop themselves individually. The choices were limited to behaving in accordance with eight different virtues or being bribed as part of a class control measure. In my notes I reflected deeply about the implicit messages this was giving to children at a time when Harvey Weinstein, the disgraced movie mogul, was in court. In my field notes it struck me that children were being taught that they would be seen as being more favourable if they appeased the more powerful other individual. This powerful other had the power to sanction their playtime and exclude them from a classroom activity that they might have ordinarily enjoyed. They also had the power to give Dojo points or remove them. On occasion, I noted how teachers portrayed the Headteacher as a fearful character to promote order as the class walked past her office. This struck me as a system that was teaching children to conform to the wills of powerful other individuals to be seen as favourable. This dynamic is complicated further as parents are made aware of the amount of Dojo points their child has got or whether they have had Dojo points removed. This seemed to put a lot of power in the hands of the teacher, and something which could be used to manipulate children with external control. This is quite the opposite to what growth mindset theorists would promote. And it was a set of circumstances I found difficult to observe and consider.

### 3.3.5 Communicating growth mindset

#### 3.3.5.1 Mindset in Phrases

Although the use of growth mindset practices did not appear to be obvious during the observations, the teachers and teaching assistants recounted previous experiences of developing growth mindset and implementing it. A key aspect that teachers recounted about growth mindset was the power of language. A teaching assistant said:

*“Only because you’re more consciously aware of the power of what you’re saying. And I probably used language in the past that I wouldn’t use now after having the growth mindset training.”* (Teaching assistant)

Regrettably, the researcher was unable to access the training documents the teachers used. Seaton (2018) found that staff reported having a better understanding of mindset and effect on learning, greater awareness of their own impact on learning, but also how impactful language can be, and how powerful this made them feel in the school. Language has been repeatedly seen as a key component of growth mindset (Fraser, 2018) and in the discouragement of fixed mindset language. The teaching assistant went on to say:

*“I would like more training to be given to lunchtime organisers, because we’ve all had training and practiced using the language, we’ve had the handout for little phrases we can use, and then you work alongside somebody who hasn’t had that training, some of the language that they use makes you cringe ... Only because you’re more consciously aware of the power of what you’re saying. And I probably used language in the past that I wouldn’t use now after having the growth mindset training.”*  
(Teaching assistant)

As a result of the training in growth mindset, the teaching assistant developed a new understanding right and wrong ways to speak to children, this finding is representative of literature within education publications targeted at teachers. Below are some examples of literature targeted at teachers by Carol Dweck that promote the idea that growth mindset results in success and parents are responsible for creating a growth mindset in their children:

*“A brilliant student, Jonathan sailed through grade school. He completed his assignments easily and routinely earned As. Jonathan puzzled over why some of his classmates struggled, and his parents told him he had a special gift. In the seventh grade, however, Jonathan suddenly lost interest in school, refusing to do homework or study for tests. As a consequence, his grades plummeted. His parents tried to boost their son’s confidence by assuring him that he was very smart. But their attempts failed to motivate Jonathan (who is a composite drawn from several children). Schoolwork, their son maintained, was boring and pointless.” (Dweck, 2007a, p. 37)*

And another quote that was also found in literature targeted at teachers which emphasises a split between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ praise:

*“The wrong kind of praise creates self-defeating behavior. The right kind motivates students to learn.” (Dweck, 2007a, p. 34)*

It has been found that children can be adversely affected by the wrong type of praise, and that a successful child is one with a growth mindset. A growth mindset perspective was demonstrated by using specific ‘safe’ growth mindset phrases. The risks of fixed mindset language have already been mentioned in the previous chapter, which highlighted teachers’ perceptions of the influence of fixed mindset families and communities that the children

come from. It is likely that teacher training reinforced their understanding of families and children. In a similar way that critical realist researchers may reanalyse data through a particular theoretical lens, teachers and teaching assistants can apply their new knowledge as judgements on parents and others that communicate in a fixed mindset way with children. As such, teachers and teaching assistants talked about using particular phrases that had been suggested, tried and tested by the staff. This could be seen as an example of the development of 'scripts,' as found by Savvides and Bond (2021) in other studies of the implementation of growth mindset in primary schools. A teaching assistant said:

*“Well, we had a few staff meetings and a few discussions about growth mindset and we came up with a few phrases that you could pull on, because the language, it’s not the language you use all the time, so, people in the meeting would say: ‘I used this phrase and it really worked for me,’ so, we had a list of things to say just to get you into the practice of it, so it became more natural, and the more you use it the more you natural it becomes. So if somebody was giving up on something: ‘I can’t do it I can’t do it,’ just a little phrase like: ‘Even though it’s hard, we don’t give up’ and you hear children saying that to themselves when they’re finding something tricky to do in early years – ‘Even though it’s hard, we don’t give up’, if I make a mistake: ‘It’s OK miss, it’s OK to make a mistake because that’s how you learn.’” (Teaching assistant)*

These key phrases were also believed to serve a purpose for the children, the special educational needs coordinator said:

*“No, I’m gonna do it, it might be difficult, but I can try.’ You know, and getting that for children, and having little phrases and mottos for them to say helps them, and it reminds them to keep on being resilient.” (SENCo)*

Simple key phrases were seen as ways for children to respond quickly to psychological setbacks which enabled them to continue with their efforts at school. Most of the examples given by teachers tended to relate to children making an attempt at a piece of work, or putting in more effort:

*“But you know it doesn’t matter you know just go and have a try.”*

(Nursery Teaching assistant)

*“It might be tough but I ain’t gonna give up.”* (Nursery teaching assistant)

*“If it’s tough, we don’t give up.”* (Nursery teaching assistant)

*“No, I’m gonna do it, it might be difficult, but I can try.”* (Nursery teaching assistant)

*“Even though it’s hard, we don’t give up.”* (Teaching assistant)

*“‘Yet’ just makes you think ‘I’m gonna try’.”* (Teaching assistant)

*“‘What do you wanna do when you’re older, how are you going to make that happen? Well you need to go to school, you need to go to university, you need to do well at school.’ Instead of that really long conversation every single time, again you can just have it once, and link it to growth mindset and therefore when you just say: ‘Ooo, you’re making the right choices for your future.’”* (Teacher)

The majority of these phrases focus on effort and beginning pieces of work, and therefore more process orientated praise as found in other studies (see Savvides & Bond, 2021). This would seem to be a more obvious interpretation of growth mindset as it is something



commonly found in the literature. However, less obvious phrases are ones that relate to 'choice', as shown in the last quote by a teacher in year three. However, examples of practice that relate to choice proliferate the interview data:

*"Ooo, you're just like Healthy Henry, he always choses to have a healthy snack because he doesn't want his teeth to fall out by eating too many sweets."* (Teaching assistant)

*"So the growth mindset part of it is if you get a child at the stage where they can understand that it's easy to use that vocabulary to say: 'So, we've had a bad start to the morning, that's fine you can make those choices to move on with your day.'"* (Teacher)

*"That kind of conversation I find that with the growth mindset you just have to have that conversation once and link it with the growth mindset theory of you can make your own choices."* (Teacher)

In my observation notes, I referred to this moment of teacher–children dialogue as 'teacher speak'. 'Teacher speak' appeared to be quite a robotic and limited way of talking to children but also about children. The emphasis was about how children made choices to behave well, or choices to behave badly, either way the child's decision was blamed for the resulting outcome. It occurred to me that these descriptions of practice from the teachers and teaching assistants give an indication of how the mesosystem between the teacher and class and teacher and pupil can become weakened by a limited and mechanical way of talking to children in the context of feedback.

One teacher spoke to me informally about her experiences of learning about trauma, and that she could differentiate between choice behaviour and not. However, this discourse around choice seemed to take over with an example of the boy mentioned earlier who had

poor eyesight. The teacher claimed he was making choices to behave badly without contextual information about what might be behind the *bad behaviour*. This is important, as growth mindset is perceived as an idea, which once it has been learned it means that children are consciously making decisions. This struck me as an example of a teacher not seeing the child in front of them in their entirety, and I felt that this had a similar pattern with the use of key phrases. Equipped with these key phrases, teachers constrained themselves to a narrow discourse to children about their work; again, by depending on a limited phraseology due to eminent risks of using non-growth mindset language, the quality of the communication lacked nuance.

Truax (2018) developed a comprehensive list of accepted examples of growth mindset and non-growth mindset language to be used with children when giving them feedback on their work. Here are some examples taken from their study:

*“I know writing used to be easy for you and that you used to feel like the smart kid all the time, but the truth is that you weren’t using your brain to the fullest. I’m really excited about how you’re stretching yourself now and working to learn hard things.”* (Truax, 2018, p. 152)

The above example is the only instance Truax (2018) provides that provides an actual life-course history of the child and is not something that can be reproduced as a replicated key phrase. This kind of accepted growth mindset feedback reads like a considered acknowledgement that requires a thorough understanding from the teacher about the experiences of the child. The following is another accepted growth mindset phrase from the study:

*“I like the effort you put in, but let’s work together to figure out what it is that you’re having trouble understanding.”* (Truax, 2018, p. 152)

Unlike the first quotation, which focused on providing feedback on a pupil's success, this quote provides an example of accepted growth mindset language that can be used when a pupil may have experienced difficulties in the learning. I selected this quote because it demonstrates how growth mindset does not appear to imply a solitary process of children sorting their own problems out. In this example there is an implication that children can learn to expect support from teachers, or perhaps adults more generally if similar logic is internalised and applied where the possibility of support exists elsewhere. This is important because it demonstrates that organisations and people can interpret and apply growth mindset differently. Truax (2018) did propose some more generic examples of growth mindset language to enable some form of consistency for validity purposes, and some of those examples highlight work done and effort applied, but they also look at different strategies taken. However, none appeared to be quite so narrow in scope as what was reportedly developed within the school in this study.

### *3.3.5.2 Mindset in metaphor*

The use of metaphor was a common way that teachers explained how they implemented growth mindset. The most common growth mindset metaphor used was reframing development through steps of competence. These steps were reported to have been developed in agreement with the acting Headteacher that teachers would feedback to children in terms of where each step represented a particular area of competency. A teaching assistant explained how this was carried out:

*“Yeah, yeah, I’ve used this steps verbally, and I’ve looked at them and I’ve said: ‘Right, you’re here at the bottom,’ they can be really frustrated crying and really upset: ‘We’re here we’re really here, now, but we’re gonna*

*make our way to the top' – 'No, no [child], let's take one step at a time', so you can see that turning round because it's something visual I can see them for them I can see that they're getting there and 'I can actually see that you've calmed down and you're sitting there, you've calmed yourself down and that means that you're trying, and you get there'. It could be like they were that frustrated, they've come out of class, you know behaviour or something like that, and it could be just the steps from being so wound up and annoyed to just getting on the with the work – and that could be the step process. And I think that works really well as well." (Teaching assistant)*

When the teaching assistant gave examples of using the steps, they often reported that this coincided with a calming effect on the child. It was like they described a process where children went from a state of flight or fight to a calmer state of mind. The teaching assistant went on to say:

*"I was doing some teaching, doing some handwriting and spellings at the same time, and this little boy who just couldn't focus – as soon as you give him some new letter, that day, no new words sorry, he's like: 'It's too much, I can't do them all,' I said: 'Let's try, just take it step by step.' He just put his head in hands, and by the end of the session he was like: 'Yeah, I feel a bit better about it, yeah, it's not as bad as what I thought.' Every single time coming back to these new words he was like: 'Arghhhh', meltdown time and then we kind of use the growth mindset language and it did get a bit better over time, his handwriting dramatically improved but he still kind of had these little meltdowns, it was just him, but using the*

*growth mindset just snapped it out of him a bit quicker.” (Teaching assistant)*

There is something unique about this approach, rather than simply telling a child that they can make their own choices. There appears to be something more relational where the teacher acknowledges a position, but also the struggle for a child. The steps in competency were the only reference to growth mindset within the schools teaching and learning policy:

*“Staff foster a growth mindset attitude in lessons, using terms beginner, novice, skilled and expert learner.” (School teaching and learning policy)*

### 3.3.6 Conclusion

Unlike other research on growth mindset, this chapter has demonstrated the breadth and complexity in delivering growth mindset in real-world settings. There are clear similarities between some aspects of growth mindset delivery, such as the emphasis on mistake making, while other aspects such as a merit-based system to promote specific characteristics evokes what a growth mindset theorist might consider a very fixed mindset approach to humanity and could be seen as being incoherent with the principal arguments of growth mindset research. By taking a socio-cultural approach to understanding how growth mindset is implemented, it can be demonstrated just how influential context can be to the understanding and delivery of growth mindset psychology. It could be argued that growth mindset had become understood through a character education lens, in similar terms to a social and emotional learning approach, in the super learners developed by the acting head. This was not compatible with teachers developing key phrases that emphasised not effort, perseverance or the importance in knowing they were responsible for their own choices. Such narratives around hard work and choices absorbed into growth mindset as an

entrepreneurial discourse within the school. Socio-cultural research demonstrates that just how wider systems, such as a neoliberal macrosystem culture, pervades and influences the conceptualisation and the practice of growth mindset. This aim of this research was never to evaluate the effectiveness of growth mindset, this has been done elsewhere (see Foliano et al., 2019 for an example), rather, this research was intended to get beneath the surface and explore the ways growth mindset is implemented contexts. It would have been easy to carry on the debates found in unsuccessful growth mindset evaluations that suggest systemic factors which meant that the delivery or ability to measure effect sizes have been difficult. This research demonstrates that most quantitative studies on growth mindset interventions, which involve training of teachers to deliver growth mindset in real-world settings, would have issues with validity. This is because it is impossible to assume a consistent truth in understanding a particular conceptualisation of growth mindset. These findings clearly show teachers using growth mindset as a vehicle for other agendas and discourses. Whether it be the character education of super learners, or the neoliberal discourse of choice and self-responsibility, as shown here, the context of an approach or intervention can influence what practices emerge. And finally, the lessons taught by researchers, such as Carol Dweck (see Dweck, 2007), provide insights into the promotion of anxiety for teachers that becomes operationalised with the use of scripts that provide a narrow way of relating to children about their work. It is also arguable that the nature of the literature emphasises blame on teachers and parents because it does not consider wider contextual structures that influence someone's mindset.

Before growth mindset was called growth mindset, research understood the concept as an incremental theory of intelligence (Dweck and Legget, 1988). The latter of the two names for the same concept is more specific and less open to interpretation. An incremental theory

of intelligence provides the reader with a specific understanding of a concept that can be researched but also explained in practice.

### 3.4 Section 3: The impact of growth mindset on staff

In this chapter I will discuss the interview data that draws on the stories, reflections, and associations that teachers and teaching assistants had about their experiences of growth mindset. The chapter considers the previous experiences of developing and implementing growth mindset before the original Headteacher left and over the period of instability thereafter. In doing so, this chapter provides important information contributing to a holistic understanding to all three research aims.

During the interviews and focus groups, I asked my participants to tell me about the development of growth mindset in their teaching and generally across the school. This included evaluative points, stories about training or other structures that influenced the development of understanding and practices. I also asked questions more broadly around school pressures, aspirations for the school and themselves as teachers, the children they taught and the school ethos. These questions were nested in the context of developing and implementing growth mindset. As such, the stories and associations between all aspects related back to growth mindset or important contextual information that teachers used to situate their points and associations. Nested within these conversations, I identified a theme that focused on the staff reflecting on how the growth mindset learning had impacted on them. The analysis highlighted that these reflections concentrated on two distinct chronological periods of the teachers' narratives: when the original Headteacher was present and when the new Headteacher joined the school. The reflections from when the

original Headteacher was present were concerned with the benefits of the structures that were used to develop growth mindset, and often related to the impact of growth mindset as an opportunity for professional group reflections on experiences, theory, and practice. The second period of reflection tended to bring about associations with personal coping through a school crisis and a focus on the acting Headteachers attributions of their own growth mindset to choices they made.

### 3.4.1 Developing a community of practice

Through the interviews, a narrative of how growth mindset was initially developed unfolded. Teachers spoke about how the original Headteacher initially introduced growth mindset. This was important because patterns in the interview data suggest these early introductions by the original Headteacher formed a blueprint as to what happened afterwards and gave the teaching staff a sense of what doing growth mindset was. These initial structures involved meetings where senior leaders in the school were asked to read Carol Dweck's popular psychology book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2006) and then develop teaching strategies based on their learning. The teachers then met to discuss the individual growth mindset projects that they had developed. Similar approaches to developing growth mindset were found in the review of literature on growth mindset practices in primary schools (Savvides & Bond, 2021), and highlights the flexibility in developing practices within their community. Here, teachers are seen carrying out additional reading and encouraged to develop their ideas for their context.

The school subsequently established a group called the 'Growth Mindset Think-Tank'. This was described as a formalised space where teachers, teaching assistants, and other members of staff met, discussed, shared and learned from one another on ways of doing



growth mindset. This was a group I was already aware of having been asked to be a part of it in the early stages as a school counsellor before I decided to develop the current research. Many of the ideas that became customary growth mindset practices in the school came from these professional practice meetings. Below, a senior teacher in the nursery explains how some of these practices were developed within the growth mindset think-tank:

*“As a group we said how you are a novice and then you become skilled and expert but even as an expert you can be a beginner or something else. And then there is the think-tank that devised the steps that you will see. We don’t have them in nursery because it’s more verbal in nursery. But higher up the school the children can visually see themselves climbing up the steps until they achieve and become an expert. But they know when they are an expert, they become beginner in something else, so it is always going up and down the stairs so it’s not always once done you’ve done it, there’s always something else to go and do. So, the think-tank devised the visuals that they have in the classroom to support the children.” (Nursery lead teacher)*

Although the think-tank appeared to be a key structure in the school for the development of growth mindset practices, the arrival of the new Headteacher (who was later removed from post) ended the growth mindset think-tank. This change had a significant effect on the structures that previously enabled the development of growth mindset practices. As such, during the interviews, it was these lost structures that were reflected on:

*“I would really like to be meeting up with the growth mindset think-tank at least every three to four weeks and saying where are we up to, to keep moving it forward, but that’s not been possible, also we had a head who*

*really didn't buy into the growth mindset approach so that made it difficult, whereas the head that had left at Christmas bought into massively."* (Acting Headteacher)

A teaching assistant talked about how the solution-focused atmosphere of the growth mindset think-tank resonated with her personality:

*"I find myself a very positive, 'can do it' sort of person anyway, so this growth mindset has worked really well for me – I would much rather discuss for five minutes how we can achieve something than moan about it for two days when we should not have to do it, or how things were different years ago."* (Reception/nursery teaching assistant)

This statement is significant because it gives a sense of how growth mindset is understood by one teaching assistant conceptually as a practice of interacting with other members of staff. This teaching assistant found that the practices, which occur in these proximal interactions, beneficial to her own practice, but she also pointed out what she might see as more regressive proximal interactions that limit development. Here, the teaching assistant gives the impression that the structures where teachers reflect on practices and look for solutions are parts of what they see as doing growth mindset, and it is something they found effective in their own development. This supports the notion, as found by Savvides and Bond (2021), that primary schools that aim to integrate growth mindset psychology into their teaching and learning practices do so through staff involvement.

Unfortunately, I did not have access to these interactions to see what the teaching assistant meant. However, at the time of data collection, informal conversations and observations of breakout periods showed teachers lamenting about how things were different years ago.

For example, the developmental level at which children come to the school and the

additional work that is needed to support children's needs, such as toilet training, but also the lack of perceived support available for children with special educational needs and difficulties. The teaching assistant in this quote may have been airing frustrations about the kinds of conversations she has been having as she fondly remembered the growth mindset-orientated meetings, which she saw as a positive, solution-focused experience.

What the teaching assistant described appears to demonstrate a split between what Christ and Wang (2013) call 'the challenges of classroom practices' and professional development aligned with communities of practice. There was a high teacher turnover at the school, existing practices did not always cohere with research-based practice, teachers had bought into the practices of a different Headteacher and the direction of the school was not clear. What did appear to be clear was the reported community of practice that the original Headteacher developed. Christ and Wang (2013) argue that the original Headteacher did develop a community of practice model as she encouraged the sharing of stories and practices among teachers, invited all teachers to participate in developing growth mindset, the practices were carried out with teachers, children and parents and the teachers built on existing practices.

The Reading Recovery teacher gave a comparison between the approach taken to growth mindset at the previous school she worked at and the original Headteacher's approach at the school in the study:

*"My previous school had sort of done growth mindset and sort of ticked the boxes like 'we do growth mindset here', I always felt really frustrated by the way it was taught, and fed to us, and it was very much like it wasn't a very physical approach to it was much more like: 'This is what it is and we need to know about it in our school and off you go,' it was weird 'We've*

*done growth mindset here' and then so when I went to this school and we were really properly doing growth mindset and I was like: 'Oh, right, this is growth mindset,' so I always felt there was much more to this, and it was interesting because I was learning bits and bobs about it but then never, and thinking: 'There's so many links with what I do,' but, my previous school didn't really pull things together in the same way as here so, when I first came in I was like: 'Wow, there's so many things.'"* (Reading Recovery teacher)

This quote demonstrates that the impact of growth mindset is context-dependent. What the current research demonstrates is that a transition of senior leaders can significantly impact the nature of the delivery of growth mindset. But it could equally be said that the experiences of those senior leaders and the way that structures within a school are shaped for professional development can make a big impact on its implementation. In this case, the impact growth mindset can have on staff is dependent on other socio-cultural influences, such as the communities of practice which exist within those settings. The Reading Recovery teacher indicated that there was a proper way of doing growth mindset and the impact on this way of doing growth mindset enabled her to 'link' and 'pull' things together in an exciting way.

The Reading Recovery teacher's involvement in the community of practice model developed by the original Headteacher highlights the importance of collaboration and building on existing practices and knowledge. The Reading Recovery teacher indicated that the original Headteacher had already considered how the approach to Reading Recovery would fit in with growth mindset and therefore considered how her role and practices in the school

would fit within and around the wider strategy. The Reading Recovery teacher went on to say:

*“Yeah, I feel there’s loads of overlap between growth mindset and reading recovery, you know, and I’ve been able to like, pipe up at staff meetings about my stuff, at a growth mindset meeting: ‘This is the sort of things that you could be doing...’ Pushing your growth mindset stuff through, yeah, there’s lots of opportunities for that definitely, because it’s all about, ’cos staff come to see me in lessons, and I’ve done quite a few lessons throughout the year, erm, if I’m teaching their children then they always come to at least two lessons, but I’ve had other staff in ... in terms of growth mindset with staff, so the idea of sharing knowledge and skills is crucial to the development for staff in general. And that idea that we’re always learning as adults filters then to the children.” (Reading Recoveryteacher)*

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory, this quote demonstrates the complexity of Reading Recovery in the system, and how she and other staff are affected by the doing of growth mindset. If the child’s development was the centre of the ecological model, then the Reading Recovery teacher could be seen as both an important exosystem, mesosystem and meso-agent. Here, she impacts on the child by utilising growth mindset language to support other teachers and teaching assistants in teaching literacy skills. The Reading Recovery and the teacher combine to create an exosystem in which new strategies are developed to support the child’s development in reading. They are also a mesosystem in that the child can potentially see the Reading Recovery teacher, who would also participate in the classroom and with their other teachers, while they might also

introduce teachers and teaching assistants to the growth mindset think-tank so that further ideas could be shared. As such, the Reading Recovery teacher could be considered a meso-agent within this complex system. The Reading Recovery teacher was a part of a lot of systems, and this is reported as that is crucial to their work. Participating in implementing growth mindset and doing growth mindset is difficult to separate as the teachers contextualise their messages. In the above quote, growth mindset is perceived as both an idea for sharing knowledge and skills and as being essential for cultivating a sense in adults around the importance of lifelong learning. Dweck (2006) argues that holding a growth mindset as an adult would reconcile with the notion that 'we're always learning as adults', but ideas around sharing knowledge and skills are only considered as processes, Fraser (2018). That enabled the initial planning and implementation of growth mindset. In this context, the collaboration, meeting, and sharing is reported to be understood as doing growth mindset and not just a process that facilitates it's learning and development. The facilitative processes that enabled the professional development of staff to use a growth mindset were highlighted by a teaching assistant who talked about additional structures outside of the growth mindset think-tank group. This group was led by the teaching assistant manager and only included teaching assistants:

*"For the TAs [teaching assistants] a little briefing and lots of meetings. And kind of come together and say: 'Right, what do you think is working? Have you got any evidence?' And kind of just sharing that, you know, sharing ideas and sharing the language that we are using as well. And then talk about what growth mindset they were using and if it was working and what impact is it having. Like in our marking and feedback policy, TAs were*

*involved in that heavily to have a growth mindset approach when giving feedback within books.” (Teaching assistant in the upper school)*

Christ and Wang (2013) would consider this a part of the communities of practice model as the teaching assistants were being encouraged to develop practices but also policy around giving feedback to pupils. The process which is set out by this teaching assistant demonstrates what Henderson et al. (2012) would argue is a demonstration of collective meaning making as the developmental processes became bottom-up in nature. The process fosters a collective sense of what doing growth mindset is in the school, perhaps formed by a shared repertoire of mutual engagement (Wenger, 2006).

The teacher’s appreciation of these processes of doing growth mindset may be as result of uniqueness in this more action research-orientated approach to professional development in the school setting. The impact of these practices is likely to influence the teacher’s professional identity (Wenger, 2006). In the example above, the teaching assistant described an egalitarian practice that is important in the development of policy and practices within the school, but they also gave the impression that they had less power than others. However, the structures that developed over the period the school was doing growth mindset were reportedly designed to encourage a shared investment in the teaching and learning of children at the school; even teaching assistants had the power to be involved in professional development, which informed how children were taught. The Reading Recovery teacher and teaching assistants found a place to share and collaborate and identified with a community where it was a cultural practice to do so.

A Damjanovic and Blank (2021) case study found similar responses with teachers involved in a professional learning community. They found how professional identities developed over time and their professional learning community provided teachers with a space to share

their enquiries with each other and learn through their own teaching contexts. Their research found that teaching assistants were emboldened and felt integral to the teaching community, and this was contrasted with them never being invited to take part in such a learning community. The current research has found that the approach to developing growth mindset in a communities of practice model did have an important influence on the staff.

This research has found that it is possible to have several ways to develop growth mindset in a school. External agencies can come in and teach children growth mindset-themed content (Blackwell et al., 2007), schools can have specific training for members of staff on growth mindset (Fraser, 2018) and children can practice growth mindset implementations online (Donohoe et al., 2012) without teacher involvement. In this study, I found that staff can be involved in developing growth mindset and have autonomy in how growth mindset is practiced and understood. However, aspects of what staff consider growth mindset could also be described as another concept. In this case, the beneficial impact on staff could also be understood as taking a communities of practice model to developing practices and professional development within the school.

What is different in this study is that, at the time of the interview, the teaching assistant had already spent much of a year being involved in the project, whereas in Damjanovic and Blank's (2021) research, the assistant was interviewed after the process, and they were purposively sampled based on how engaged they were in the professional learning community. The teaching assistant I am referring to could well have grown used to the practices and perhaps did not feel closed off to such professional development spaces. Interestingly, the teaching assistant spoke in very clear terms about how she would see the school recover:



*“I do think they need to touch back on it ... sometimes you get a bit settled, don’t you? ... [Teachers and teaching assistants] probably are using it but kind of just need to say: ‘Right, how are you using growth mindset?’, ‘How are you using rights respecting language?’, ‘Do you use it as much as you should be doing?’, ‘Can we have a bit more of a push on it just to make sure we’re not dipping down?’ Because obviously it’s had a positive effect on the whole school, so we don’t want it to dip down and lose it necessarily.” (Upper school teaching assistant)*

From a communities of practice perspective, the spaces developed during the implementation of growth mindset left a lasting impression as this teaching assistant wanted to see those practices return. There is something quite forthright in the way that this teaching assistant was acting out the structure of these imagined meetings, as if she would be leading them and asking the questions. Perhaps her experiences of being an active contributor to school policy developed a professional identity that was shaped by that previous period. From a communities of practice perspective, this could suggest that due to being able to influence and shape the meanings that matter within the community, she had a higher degree of negotiability (Wenger, 2006). The teaching assistant is theoretically able to contribute to professional practices in the school. However, they are also identified as part of a wider team that can learn and unlearn. The reported findings painted a picture of a particular set of structures that enabled the development of growth mindset in the school and reportedly had the potential to have an influence on the teacher’s professional identity. It appears that developing growth mindset using a communities of practice model (as it was analysed to be) has enabled a more egalitarian and equitable approach to developing staff, and this was a system that the staff wanted to return to.

The collaborative experiences of sharing knowledge in an open way, with some effort being made to manage issues of power and role superiority, while giving teachers autonomy and responsibility in their own endeavors, were reportedly beneficial for the teaching staff.

Reflecting on the period during which the school became destabilised after the original Headteacher left, it was reported that teachers were using growth mindset language with each other. A teaching assistant who worked across nursery and reception reportedly did this when they noticed that their colleagues were struggling:

*“I think I mean the job is really busy sometimes it can get you down, it’s tiring it’s constant and there’s always something else to do, and for other members of staff you can see people get tired and people get frustrated, but if you use that [growth mindset] language with each other as well, that can be of benefit with the people you’re working with and if you get into the habit of doing that, if you’re having an off day then there’s always someone there that can pick you up and share the burden too.”*

*(Nursery/reception teaching assistant)*

This represents a departure from the previously discussed professional learning groups..

The example shows teachers have been impacted by growth mindset in a way that they might have anticipated to affect children. This unexpected finding is important because it shows growth mindset was also a deeply relational practice for this teaching assistant.

Highlighting that the school environment can become stressful, this teaching assistant recognised the strains and potential burnout in other members of staff. She felt that using growth mindset language could be helpful. This is something that the observational evidence supports, as I noted on several occasions that teachers were tired and struggling the tensions in of their classroom. However, I cannot provide direct examples of what could

be described as staff members using growth mindset language with one another, I can evidence a very supportive community culture, particularly in the nursery and reception classes. A teaching assistant notably claimed to have ‘got the back’ of a newly qualified teacher, who had just started at the school.

### 3.4.2 Teachers and teaching assistants reflecting on their practices

The reflective spaces that the teachers described also occurred in their own internal spaces. It was reported that teachers and teaching assistants were more reflective of their teaching practices as individuals after growth mindset had been implemented.

“We talk about it [growth mindset] more than we did before. Possibly once you’re made aware of it you might make use of it more in everyday practice, rather than before you might not have. Maybe we would have used it with individual children but not the whole group, but now use it with the whole group more, don’t we?” (*Nursery teaching assistant*)

And continued by a colleague in a focus group:

*“... it just makes you think more and think about how you work things and how you approach things with the children.”* (*Nursery teaching assistant*)

Another teaching assistant in reception reflected on the amount of praise they gave to their pupils:

*“Well, no, ‘cos when you realise: ‘I could have praised them just as much’ or given them a bit more self-encouragement, then go back and relook at this, sort of, like, evaluating yourself and thinking, right I mustn’t do that, or if it doesn’t work straight away going back and thinking about doing another piece of work, and ‘Ooo, wow, look at that’, make sure do it again,*

*do, you know, do that praise, you know, give them the same treatment as they would have everybody else. Because you do evaluate yourself all the time, and you cannot get it right all the time, you know, but if I get it right like twice or three times a day on most of the children, then you've given them something rather than nothing, you know." (Reception teaching assistant)*

The teaching assistants said that the more they discussed growth mindset between them, the more they were likely to use it. This would mirror how Bronfenbrenner (2005) understands development, as the increased amount of time doing something leads to increased levels of complexity within the practices of the community. The teaching assistant gave a candid reflection on her processes, which was very revealing. She put herself in a vulnerable position to tell a stranger that she did not get it right all the time. This is something akin to a growth mindset way of looking at personal successes or failures, but mostly the ability to get things wrong and learn from them. The teaching assistant in reception demonstrated a desire for equity in her teaching and expressed her intent to treat the children in her care fairly. Observations in this class demonstrated that this would be a difficult task, as on many occasions the teacher and teaching assistant would be pulled in multiple directions by up to six four-year-old children at any one time, each vying for attention for themselves and their. It felt quite realistic for the teaching assistant to put her mind at ease by pointing out that she did not get it right every time. And equally, the teachers and teaching assistants universally expressed enthusiasm and care for the children and wanted to do the best they could for them, and at times they felt it difficult to maintain that level of care as either internal or external resources impeded their ability to care. One member of staff, who was the lead teacher in the reception, and also a member of agency

staff, spoke widely around this subject. Even though this teacher arrived at the school the term after the original Headteacher left, they did still pick up on growth mindset within the classroom setting. This suggests that informal conversations and practices were supporting the growth mindset practices. However, this teacher reported feeling as though they wished that senior leaders in the school would treat staff with a growth mindset.

### 3.4.3 Growth mindset supporting staff in difficulty

Participants reflected on the helpfulness of growth mindset during a period of instability at the school. A particular stressful moment was reported by the teachers after the original Headteacher left. They were replaced by a new Headteacher, who reportedly made large changes, which included a move away from growth mindset and the schools UNICEF rights respecting initiative, which had been a standout initiative at the school for some time.

In the previous section, as demonstrated, the growth mindset approaches were used by colleagues to support one another, and staff attributed it as a mechanism for their own individualised coping during that difficult period. One teaching assistant spoke about how this change impacted her,

*“So, I didn’t get any support for rights respecting, it’s a big thing for rights respecting, especially across a whole school as I’m only a teaching assistant at the minute and I’m not saying that teaching assistants can’t have that kind of responsibility, I’m not saying that at all, but what I’m saying is from having, moving from a totally new job to running it [rights respecting] without having that really big support behind me and guiding me and kind of giving me a gentle push ‘I can’t do this’ and ‘You can do it’, ‘Right OK, we’ll support you in that’. The support was all dropped back,*

*and I had to kind of keep it going and do things 'I'm not sure, can I authorise that? Can I do that?' questions, questions, all the time, so it was kind of it's good in a way because I got that practice there now and I know certain things I wouldn't have found out, but, yeah, it's just support really and having that back up there and come into meetings and, kind of, and [the original Headteacher] coming to our conference to, kind of, like be like that as a lead from our school, but I was the main lead from [the school], and it's me then, and I'm not a Headteacher, it needs to come from the Headteacher and the replacement Headteacher didn't want that. So, I was kind of left." (Teaching assistant upper school)*

This experience gives an indication of some of the disruptions that occurred in the school when the original Headteacher was replaced. Importantly, it also shows the level of support that the original Headteacher provided this teacher with despite the fact she was no longer the actual Headteacher at the school. The biological systems perspective would argue that the set of circumstances that teachers and teaching assistants faced at the school was challenging. Principle twelve of ecological systems theory outlined by Bronfenbrenner (2005, pp. 162–163) states:

*"The degree of stability, consistency, and predictability over time in any element of any level of the systems constituting an ecology of human development is critical for the effective operation of the system in question. Extremes either of disorganization or rigidity in structure of function represent danger signs for potential psychological growth, with some intermediate degree of system flexibility constituting the optimal*

*condition for human development. In terms of research design, this proposition points to the importance of assessing the degree of stability versus instability, with respect to characteristics both of the person and of context, at each level of the ecological system.”*

Therefore, it is understandable that the psychological and professional development of staff stagnated during the period after the departure of the initial Headteacher , but also that the staff struggled with the sudden changes in systems. The period when the original Headteacher was in post was described as a period of high stability, as demonstrated by the low turnover in staff and the longevity of policy-informed projects, such as the UNICEF Rights of the Child initiative, that the school had carried out. However, the destruction of established structures and work, to adapt to alternative and unfamiliar structures, would have likely caused uncertainty and instability in the teachers and teaching assistants. A teaching assistant said:

*“It was really difficult, I mean, to be fair, I’m a really positive person and obviously then I had to step up and work with the Headteacher who was sacked for a short time, and it was different, working with a different member of staff and she had totally different approaches and different thoughts and paths for our school. And obviously mannerisms and just different approaches like that, and it was difficult ‘cos you’re trying to deal with it in a professional manner yourself.” (Teaching assistant)*

Commitment in teachers can be eroded by the impact of changes at management level, but such changes tend to also lead to work-related stress, have a negative impact on professional identity, self-confidence and lead to an increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety and depression (Skinner et al., 2021). This may be why it was reported that seven members

of staff chose to resign, including the special educational needs coordinator, deputy Headteacher and the subsequent acting Headteacher.

I noted an informal breakout in my fieldnotes in which some staff were discussing the differences between three recent Headteachers. It was notable how annoyed the staff were with the original Headteacher's replacement. They reported that the replacement parked in the disabled car parking bay without reason or a special card that indicates a need to, and how obsessed she was with facts, figures and folders. One teaching assistant remembered how the replacement Headteacher seemingly at random asked her 'to do her folders'. If this did happen, it would be a sign of an anti-developmental and unpredictable set of circumstances. It is important to point out that the original Headteacher appeared to be loved by staff at the school, and several staff handed in their notices to follow the head to their new primary school. The time that the original Headteacher was at the school was commonly reflected on as a successful period for the staff and children and a period some members of staff reported that they hoped the school would return to. There also appeared to be a great deal of commitment demonstrated by the staff towards the school and its community at the time of the original Headteacher, and the original Headteacher demonstrated commitment to their staff, even after they left the school.

As the descriptions suggest, the teachers and teaching assistants recalled that that the period after the original Headteacher left was challenging. A key finding from this research highlights how the growth mindset of the staff members themselves was impacted during this period of instability:

*"You've got to really have that positive growth mindset about coming to this daily, there's things happening every single day, I'm trying to do that*



*for myself and [it's] difficult to try and feed that back into the children ..."*

*(Upper school teaching assistant)*

This belief in the ability to cope during this frenetic and disorganised period was not an isolated case. Other members of the teaching staff also felt that their own growth mindset helped them to make decisions and cope without the typical support they were accustomed to:

*"However, personally, I've needed a lot of growth mindset and resilience that last term where it's been really difficult. Erm, sort of in terms of change of role and things, and actually having to suddenly do things that I never imagined that I had to do and take responsibility for things I never realised I was gonna be responsible for, and haven't really been trained to become a Headteacher, did you know, require a lot of growth mindset ..."*

*(Acting Headteacher)*

The above quotes demonstrate two different ways that staff used growth mindset to cope during the period of instability. Both staff attributed growth mindset for their coping over that stressful period. The teaching assistant described it as something that enabled her to cope emotionally with day-to-day difficulties, while the acting Headteacher attributed her growth mindset to the success of her learning how to become a Headteacher. This attribution is coherent with the socio-cognitive paradigm that growth mindset sits within as this demonstrates that teachers see the development of growth mindset as a particular trait that can support them. However, this is recognised in the context of external supports and resources being weakened.

#### 3.4.4 Growth mindset is useful for those with resources

This sub-theme highlights the benefit the acting Headteacher attributed to growth mindset when taking on their new role. They reported to have understood their development and learning as an example of growth mindset working, while also presenting the use of resources as demonstrating growth mindset practices. The acting Headteacher attributed how her own growth mindset helped her to successfully learn the skills of being a Headteacher:

*“I’ve had to use my own growth mindset, to learn a new skill set, and this has been a whole new skill set because I’ve not gone and done a professional qualification for headship. I’ve not been training for this like heads would be.” (Acting Headteacher)*

This teacher attributes her own growth mindset in the context of lacking the traditional educational structures to learning how to become a Headteacher. To overcome this, the acting Headteacher went on to describe identifying and configuring the available and necessary structures that helped her in the transition of learning the role of a Headteacher:

*“But, I’ve been quite surprised at how I’ve been able to do some bits of that [headship duties] because I’ve just had to, it hasn’t been a choice. So, in that sense, it’s just been learned, and I suppose then you look around and you look at your resources and you look, and you say what do I need to do to be able to help me do this role ... and I suppose that’s what we’re trying to train the kids to do all the time, isn’t it. We’re trying to train them to look around them to say: ‘What do I need for me to be able to do what I*

*need to do?’ Because we’re training kids now to do jobs that we can’t even imagine what they’re going to be.” (Acting Headteacher)*

What is unclear is the importance of growth mindset in the acting Headteacher’s claim of using growth mindset to learn a new skill set. The acting Headteacher described being forced into being the acting Headteacher and then describes a first phase in scaffolding the knowledge necessary to carry out the role. She then went on to explain in more detail how she went about learning the skills needed:

*“So, you know I got dumped in this job and thought: ‘What resources have I got to help me?’ So I started looking round thinking: ‘I could use that, I could use that, I could use that, I can read up on this, I can buy that book, I can ask that person, I can go to this school, I can observe, I can use other people around me, the deputy head is really good at those things, the PSA is really good at that. I’m just noticing that such a body is really good at that I’m going to annoy that person and get what skills I can from them or whatever.’ And it’s the same with the kids we want them to develop the skills.” (Acting Headteacher)*

Here, the acting Headteacher explained that to build the competencies and learn the role she had to develop a complex configuration of resources that were unique to her. Although the acting Headteacher attributed her own growth mindset, or using her growth mindset, growth mindset alone was only a part of this configuration. The complex structures came together to guide and develop her identity as an acting Headteacher. The reported experience of this teacher was viewed as a preferential way to train in the practices associated with being a Headteacher (Zhang and Brundrett, 2010).

What is important is that although growth mindset was attributed to a successful development in competencies by the teachers, what appeared to be more important was the socio-cultural world which the acting Headteacher existed in. This means that the teacher had the necessary resources in her system to access, such as relationships she could depend on for advice. The learning the acting Headteacher described was experiential and relevant to their working context and development. In contrast to children, who were observed to be taught a narrow curriculum of mostly maths and English, the acting Headteacher's learning was relevant to her role.

#### 3.4.5 Growth mindset, choice, and self-responsibility

This theme demonstrates the conflicting nature of how the acting Headteacher understood the use and conceptualisation of growth mindset in their own personal life. The theme of choice and self-responsibility appeared to be a key conceptualisation of growth mindset for the acting Headteacher. Unlike the lack of choice when learning how to be a Headteacher and 'using' her growth mindset to do so, the acting Headteacher viewed the making of choices as key to demonstrating a growth mindset, she referred to the term 'choice' in the context of children and herself making choices on seventeen occasions in the interview. This conflicted with her making a choice not to become a Headteacher, which was not conflated with having a growth mindset. The acting Headteacher felt able to prove growth mindset working as she drew on her resources and learned the skills necessary for her role, thus attributing growth mindset to helping her cope. However, the acting Headteacher attributed growth mindset to her choice-making behavior, and this adds a different dimension to her understanding and application of growth mindset. The acting Headteacher said:

*“Yeah, it [growth mindset] definitely has made an impact ’cos I think people have had to go back to those values of resilience and everything we’re trying to train the kids to do, you know, you take responsibility, this is how I’ve thought of it, you are responsible for your own choice ultimately.” (Acting Headteacher)*

This is an important finding as it demonstrates a link between the macrosystem, the application and the understanding of growth mindset. The mantras of choice, self-responsibility and resilience are the discourses of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015) and proliferate both the observational and interview data. During my time making field notes, I noticed how frequent the word ‘choice’ was used with children. I observed children being told they were making ‘poor behavioural choices’ when they did not walk in silence throughout the school. In other instances, within my data there was opposition to the idea that growth mindset thinking could relate to behaviour, here is a segment of an interview with the acting Headteacher:

*I: “[With the influence of growth mindset] so, it sounds like when a child gets stroppy, in the classroom ... and they end up leaving the classroom, that behavioural, that difficult behaviour is seen in a more of a positive light?”*

*AH: “Erm, not seeing it in a positive.”*

*I: “I got the sense that they may be a novice in their emotional development.”*

*AH: “Yeah, maybe and we might speak to the children about that, but we still wouldn’t accept that as a reasonable choice, but it gives a framework you need to improve at taking feedback for example. Because if someone*

*hasn't come over and said: 'You spelt that wrong, you need to copy that out a couple of times to learn it, and actually that is a tricky word because lots of adults spell that wrong, but here's the rule for that rule or that spelling pattern.' Yeah we might explain it to them like that, we say 'one of your targets', 'what I'm hoping we'll move towards next year', whoever takes it on, is that the children will have their own personal development targets linked to growth mindset, you know, so that might, you're a novice at actually taking feedback, but to get better at your learning you have to be able to take feedback better, so I'm hoping that will."*

Here, the teacher provided only a partial answer to my query rather than exploring my reflection of how I understood growth mindset based on the conceptualisation they presented. On other occasions, the mantras of choice progressed to the point where pupils could 'choose' to do better at school:

*"You just have to have that conversation once and link it with the growth mindset theory of you can make your own choices, sensible behaviour choices you can concentrate on your work and therefore do better in school."* (Teacher)

When children behave well, teachers considered them making good behavioural choices and were rewarded with Dojo points, but they isolated them when they made bad behaviour choices by asking them to sit on a carpet or by sending them to the staff room. Other times, teachers would discuss what options they had available to them when working with more vulnerable children. At one point, I noted that a teacher and a temporary special educational needs coordinator did not have the power to make choices that would meet that child's needs, and this was something which was a pattern for children. The language of

choice was omnipresent across numerous activities and context within the school, and therefore within the nested systems that impact on the development of all in that school system. A frequent goal of early-year teachers was to train children to be the ideal of 'self-responsible learner that made good behaviour choices. It seemed that teachers felt that children could 'choose' to use their growth mindset in class and 'choose' to be resilient, or equally, they could choose to be naughty and choose not to cope. For anything contrary to an acceptable rational decision, the child was deemed to make an inappropriate choice. This inappropriate choice had some form of sanction by emotion (teachers telling children they were 'sad' about the behaviour they displayed), physical (being removed from a classroom and placed in isolation) or material (not receiving Dojo points). Therefore, the dominant discourse across the system was that of choice and self-responsibility, and this was something managed throughout the school on multiple levels and in multiple systems. In this example, the acting Headteacher distilled growth mindset to an appreciation that 'you are responsible for your choice ultimately'.

There appears to be something almost irrefutable to the acting Headteacher's claim of people and children being ultimately responsible for their choices. Nonetheless, there was an appreciation in the acting Headteacher's own life that they did not have choice when taking on the role of acting Headteacher, but they demonstrated the positive impact of growth mindset. There was also an appreciation that other members of staff did not have choices available to them. However, even with this contradiction, by following the Headteacher's meaning of making growth mindset an understanding that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own choices, the impact growth mindset had on teachers was significant. This Headteacher, along with six other members of staff, decided to leave the school at the end of the summer term, while I was in the school collecting data. The

acting Headteacher emphasised her position through the language of choice and explained that she made choices to leave:

*“[Talking about choice to children] made a difference, you know, everything that was going on in school made it really really difficult. Like that last term I’ve now chosen to apply to work elsewhere – so you know, that is a choice that I have made at the time because I know the structure in September. I’m aware of where the school is going, although we’ve come out of this other side, ultimately isn’t for me. So, but I’m lucky because I’m in a position to make choices, erm, and sometimes you don’t have a choice about things and there will be some staff here who feel they have less choice, maybe teaching assistants who can’t travel to go and work in other places or whatever. So, in that difficult term when people felt they couldn’t work under that style of leadership maybe they didn’t feel like they had choices, but those people who did feel like they had choices knew that ultimately rather than sitting and moaning about your job, whining about the situation in school, you could actually go and do something about it.” (Acting Headteacher)*

From the acting Headteachers perspective, the use of a growth mindset led to an understanding that individuals are ultimately responsible for your own choices. However, utilising growth mindset to make such choices using a growth mindset appeared to be a privilege. This is because those without the ability to be fully responsible for themselves were unable to be impacted by teaching in growth mindset or by their own growth mindset. The perspective of the acting Headteacher could hold some validity when we look at some similar examples from the literature on growth mindset and performance. Warren et al.



(2019) demonstrated that growth mindset does not buffer the educational attainment of children who might lack the power to be fully responsible for themselves. They found that children who receive free school meals or those registered as having a special educational need did not benefit from having a growth mindset in an academic context. Children that require free school meals or those with a special educational need could be seen as having their choices limited, either through limited family finances to enable opportunity or in the struggle with the expected processes of learning. This study highlights the importance of external support for this group of children by means of appropriate adjustments. Likewise, in the context of the current research, some teachers could not move to a different school unless they had the external support to do so.

The value of growth mindset as a psychological characteristic compared to other important structures can be brought into question. The acting Headteacher recognised that external structures are key to both decision making, the ability to make choices and the availability of choices. Therefore, the impact of growth mindset in this context is perhaps only possible where genuine choice is available. But the data also tells a story of teaching assistants that are passionate about their local area and making a difference to their community by working at the school.

This suggests that having a growth mindset may be insignificant for these teaching assistants in their decision-making, as their professional identity within the community is crucial. For some, the impact of the development of growth mindset was reported to have the greatest impact and the experience of developing growth mindset went on to provide support for some teaching staff.

*“I think using the language personally for me worked, I was at the gym actually, and I was on the treadmill, and I thought: ‘I can’t go anymore, I*

*can't do it,' and I thought: 'I can't do it yet,' I couldn't run for more than four minutes, at a certain pace, and I was giving up , but I can't do it yet, and I had a word with myself and I can, I can run for longer [laughter]. You don't feel defeatist within yourself, you just flip the words around in your head, am I making sense or am I waffling?" (Teaching assistant)*

Some teachers, such as the acting Headteacher, did not have a strong connection to the community. Their professional identity was not closely connected with the respect they received from the community. Therefore, the memberships of different communities seemed to be vital in the decision making of those that decided to leave the school and those that decided to stay. The concept of growth mindset seems to be a factor in many different decisions that people make. It also appears to be a concept that can be understood as both something that 'is' within someone but also understood as a set of practices and external structures to practice within.

### 3.4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the development and engagement of approaches could be as important to the experience as the approach itself. Teaching assistants appreciated being involved and felt that they were shaping policy and practices in the school. This period was reflected on fondly, partly because the original Headteacher was in post. There was a sense that staff felt supported and had trust in their leadership and the way original Headteacher organised the development and implementation of growth mindset across the school. As part of the processes of developing growth mindset, a particular aspect of this was the creation of reflective spaces where educators across the school could meet and share knowledge and experiences. This experience was perceived to be important and,

based on the perceptions of teachers and teaching assistants in the school, these practices developed a robust learning community.

The second sub-theme was the personal impact that learning about growth mindset had on them. Some teachers perceived the benefits of growth mindset that supported them through a period of crises at the school. While others, notably the acting Headteacher, spoke extensively on the notion of choice and self-responsibility. The acting Headteacher perceived their action of deciding to leave the school as an example of growth mindset choice-making behaviour. However, a theme underlying this suggested that growth mindset, as perceived by the acting Headteacher, would be more beneficial to those that had choices.

## Chapter 4

### Contribution to Knowledge, Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion

#### 4.1 Contributions to knowledge

I'll begin this section with a personal reflection to provide context for the contributions to knowledge of this research. As I set out on this research endeavour some five years ago, I never knew how doing this research would change my perceptions of the social sciences in general.

Initially, my degree of critical analysis was minimal. My interpretation of growth mindset theory and its possible applications, as my supervisors will confirm, was positive. I thought the model was effective and sent important messages to educationalists and coaches working with young people about effective methods to give guidance and feedback. Coming from a counselling background, the idea of not labelling, focusing on the "present activities" activities or making a clearly evidenced and considered acknowledgement of development was good practice. Research in implicit theories of intelligence provide knowledge that supported practices in counselling and coaching I was familiar with. For this reason, I was very encouraged by growth mindset theory and looked forward to carrying out research on how it was implemented within a school setting. However, much changed from the point when I made the decision to explore growth mindset theory in practice in a real-world setting, and this is important to bear in mind before reading these contributions to knowledge. In this study, the new Headteacher stopped the development of growth mindset practices and several teachers left the school to follow the original Headteacher to her new school. This meant that when I entered the field to begin collecting data the school was in a state of flux. As there was a period of uncertainty this clearly had an influence on

the data that was collected. My early anticipation of seeing cutting-edge growth mindset practices informed by evidence and research was not initially obvious. I had not expected the influence of discourses around choice and self-responsibility to be so dominant around the school. But what I did not know was that these discourses were perceived to be linked to a real-world understanding of growth mindset theory in practice.

Teachers and teaching assistants argued that that growth mindset theory in practice was important for those children perceived to be lacking support at home or within the classroom. As such, a key contribution to knowledge from this research is that through the process of researching growth mindset, the research highlights the importance of teaching children self-care skills from an early age. The narrative of becoming a self-responsible learner starts as soon as they arrived at the nursery and was reinforced for those who transitioned to secondary school. Growth mindset theory was conceptualised by teachers to be the tool that children could use to become self-responsible in a community context in a community where teachers did not necessarily prioritise self-responsibility. Teachers perceived that when pupils understood the tenets of growth mindset, they would become able to make the right decisions and cope with difficulties independently. Because of this perceived ability for children to be able to cope by themselves there is a potential for a barrier to inter-subjectivity. For example, teachers may falsely assume that a pupil is OK and can solve their problem without some support from the school. However, the mismatch in understanding may lead to a child not getting support and potentially not coming forward for support because of assumptions that they needed to show themselves as self-responsible.

It appeared in the data that the staff developed a psychologised view of the children, but they also developed a confidence in manipulating thought processes so that children could

change their thinking by themselves. This was rooted in the pupils' ability to make informed, rational choices because of learning to develop a growth mindset within themselves. The entrepreneurial discourse was found to be evident in examples where autonomy, progress and choice were highlighted alongside growth mindset ideas. Additionally, growth mindset was developed as a means to increase levels of aspiration in the children. As mentioned previously, the local community was perceived to be unsupportive and generalised statements about the community being unemployed for four generations was seen as a reason that pupils at the school lacked both aspiration and growth mindset as an individual difference.

The implementation of growth mindset theory in practice was incongruent with growth mindset principals at times. For example, a character-based approach was perceived to have been inspired by growth mindset theory principles. However, this approach created fixed ideals for children to be modelled against and was mainly operationalised through an online 'smart' merit board system. This merit board system known as 'Class Dojo' was perceived to create a hyper-competitive environment that enabled teachers to 'get children to do what they want them to'. Classroom observations demonstrated that Class Dojo was used to bribe children to behave as the teacher wanted, while also forming a key part of a rewards system to mould character. This is important because it demonstrates that even when spending time learning and developing growth mindset theory into practice, schools can introduce inconsistent platforms that go against the theory of growth mindset. It is also important because it demonstrates that wider systems and culture can play a significant part in influencing how interventions are practiced. Even if it means that the basis of growth mindset is lost in the platform used to encourage it.

It was found that the staff had a heightened sense of good and bad language to use in front of children and when giving feedback. This was important for two reasons. Firstly, it emphasised a view that parents had a problematic effect on their children. This formed part of a wider discourse of parent-blaming that was prevalent at the school, while there was a distinct lack in the perception and understanding of structural issues that impacted on families and children. Secondly, growth mindset informed language appeared to become manualised within the community. Teachers and teaching assistants discussed developing key phrases that they would use time and again, so the 'correct' language was used. These key phrases were used in the context that the wrong language would create deficits in children that would restrict them in their lives.

Reflections from teachers on the process of developing growth mindset theory into practice were roundly positive; however, this was in large part due to the influence of the original Headteacher who the staff trusted. This is important because it demonstrates that when developing growth mindset, and perhaps any other approach that takes a whole-school approach, leadership and stability in the school are key.

My study demonstrates that the quality of professional structures that promote professional development is important to staff taking part in the research. In terms of growth mindset, this research demonstrates that consistent reflective practice builds complexity, but also a shared understanding of among those involved. This is important because it demonstrates that even when a significant change happened in the school, some staff hold onto those practices. Teachers and teaching assistants enjoyed being a part of developing and shaping practices within the school.

Further contributions to knowledge were found on the personal experiences and awareness of how 'their own' developed growth mindset helped staff members. This demonstrated

that, as an unintended consequence of developing and learning about growth mindset, members of staff found support by 'using their own growth mindset'.

A key contribution to knowledge was the conceptualisation of growth mindset as a person being responsible for their own choice within this context. This understanding of growth mindset in the literature demonstrates the importance of real-world research. The responsabilisation for choice is problematic for those unable to make choices and progresses a notion that a person is to blame for the decision they made. I argue that this creates a route for prejudicial views about vulnerable children and communities that can further entrench physical and mental isolation from potentially important and supportive systems around them.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the educational community's understanding of how growth mindset theory in practice may be implemented within the context of neoliberalism. This was shown prominently within Chapter 3, Section 1, on understanding why growth mindset was implemented at the school. Here, 'growth mindset', the psychology in practice, could not be removed from the wider neoliberal structures that informed educational pursuits for teachers and teaching at the school. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used to explain how the wider macrosystem nests all of the teaching practices within the school. For example, this led to teachers and teaching assistants understanding growth mindset as a tool to develop self-responsible learners that make 'good' behavioural choices.

This research confirms of what the originators of growth mindset theory were concerned about. According to anecdotal testimony from Carol Dweck (2017) suggests that real-world applications of her theory did not work because of teacher misunderstandings. In her example, Dweck points out that growth mindset messaging can be joined with aspirational



discourses that hold empty promises and are not helpful. Dweck believes that this discourse would be detrimental to a child because they then become responsible for their own failure. The findings in this thesis suggest that these fears are well founded as it demonstrates that similar neoliberal contexts do create a mechanism to making children self-responsible for their own learning, and importantly growth mindset theory in practice is used as a tool to do that. The influence of growth mindset theory in its most idealistic way appeared not to have selective influence, but rather being coherent throughout the school's practices.

The link between growth mindset theory and neoliberal discourses is not new. In research with children, Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021) explored the interaction between the neoliberal context and growth mindset practices through interviews. Their important piece of work identified a particular lived experience of children's lives in schools and how, over time, in the chronosystem, children were coerced into a 'cruel and cynical fiction' that created a common sense where their basic needs are replaced with neoliberal needs of performance and control. In their work, children were led to implicitly believe themselves to be self-responsible for their failure to make academic progress and, as such, Accepted the imposed penalties, such as lunchtime detention, as necessary to make up for their shortcomings. Typically, these punishments would be given to children for misbehaving, but in this instance, children were punished for not learning fast enough. The current study extends this area of knowledge by interviewing teachers and observing their practices within a neoliberal setting. Because the macrosystem was dominated by neoliberal culture, a socio-cultural position argues that any intervention that aims to 'empower' children is rationalised and evaluated within neoliberal norms. It is the macro-level influences that guide what society perceives as the main aims of learning and ideal learner subjectivities (Bradbury, 2019). It is the attitudes and ideologies of culture that informs the use of

psychological technologies (Rose, 2000), such as growth mindset. Reay (2013) noted that education has been reinvented as an aspirational project for the self, particularly for communities perceived as lacking in aspirations by policy-makers.. Growth mindset theory in practice is perceived to provide a mechanism for this discourse of the aspirational self to be realised. The lack of aspiration within these communities maintains a dominant discourse; however, this research found, in extension to Reay (2013), that communities can be perceived as being dominated by 'fixed mindsets'. The implication is that fixed mindset communities lack aspiration, and therefore they will never better themselves through upward social mobility.

Carol Dweck (2017) has a more holistic vision for the use of growth mindset theory in practice that seems separated from interventionism, the need of strict protocols and consistency necessary for reliable and valid empirical research. She argues that schools should develop growth mindset environments that have taken the learnings from growth mindset research and adapted them for real-world contexts. However, within a neoliberal context, the key lessons of creating a process-focused, anti-performance space that is forgiving of failure, that growth mindset research identifies the possibilities of, would challenge the neoliberal common-sense.

This is particularly striking when the chronological order of the integration of growth mindset practices in the school is considered. This thesis demonstrates that growth mindset ideas can be understood through individualised and hyper-competitive character-based education, which is at odds with growth mindset theory. This research does not explore how growth mindset was perceived in a different context where structures were supportive of the integration of growth mindset theory. This comparison is key to this research, as while there was a previously concerted effort to implement growth mindset over a sustained

period, this period was not accessible to the study. Therefore, this research shows how growth mindset could augment over time; the chronosystem is key.

The chronosystem is particularly prominent as teachers and teaching assistants reflect on growth mindset experience as something that happened in the past, rather than something that is done continuously. A reason for this was the changing of Headteachers, when the beloved Headteacher that initially introduced growth mindset was replaced by one that had a different agenda. One teaching assistant lamented this loss and hoped for the school to prioritise growth mindset and return to a similar culture as before.

By appreciating the changes in the school, the study develops a frame of reference that would be lost that cannot contextualise research more fully. This research shows that growth mindset in practice is not a panacea as it became reappropriated and potentially phased out by practices that were more coherent with the dominant neoliberal culture within the macrosystem. These practices include performance groupings, the narrowing of the curriculum and excluding underperforming pupils from lessons and their education.

A key finding of this research is the furthering of knowledge in how growth mindset is used at a 'real' theoretical level. The analysis in this thesis argues that growth mindset was used as what Foucault would call a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 2008) or what Cruikshank (1999) would term a 'technology of agency'. This technology of agency serves at an unconscious level to remove the responsibility of academic progress away from teacher and on to children. As such, this responsibilised the children for the progress of their learning because they were perceived to have a growth mindset personality. This fits succinctly with neoliberal ideals of the self-determining self, or as Foucault would term the 'entrepreneur of the self' (Foucault, 2004, p. 232, cited in Christiaens, 2020). I argue that the 'real' existence of this technology of agency creates an implied psychological contract whereby

the child exchanges good or better progress in exchange for a growth mindset that the school has taught them. This psychological contract distances a teacher from their pupil's education due to the aim of the pupil to become a self-responsible learner.

This psychological distancing is important for teachers for two main reasons. Firstly, the teacher is psychologically defended against the blame for a child not making progress.

Secondly, the teacher feels less shame for spending more time with children that do not fit into the neoliberal classroom, such as a traumatised child or a child with specific learning difficulties and disabilities. As such, the construction of growth mindset in this particular setting creates a particular frame that enables a defence against the teachers upsetting emotions around fears of persecution from performative structures, and their guilt of not satisfying their needs for not providing support for more able children.

The strength of this research is that unlike traditional, positivist research in growth mindset, the context that it had been implemented is explored. This research can be used to offer insights into the way growth mindset interventions interact with the socio-cultural world in which it is placed. The findings in this piece of work are not generalisable, but they may well be transferable and be transferable to the way growth mindset is understood in some schools and by some educationalists.

## 4.2 Limitations of the research

Due to my previous position in the school, the fieldwork was only focused on the early years. As such, I cannot generalise on the school as a whole. However, as all of the teachers in the school learned growth mindset, I could surmise that the practices being observed in the nursery were also being carried out in other school years. Had I not already had a recent

role in the school, I would have liked to observe growth mindset practices in multiple years to compare and contrast the practices within the whole-school setting.

As Chapter 3 highlighted, throughout the course of data collection there was a management change in the school, meaning I had to renegotiate access. While the new Headteacher was happy for me to continue my research, I felt the dynamic among staff had shifted, especially because some staff had left over the summer break. As such, I felt that the data might have been impacted by the change in focus of practices at the school that came with the new Headteachers. Due to the change of management and staff over the course of my data collection, some of the teaching staff felt disenfranchised, which may have further impacted their engagement with my study.

This study sought to explore the implementation of growth mindset in a primary school, but, as the findings chapter highlighted, teaching staff spoke in detail about the role parents play. As such, this research would have been strengthened by including the voice of parents to understand their understanding of how they construct growth mindset and growth mindset theory in practice, and what the school expected of them in implementing it home. It would have also been useful to learn more of their perceptions of the school and how they believed they were perceived by the school.

Finally, like most qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalised to wider populations. However, this research does begin to offer a new insight into why schools might choose to use growth mindset practices, and it can offer insights into how this may influence how teachers perceive children and families.

### 4.3 Recommendations for practice, policy, and research

This research has developed knowledge on the implementation of growth mindset approaches within a school setting, in addition to knowledge about relationships between schools and families. As such, the following recommendations have been identified based on this study.

#### 4.3.1 Recommendation for educational practice

It is important to establish whether a school should incorporate growth mindset concepts into their teaching and learning strategies. This research shows that the adoption of new practices is intertwined with the broader systems and structures that shape educational principles and practices. It also informs how educationalists evaluate interventions and approaches, such as growth mindset theory-based practices.

Chapter 3, Section 1 of the findings and discussion argues that socio-cultural structures, in particular neoliberalism, can play a major role in how growth mindset theory is perceived and applied. I argued that by adopting a growth mindset theoretical stance in this context promoted a teacher perception of a child isolated from their context. The findings of this research shows that growth mindset can be adopted to serve overarching aims associated with a neoliberal environment, such as a need for a child to work independently without the support of adults. Consequently, this context saw growth mindset theory used as a catalyst within a chosen remedy that mitigated the negative impact of perceived deficits in adult support within a pupil's classroom and family microsystem.

My conclusions do not promote the shift of the governmentality of learning onto children, but they do observe them in practice. This research further explains that growth mindset theory in practice contributes to this process by forming part of the implied psychological contracts that were used in the school.

This theoretical contribution is important as points of provocation that highlights the implied pressures children can face. I recommend that educational settings consider the implications of overarching culture on their practices and how this impacts on children and the formation of psychological contracts in their educational setting.

Researchers like Carol Dweck may also 'turn in their sleep' (Dweck, 2017, p. 216) at the thought of growth mindset theory being reconfigured by new subjectivities, but this is less important than how practices exist within highly competitive spaces that allow for a narrow view of the world. It is how the brand of growth mindset theory is used that can be good or bad, and this is context-dependent.

Growth mindset theory is neither good or bad; science is indifferent to good or bad because it reports on what is objective. It is always up to the reader of those objective facts to determine what is good or bad depending on the chronosystem, or life course, that frames their development. Growth mindset theory is a theory that has been glorified by researchers, such as Dweck and Yeager, over the years, and as such, it has developed a particularly strong narrative for those practitioners that want to implement it.

A teacher in this study remarked that growth mindset was a 'real thing that has been proved by science all over the world'. This version of the growth mindset theory presented by the teacher also evaluated the theory as beneficial because it allows children to choose to solve their own problems and cope with frustrations independently. This is not something that Carol Dweck would perceive as growth mindset theory in action, but it does demonstrate how real-world interpretations of theory can be evaluated to suit the psychological needs of teachers working within a neoliberal context.

Additionally, it was found that teachers used constructs of growth mindset theory to describe the surrounding community. This community was perceived as having a fixed

mindset and was therefore deemed to have a psychological deficit. Little positive reflections were made towards parents throughout the study, and growth mindset theory in practice appeared to create a new path of least resistance to perpetuate prejudice to the community. As such, I think it would be important for teachers to be trained in social justice and critical pedagogy to prevent the alienation of the community.

However, it is important to remember that I argue that the macrosystem and chronosystem are driving the aims of growth mindset theory. While it is coherent for a psychological theory of individual differences to be heavily used in a context where individual virtues are prized, the underpinning messages of growth mindset theory could be used to support aspects of relational practices.

Taking growth mindset theory-informed practice seriously would require a systemic change, not just practice change. This research shows that the context that growth mindset is nested within is more important than isolated moments where teachers praise mistakes being made. The gap between growth mindset theory and a performative education can be changed by schools adopting more relational approaches of working with children. By developing spaces where children are not routinely perceived to be in deficit of something, a relational approach would allow a space for children to contribute meaningfully among their peers and teachers. Rather than a child being positioned in a highly competitive space dominated by a Class Dojo merit-based scoring system (see Chapter 3, Section 2), children could be encouraged to develop their capabilities in relation to and not in comparison to their peers and teachers. It would be within a relational space where meaningful explorations in learning could allow children to have the ability to make 'choices' and experience a shared responsibility. However, children had limited options, as my findings showed a narrowness in the curriculum that was symptomatic of a neoliberal setting.



Chapter 3, Section 2 illustrates how growth mindset theory in practice demonstrates a forgiving stance towards children is important. This research also shows that this forgiving discourse was in support of education, developed relationships between teachers and children and generated a sense of joy and relaxation in the classroom. Although this was something perceived as being a specifically growth mindset theory-informed practice, it is also a practice that promotes acceptance and forgiving subjectivities within children. This kind and forgiving subjectivity within an unforgiving and neoliberal classroom would be helpful for teachers and pupils that struggle within a neoliberal classroom. However, it is important to recognise that this may conflict within a system that clearly does not view failure as something to be celebrated. This could create another cynical fiction (see Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan, 2021b), whereby children perceive this as inauthentic scripted messages.

#### 4.3.2 Recommendation for policy

Practices are nested within the structures of policy. Chapter 1 contextualised the research by highlighting the neoliberal policy context and framing growth mindset theory in practice within the governing policy to understand the macro-level influences on schools, teachers and pupils.

The policies that directly relate to the promotion and enabling of growth mindset in schools, such as the character education framework (DfE, 2019) target social and emotional learning and have their roots in behavioural science and psychological forms of expertise. In addition, the quantitative epistemology of these approaches also fit within the tiered medical model of research hierarchies. Growth mindset theory is coherent with this

framework, thus, enabling the promotion of growth mindset theory in practice across the United Kingdom.

Secondly, growth mindset theory is coherent with social and emotional learning aims within schools. The Education Endowment Foundation, the government-funded authority on educational research, guidance (EEF, 2019), on improving social and emotional learning in primary schools is provides advice on improving deficits in psychology and ‘relationship skills’. The focus on social and emotional learning being ‘skills’ is coherent with the discourse found in throughout this study.

There is a fundamental problem with integrating growth mindset theory into schools within the current policy framework in the UK. It provides an alternative narrative to the importance of high-stakes examination and excessive performance accountability in schools. Growth mindset theory argues against a performance culture dominated by individual assessment through measurement, which is the dominant narrative in education. As such, policy makers should develop policies that is coherent with practice. In the case of the current study, it would appear that elements of growth mindset practice were still being used during the data collection; however, at a systemic level. growth mindset theory had no influence on the knowledge that informed new policy (See Chapter 3, Section 2).

I argue that growth mindset theory in practice cannot be effectively implemented within a neoliberal context due to the fundamental incoherencies with the underlying theories of performance versus anti-performance. Aspects of growth mindset theory in practice are coherent, such as an anti-relational approach that does not view pupils and teachers as inter-dependent, as shown in the lack of research into how these spaces influence the teacher–child relationship. This is not something a neoliberal evaluation is interested in.

Although a more relational approach with a broader curriculum could be more coherent for

a child being told to make educational choices. It could also be more coherent with the experience of a child looking to exercise their growth mindset in relation with and supported by teachers.

There needs to be sympathy with teachers that recognise that the importance of growth mindset for children who do not get their adequate support. The issue is rooted in wider societal issues and surrounding state education funding in the United Kingdom. These teachers were aware of the lack of support for children with specific learning difficulties and those experiencing trauma and neglect. These teachers were encouraging of children developing a growth mindset because 'their hands were tied' with taking care of children whose additional needs demanded their attention (Chapter 3, Section 1). Teachers want immediate solutions to wider systemic problems of lack of investment of resources after twelve years of austerity. However, when this lack of funding intersects with an accountability agenda focused on schools and then teacher performance, teachers fear children not making progress as it could have a detrimental impact to their career. As such, this research shows that growth mindset theory in practice could offer teachers some perceived hope that unsupported children can make progress. However, growth mindset in practice within an under-resourced neoliberal classroom is only a short-term response to entrenched systemic problems.

#### 4.3.3 Recommendations for further research

More qualitative research is needed on the implementation of growth mindset theory.

More real-world research on Growth mindset theory in practice is needed to understand not just how growth mindset theory has been implemented in different settings, but also to understand how these different contexts develop understandings of growth mindset.

The reasons why growth mindset theory is integrated in practice are context-dependent. As such, qualitative research carried out on growth mindset in this regard would not only deepen our understanding of how growth mindset theory is constructed in the minds of teachers, but also shed light on contemporary influences specific to that educational context.

Qualitative research on growth mindset could also be expanded to the perceptions of other stakeholders. This research demonstrates that growth mindset theory in practice can create a new path of least resistance for classism. Because of the impact this has had on teachers' perceptions of parents, I recommended that further research be carried out on how parents perceive growth mindset and their relationship with teachers, the school and other parents at schools where growth mindset theory is utilised in practice.

This research has highlighted contemporary and unanticipated findings that warrant further investigation. Notably, there is a need for a thorough research-informed exploration of how low socio-economic status families are perceived and portrayed within policy, media, social media and literature. This research would contribute to the discourse on social justice in times when income inequality and poverty is increasing.

More research is also needed on the framing of self-responsible learners and how that is enacted by teachers in practice, but also thorough qualitative evaluation of how these discourses influence social and emotional development of children and young people and their perceptions of relationships with teachers and adults in school.

#### 4.4 Overall Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the implementation of growth mindset in a primary school in the North-West of England because there was limited qualitative research on growth

mindset, particularly in a situation where the school developed growth mindset independent of the researcher or an intervention-based piece of research. At the time of the study design, research had not explored the implementation of growth mindset in a real-world setting, particularly from a critical perspective. The majority of studies carried out aligned themselves with a positive view of growth mindset and sought to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of objective measures or evaluate how well participants understood and practiced growth mindset.

Chapter 1 provided a review of the literature that sought to explore and contextualise growth mindset research. The review gave background information on how growth mindset is conceptualised and prominent studies that have informed the use of growth mindset. The literature places growth mindset theory within a performance-focused educational context. This was important, because this section highlighted the philosophical differences between the learning of research in growth mindset, and the context growth mindset practices are situated in. From a socio-ecological position, I argued that these differences are incompatible as the overarching culture that growth mindset practices are nested within are ultimately influenced by a competitive marketised education system in which high-stakes testing is used to demonstrate accountability. The literature review went on to explore how growth mindset is practiced in schools where key ideas of learning from mistakes and the importance of process-orientated praise are highlighted. Finally, the literature review examined how the literature understands forces of influence on growth mindset practices. This includes the influence of parents not giving growth mindset feedback to their children, individual teacher mindsets related to the implementation of growth mindset and the perceived value-coherent school systems. This literature review is important because it highlighted gaps in knowledge related to the implementation of

growth mindset in a real-world setting, which influenced the development of the research aims.

Chapter 2 began by presenting the overarching research aim, which was to explore the implementation of growth mindset in a real-world setting. Subsequent research questions sought to explore 'Why was growth mindset implemented?', 'How was growth mindset implemented?' and 'What are the structural influences of the implementation?'. To do this, I carried out a mixture of interviews (fifteen), focus groups (two), observations and informal conversations within an ethnographic methodology. My research was conducted in a critical realist paradigm that utilised a socio-ecological ontological position. This allowed me to consider systemic and structural influences on perceptions and practices within the school. I initially immersed myself in the data inductively with thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), before carrying out a template analysis (King, 2012). The template analysis was a pragmatic approach while working with diverse real-world data. The re-analysis of the data through iterative and inductive processes allowed for a rigorous development of substantive themes and ideas.

Chapter 3 presented the findings and combined discussion. On answering the question 'Why was growth mindset implemented?', the teachers perceived a need for children to be self-responsible learners. I interpreted growth mindset as a technology of agency (Cruikshank, 1999) that was perceived to enable children to become self-responsible learners that made good behavioural choices. By understanding growth mindset, children were perceived to be able to manage better by themselves, both academically and emotionally. Teachers perceived a need for children to become self-responsible learners for two reasons: because of issues within their parents and the wider community; and because teachers could not spend enough time with those children that could make good or better progress. I argue

that within the context of a neoliberal education system, the use of a growth mindset to create self-responsible learners implicitly encourages teachers to see children as responsible for their own academic progress.

On answering the question 'How was growth mindset implemented?', I analysed the data in terms of how the growth mindset was used to develop the self-responsible learners. In this I found that teachers adopted a psychological stance towards children. As such, they understood part of their role was to support children to change their thought processes. Growth mindset and the self-responsible learner was often couched in an entrepreneurial discourse that encouraged children to make the right choices so that they could be more successful in life. I argue that this discourse simplified the circumstances of the children and implicitly blamed the child for failure, even though they may have been victims of wider systemic issues. Teachers demonstrated the typical mantras of learning from mistakes commonly found in other growth mindset literature. However, other practices linked growth mindset with incongruent approaches that promoted competition and a performance focus. Growth mindset was taught with the use of specially developed characters that were perceived to demonstrate a growth mindset. These characters represented different desired characteristics that were operationalised in a merit-based reward system on a platform called Class Dojo. Finally, growth mindset was found to be communicated in key phrases, so that teachers could ensure that growth mindset messages were being presented to pupils and through the modelling of growth mindset.

The third question, 'What structural influences influenced the implementation of growth mindset?', was answered throughout the thesis; but more directly this question within Section 3, which looked at the impact of implementing growth mindset on staff. This section highlighted the importance of the learning environment where approaches to education

were being developed. Teaching staff perceived the use of an inclusive developmental space where anyone could contribute to the practice-development as beneficial. Importantly, the leadership was viewed to be crucial in the development on growth mindset. After the original Headteacher left, the developmental structures, supporting engagement and reflection of professional practice were removed from the school. Teaching staff reflected on the difficult period under a new Headteacher who was subsequently removed from her position. Teaching staff reflected that they benefited from learning about growth mindset as it helped them cope with the disruption. Other members of staff, notably the acting Headteacher, cited her own growth mindset as being a major influence on her performance and learning the role of Headteacher but also making choices that would see her leave the school.

This research does not aim to generalise the implementation of growth mindset, as it is an inquiry that examines a single school. However, it is hoped that some of the issues highlighted will be transferable in other settings and provide interesting provocations in debates around the utility and unintended consequences of implementing a growth mindset approach, but in other similar educational interventions.



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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1**

#### **Information sheet and loco parentis consent form for Headteacher**

Project title: Inquiry into teaching and learning practices influenced by growth mindset approaches to teaching of early years and primary school settings.

#### **INVITATION**

This is an invitation to allow me to carry out an inquiry into teaching and learning that has been influenced by growth mindset approaches used and developed in early year and key stage 1 environment. I have been counselling for three years in the school with Place2Be and currently working towards a PhD at Huddersfield University. My project is supported and guided under the supervision of Prof Barry Percy-Smith and Dr Lynda Turner. The project has been approved by the university ethics committee.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN**

In this study, I will unobtrusively observe teaching and learning practices in your school and when appropriate ask for some clarification on practices. I will start my observations after the Easter break and finish at some point before school breaks for Christmas. Before observations commence, I will let the children in that class what I'll be doing and why I'm there, but also allow them to set the limits of the observations in the ethos of 'Rights Respecting'. This means they know they have the right to ask me to leave the classroom if they would not like to be observed.

I will arrange interviews with teachers and members of staff to learn more about their thoughts on teaching and learning including how they see growth mindset approaches in teaching and learning practice, but also ask about other influences on teaching and learning practice in the school.

Finally, I shall review some school documents that influence the schools teaching, learning and ethos such as teaching and behaviour policies, and inset training.

## **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation. This means that You have the right to terminate my access to your school at any time.

You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.

You have the right to have your questions about the study answered. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, please ask Richard (the researcher) before his observations and interviews commence.

Before observations commence, I will let the children in that class what I'll be doing and why I'm there, but also allow them to set the limits of the observations in the ethos of 'Rights Respecting'. This means they know they have the right to ask me to leave the classroom if they would not like to be observed.

## **BENEFITS AND RISKS**

There are very low risks to this study however there may be benefits from the opportunity to reflect on teaching practice. I will not be assessing practice and not casting judgments on it being right or wrong. My stance is non-judgmental.

## **COST, REIMBURSEMENT AND COMPENSATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY**

The data I collect does not contain any personal information about you except. No one will link the data you provided to the identifying information you supplied.

When your role with this project is complete, transcripts from interviews and observations will be anonymised. From that time, there will be no record that links the information collected from you with any personal data from which you could be identified (e.g., your name, address, email, etc.). Up until the point at which your data have been anonymised, you can decide not to consent to having the information you provided used. Once anonymised, this information may be used in collaboration with other researchers with interests in similar areas such as education and psychology.

Data will be encrypted and stored in a locked cabinet at the university.

Once the study is complete audio recordings will be destroyed.

I plan to use my findings in my thesis, academic publications and conference

### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THIS STUDY**

Barry or Lynda will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact either of them at [b.percy-smith@hud.ac.uk](mailto:b.percy-smith@hud.ac.uk) or [l.turner@hud.ac.uk](mailto:l.turner@hud.ac.uk)

If you want to find out about the final results of this study, you should contact myself on [richard.baron@hud.ac.uk](mailto:richard.baron@hud.ac.uk)

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### Consent Form

Project title: Inquiry into teaching and learning practices influenced by growth mindset approaches to teaching of early years and primary school settings.

By signing below, you are agreeing that: (1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, (2) questions about your schools participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily, (3) anonymised data only may be shared in public data repositories, and (4) you are willing for your school to take part in this voluntary research study voluntarily.

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Headteacher Name (Printed)\*

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Name of School (Print)\*

Headteacher signature\*

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Today's Date

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Name of person obtaining consent (Printed)

Signature of person obtaining consent

*\*Participants wishing to preserve some degree of anonymity may use their initials (from the British Psychological Society Guidelines for Minimal Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research)*

## **Appendix 2**

### **Information sheet and consent form for teachers**

Project title: Inquiry into teaching and learning practices influenced by growth mindset approaches to teaching of early years and primary school settings.

#### **INVITATION**

This is an enquiry into teaching and learning that has been influenced by growth mindset approaches used and developed in early year and key stage 1 environment. I have been counselling for three years in the school with Place2Be and currently working towards a PhD at Huddersfield University. My project is supported and guided under the supervision of Prof Barry Percy-Smith and Dr Lynda Turner. The project has been approved by the university ethics committee.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN**

In this study, I will unobtrusively observe teaching and learning practices in your class and when appropriate ask for some clarification. I will start my observations after the Easter



break and finish at some point before school breaks for Christmas. I will be in the school 3 days per week and speak to you individually to find out when it will be most appropriate to observe your class. Before observations commence, I will let the children know what I'll be doing and, set the limits of the observations in the ethos of 'Rights Respecting'. This means they know they have the right to ask me to leave the classroom if they would not like to be observed at a particular time.

I will arrange around two interviews to learn more about your thoughts on teaching and learning including how you see growth mindset approaches in teaching and learning practice but also ask about other influences on the practice in the school.

Finally, I shall review some school documents that influence the schools teaching, learning and ethos such as teaching and behaviour policies, and inset training.

## **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation. This means that You have the right to terminate an interview at any time or to ask the researcher to leave your classroom while they are observing.

You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.

You have the right to have your questions about the study answered. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, please ask Richard (the researcher) before his observations and interviews commence.

### **BENEFITS AND RISKS**

The risks to this project are very low, however if distress is arising during the research, I will discuss possible avenues of support available to you such as counselling and support available to teachers.

The SENCO teacher has held the information on additional support you can receive.

I will not be assessing practice and not casting judgments on it being right or wrong. My stance is non-judgmental.

### **COST, REIMBURSEMENT AND COMPENSATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary

### **CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY**

The data I collect does not contain any personal information about you except. No one will link the data you provided to the identifying information you supplied.

When your role with this project is complete, transcripts from interviews and observations

will be anonymised. From that time, there will be no record that links the information collected from you with any personal data from which you could be identified (e.g., your name, address, email, etc.). Up until the point at which your data have been anonymised, you can decide not to consent to having the information you provided used. Once anonymised, this information may be used in collaboration with other researchers with interests in similar areas such as education and psychology.

Data will be encrypted and stored in a locked cabinet at the university.

Once the study is complete audio recordings will be destroyed.

I plan to use my findings in my thesis, academic publications and conference

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THIS STUDY**

Barry or Lynda will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact either of them at [b.percy-smith@hud.ac.uk](mailto:b.percy-smith@hud.ac.uk) or [l.turner@hud.ac.uk](mailto:l.turner@hud.ac.uk)

If you want to find out about the final results of this study, you should contact myself on [richard.baron@hud.ac.uk](mailto:richard.baron@hud.ac.uk)

Project title: Inquiry into teaching and learning practices influenced by growth mindset approaches to teaching of early years and primary school settings.

By signing below, you are agreeing that: (1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, (2) questions about your participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily, (3) you are aware of the potential risks (if any), (4) you are taking part in this research study voluntarily (without coercion), and (5) anonymised data only may be shared in public research repositories.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (Printed)\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person obtaining consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person obtaining consent

*\*Participants wishing to preserve some degree of anonymity may use their initials (from the British Psychological Society Guidelines for Minimal Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research)*

## **Appendix 3**

**Interview and focus group questions and prompts**

### **Tell me about school ethos**

- Whole school approach
- Working with super learners
- Working with SEN issues
- Code of conduct
- Behaviour policy

### **Tell me about growth mindset in teaching and in the school in general**

- Examples
- Evaluation
- Perception
- Training
- Development
- Strategy

### **Tell me about the children you teach**

- Strengths
- Difficulties
- Backgrounds
- Learning

**Tell me about teaching and learning development at the school generally over the last few years**

- Initiatives
- Guidelines
- Culture

**Tell me about teaching and learning practice**

- Influences
- With different children
- Whole class
- 1-2-1
- Play
- Code of conduct

**Tell me what influences your teaching**

- Education
- People
- Experiences

- Books
- Management
- Background

**Tell me what pressures you face**

- Targets
- Behaviour
- Progression
- Impact of pressures

**Tell me about your aspirations**

- Learning
- Professional development
- Classroom

**Tell me what works for you**

- Your approach



