

# **HEROIC IMAGINATION PROJECT**

A new way of looking at heroism

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## **Introduction**

The Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) is a non-profit organisation that was created in the United States out of idea of the psychologist Philip Zimbardo, professor emeritus at Stanford University and former president of the American Psychological Association.

HIP has been developing school programmes for many years in order to bring about positive change, not only in the lives of students, but also within their communities. More specifically, on the basis of the results from the many research studies conducted by internationally famous psychologists, these educational programmes provide both students and teachers with a set of tools for better understanding human nature, to counter implicit false beliefs that we hold about ourselves and to better face the phenomena that strongly characterise our era (negative conformism, inaction in the face of emergencies, prejudice and discrimination, just to mention a few).

The project carried out at the "E. Medi" school in Palermo consisted of two programmes through which students were provided with a training to embrace a broader vision of what intelligence really is ("Mindset" program) and to overcome the human tendency to watch and wait in moments of crisis ("Bystander Effect" program). The effectiveness of these educational programmes was assessed via a set of questionnaires administered pre and post intervention.

### **Programme 1: "Mindset"**

*The sample.* The "Mindset" programme, organised by Dr. Clelia Bartoli and Dr. Cristina Siddiolo, took place during school hours and included 74 students (16 males, 58 females).

*The programme.* The "mindset" concept has a long and significant research tradition within the field of psychology (see Dweck, 2006). Defined as a set of implicit beliefs that we hold about ourselves and our characteristics, the mindset of a person can be broadly classified as "fixed" or "growth". The first refers to people who believe personal characteristics to be more or less innate and unchangeable elements, while the second refers to individuals that consider it to be like a muscle, something that can be developed.

The importance of such beliefs can be traced back to the influence that these beliefs have on every aspect of our lives. A fixed mindset, in actual fact, will lead people to wrongly believe that it is enough to be talented in order to get what they want. Some people are talented - these kinds of people think - and others are not - one way or another, it is useless to even try.

A growth mindset, on the other hand, will push people to try their best and to consider setbacks in a positive light, seeing them as opportunities to learn.

With this in mind, this programme concentrated on an essential characteristic of every human being: intelligence. The HIP trainers focused on the main discoveries to have come out of psychology laboratories, using plain language and the help of educational videos. Not surprisingly, the students learned that our brains are plastic and that they adapt in response to every experience we have throughout our lifetimes. We change, that is the message, and we do so continuously.

And intelligence changes. While it is undeniable that all individuals come from different backgrounds, it is just as true that dedication plays a decisive role in their potential being expressed to its fullest. Throughout the programme, and thanks to exercises in class, the students were initially encouraged to reflect on how misconceptions may have influenced their motivation and academic performance. They were then trained on a series of strategies, shown by research to be particularly effective in counteracting fixed mindsets.

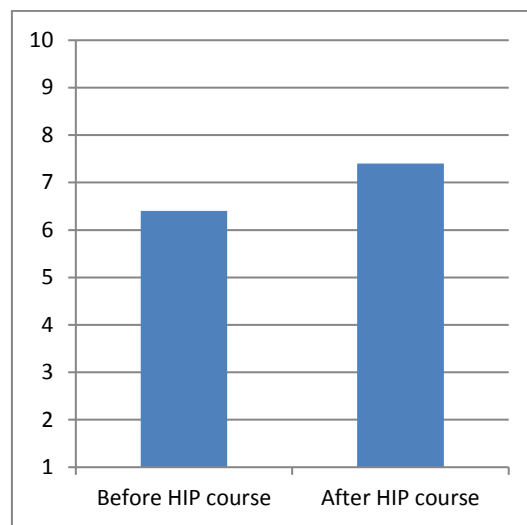
Videos, exercises and examples from research emphasised how negative beliefs about one or more students can often generate actual self-fulfilling prophecies ("Pygmalion effect"). Once the phenomena that underlie these psychological dynamics had been discussed and understood, the focus was shifted in this instance to the most useful tools for countering such beliefs and for creating interactive styles aimed at developing motivation and learning.

## **Results**

*Assessment of the effectiveness of the programme.* The effectiveness of this programme was assessed in an objective manner via a questionnaire – Intelligence Mindset (Dweck, 2000) – that was administered before and after the course. The questionnaire consisted of eight statements aimed at identifying the way in which students consider intelligence (innate and unchangeable *versus* able to develop). The respondents indicated their degree of agreement/disagreement for each statement by using a number between 1 (totally disagree) and 10 (totally agree). Repeating this questionnaire at the end of the programme allowed for a statistical comparison to be made between the points that students gave before and after.

Before starting the course, the overall average rating from students in response to the "Intelligence Mindset" questionnaire was 6.4. Our hypothesis was that the HIP course would have increased this average, leading to values that indicated an altered – towards the "growth"

side – opinion of intelligence. This is what actually occurred: at the end of the programme, as seen in figure 1, the average student rating moved from 6.4 to 7.4.



**Figure 1. Rating from students in response to the “Intelligence Mindset” questionnaire**

To guarantee that this increase in the rating was attributable to our intervention (rather than due to random factors) we implemented statistical tools. As hypothesised, the analysis results excluded the fact that such a trend was caused by chance –  $t(73) = 4.05, p = < .0001$  –, and instead indicated that a variation between the before and after figures was due to systemic factors (in our case, this was obviously the HIP course).

*Qualitative assessment of the programme.* At the end of the course, in addition to the Intelligent Mindset questionnaire, a qualitative questionnaire was also conducted, which aimed to gather information on the students impressions of the experience. To be more specific, they were asked: (a) to indicate how important they held the course to be, (b) how much they had enjoyed it, (c) if they would like to take part in another on a new topic. The results are below.

*How important do you consider this course to be?* The students replied to this question by using a ten-point measurement scale (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely). Their answers (mean = 7.8) indicated that they considered the course very important.

*How much did you enjoy this course?* Responding on a ten-point scale in this instance also, the students showed high enjoyment levels (mean = 8.4).

*Would you like to do another course on a different topic?* The students’ responses to this question were enthusiastic: they responded “Yes” in 94.2% of cases, “Don’t know” in 2.9% of cases, and “No” in 2.9% of cases.

## Discussion

The results from the "Mindset" programme are extremely significant in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Compared to what was recorded amongst the participants at the beginning of the course, the results at the end demonstrated that their framework of personal beliefs in connection to intelligence had changed. More specifically, the students gradually acquired a set of theoretical and operational knowledge that allowed them to reshape their own mindsets, which took on a decidedly more growth/dynamic appearance in a short time span. Such a change, far from being purely formal, has greatly important implications for the school curriculum. As shown in the research (for a review, see Dweck, 2006), students with a growth mindset tend to aim for more ambitious goals, to work harder to reach them and view failures as normal events in the course of learning. The end result will be better the more the students have teachers who share their growth mindsets beside them, ready to encourage them, to believe in the potential of each student and to appreciate even the smallest improvement.

The success of the programme is also supported by the qualitative data collected at its conclusion. The students expressed positive assessments concerning how important and how enjoyable the course was. The students also, almost unanimously, stated that they would like to take part in other HIP courses on new topics.

### **Programme 2: "Bystander Effect"**

*The sample.* A sample of 76 students (16 males, 60 females) took part in the "Bystander Effect" programme. The programme was organised by Dr. Clelia Bartoli and Dr. Cristina Siddiolo.

*The programme.* More and more the news is telling us about cases in which someone was in grave danger, at times even lying on the pavement dying, and they are ignored by dozens of passers-by. Whether it is a man or a woman, a young person or an elderly person, does not seem to make much difference: the reaction of those witnessing the scene seems to be, in reality, almost non-reaction.

This indifference demonstrated by bystanders was studied by psychologists as early as the 1960s (Darley & Latané, 1968; Darley & Latané, 1970). Various kinds of emergencies have been recreated in the laboratory and multiple aspects have been analysed for each. However, it is of little importance if modern psychology is able to explain this phenomenon if such knowledge remains within the confines of academia. Thanks to the "Bystander effect"

programme, HIP is aiming to address this trend, making what the scientific community already knows accessible to everyone.

Step by step, the students learnt to understand the bystander effect. They were trained on the phases of the process that is activated in emergency situations, as well as the obstacles that lead the potential rescuer towards inaction. The concepts of diffusion of responsibility, collective ignorance and belief in a just world are central to this programme. They were studied in depth via educational videos and lead the students to understand the groundlessness of the idea that, if in an emergency situation, the victim is more likely to receive help if surrounded by a lot of people.

The students learnt that the drive to intervene can be severely hindered by a series of external, situational factors that are often underestimated or even unknown to those studying the phenomenon (see Zimbardo, 2007). The class exercises also encouraged personal involvement in the scenarios that were discussed little by little, as part of a growth process that aimed to supply critically important psychological tools for managing the various emergency situations, both ones experienced by the victim and ones experienced by the potential rescuer.

## **Results**

*Assessment of the effectiveness of the programme.* Before beginning the course, the students completed a questionnaire entitled Bystander Resiliency, which had eight statements to measure the personal degree of knowledge concerning the psychological mechanisms that come into play in emergency situations (mechanisms that, most of the time, stop the bystander from providing assistance). The respondents gave their degree of agreement/disagreement to each statement on a ten-point scale. Repeating the questionnaire at the end of the course allowed for a statistical comparison of the pre/post intervention ratings to be carried out and, consequently, to obtain an objective measurement of its impact on the recipients.

The initial overall average rating of the students in response to the "Bystander Resiliency" questionnaire was 4.9. Any increase in this average at the end of the course would have indicated an increase in the knowledge held by the students about the psychological dynamics that, in emergency situations, encourage (or hinder) assistance being given. The data gathered at the end highlighted an increase in the average ratings, which went from 4.9 to 5. This difference, however, was not statistically significant –  $t(75) = 0.91, p = .36$ .

*Qualitative assessment of the programme.* At the end of the course, in addition to the Bystander Resiliency questionnaire, a qualitative questionnaire was also conducted, which aimed to gather information on the students' impressions of the experience. More specifically, they were asked: (a) to indicate how important they held the course to be, (b) how much they had enjoyed it, (c) if they would like to take part in another on a new topic. The results are below.

*How important do you consider this course to be?* The students evaluated the importance they gave to the "Bystander Effect" course using a ten-point measurement scale (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely). Their answers (mean = 7.5) indicated that they considered the course very important.

*How much did you enjoy this course?* The opinion of the respondents was given via a ten-point scale in this case also. The results demonstrate a very high level of enjoyment (mean = 7.8).

*Would you like to do another course on a different topic?* The students' responses to this question were enthusiastic: they responded "Yes" in 85.6% of cases, "Don't know" in 13.1% of cases and "No" in 1.3% of cases.

## **Discussion**

The importance of this programme can be traced, first and foremost, to the data collected through the qualitative questionnaire. The "Bystander effect" programme was held to be very important by the students. They enjoyed it very much and stated, almost unanimously, that they would have liked to take another HIP course on a new topic. As regards the quantitative side of the analysis, although the post-test data showed no significant differences compared to the pre-test, the trend observed was consistent with our hypothesis. It would be useful to explore this result by further investigating the students' understanding of those social forces that can prevent them (and people in general) from taking action in emergency situations.



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