

# **HEROIC IMAGINATION PROJECT**

A new way of looking at heroism

## CONTENTS

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Introduction	3
“Mindset”	3
Results	4
Discussion	6
References	7

## **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 "Maria Adelaide" school in Palermo consisted of a programme through which students were provided with a training to embrace a broader vision of what intelligence really is ("Mindset" program). The effectiveness of this educational programme was assessed via a set of questionnaires administered pre and post intervention.

## **"Mindset"**

*The sample.* The "Mindset" programme, organised by Dr. Clelia Bartoli and Dr. Cristina Siddiolo, took place during school hours and included 38 students (5 males, 33 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.

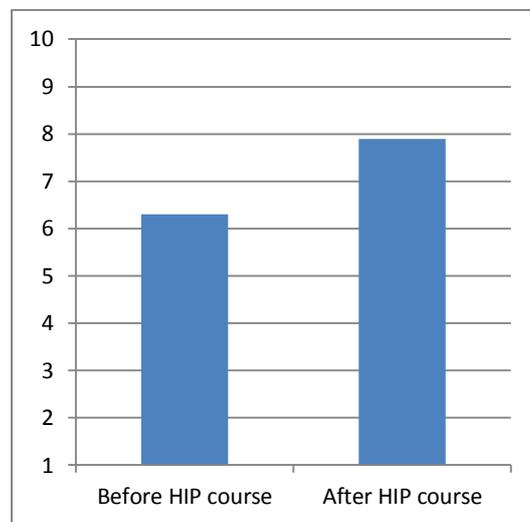
Videos, exercises and examples from research emphasised how negative beliefs about one or more students can often generate actual self-fulfilling prophecies ("Pygmalion effect"). Once the phenomena that underlie these psychological dynamics had been discussed and understood, the focus was shifted in 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 6.3. 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 6.3 to 7.9.



**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 –  $t(37) = 5.09, p = < .0001$  –, 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 = 8.3).

*Would you like to do another course on a different topic?* The students’ responses to this question were enthusiastic: they responded “Yes” in 89.5% of cases, “Don’t know” in 7.9% of cases and “No” in 2.6% of cases.

## **Discussion**

The results from the "Mindset" programme were 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. The findings of this programme clearly illustrate how the HIP educational course, which has been successfully tested in many American schools, was extremely effective within the "Maria Adelaide" school also.

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