Promoting students' persistence in meeting learning challenges

Why do some students give up in the face of learning challenges?
Carol Dweck's (2000) research[1] showed that students who had a fixed view of their intelligence showed self-defeating behaviours in the face of a learning challenge. They believed that intelligence was innate and that it determined their performance on a task to a greater extent than effort or persistence. Such students quickly lost confidence when they experienced obstacles, gave up and blamed themselves when they performed badly (regardless of any previous successes), avoided challenges and reduced their level of effort. More resilient students had a 'growth mindset'. They believed that ability on a task could be improved through effort and trying new approaches. They saw encountering difficulties as a natural part of the process of learning and persevered.

What helps make students persist when faced with learning challenges?
Dweck's research showed that it was possible to change students' ideas about intelligence and in doing so made a big difference to their achievement.

- Older students with fixed mindsets ascribed their mistakes to an innate lack of ability, but when this belief was directly challenged, they became more persistent.
- Young children exposed to praise that focused on ability (e.g. 'Clever girl'), or to general criticism when they did something wrong, associated success with being 'good' and making mistakes with being 'bad'. The best kind of praise was task focused rather than personal, and focused on the effort they had put in and the strategies they had used.

Teachers also supported students' persistence by equipping them with problem-solving strategies that were specific to the particular challenge they faced and by explicitly teaching students:

- about the need to expend time and effort when learning a skill, and
- that initial failure is a healthy sign that a challenge is worth pursuing.

What are the implications?
The research showed the importance of:

- helping students develop an incremental view of learning which makes them more inclined to engage with challenge and take risks that enable them to grow
- finding ways of praising students without unintentionally labelling them as 'intelligent', for example, by discussing the process of how they created something or reached an answer
- helping vulnerable students see that the need for effort does not indicate a lack of ability
- encouraging students to remember and use strategies to help them tackle challenges, and
- formative assessment that equips students with tools to improve the quality of their work.

What do the case studies illustrate?
The case studies (which can be accessed at http://www.tla.ac.uk/site/SiteAssets/RfT1/06RE041%20Promoting%20students'%20persistence%20in%20meeting%20challenges.pdf from page 11 onwards) show:

- ways in which students were affected by and managed frustration during challenging tasks
- the positive effects of rewarding participation and effort in a 'no blame' context

[1] Dweck, C. (2000) *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development.* Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis

- ways very young students were supported to tackle challenging problems in the context of outdoor education, and
- the impact on students of different types of praise.

To read the full resource, go to
http://www.tla.ac.uk/site/SiteAssets/RfT1/06RE041%20Promoting%20students'%20persistence%20in%20meeting%20challenges.pdf