

Research Article

"Growth Mindset" as a Hidden Curriculum for the Gig Economy

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Abstract

This article examines the pervasive discourse of "growth mindset" within higher education, proposing that it functions as a powerful hidden curriculum at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (AASTU). While presented as a psychological tool for empowering students, this curriculum may be socializing them with the ideal dispositions for navigating the precarious and demanding 21st-century labor market, particularly the burgeoning tech and gig economy in Ethiopia. Based on a proposed qualitative analysis of course syllabi and interviews with lecturers and students, this article explores how an emphasis on resilience, "productive failure," and radical personal responsibility prepares students to accept instability and constant self-optimization as natural and necessary. The analysis suggests that the growth mindset curriculum fosters three key themes: the glorification of persistence over structural support, the individualization of systemic barriers, and the normalization of continuous adaptation. The article draws parallels between this framework and the historical function of hidden curricula in producing compliant workers for different economic eras. It concludes that while the intentions behind instilling a growth mindset are often positive, its application in this university setting risks operating as a socially conservative force that aligns student psychology with the demands of a neoliberal economy, thereby discouraging critical examination of the systemic causes of inequality and precarity.

Keywords

Hidden Curriculum, Growth Mindset, Higher Education, Gig Economy, Neoliberalism, Grit, Educational Sociology

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, few educational concepts have achieved the ubiquity and acclaim of "growth mindset," a term popularized by psychologist Carol Dweck [4]. The core idea is simple yet profound: individuals with a "growth mindset" believe that intelligence and talent can be developed through dedication and hard work, whereas those with a "fixed mindset" believe these traits are static [4]. In universities globally, this concept has been embraced as a tool for fostering motivation, resilience, and a love of learning.

The enthusiasm for fostering a growth mindset is not limited to general education but extends into specialized and high-stakes professional training environments. For instance, in the demanding field of surgical education, the prevailing mindset of residents is a subject of significant interest. A recent study of surgical residents found that the overwhelming majority, nearly 90%, exhibited a growth mindset, which is seen as crucial for continuous learning and adaptation in a field with high stakes [10]. This focus on mindset in such a

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Received: 29 October 2025; **Accepted:** 10 November 2025; **Published:** 9 December 2025



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specialized area underscores the belief held by many educators that cultivating a growth mindset is a key component in

developing resilient and adaptable professionals across all disciplines.

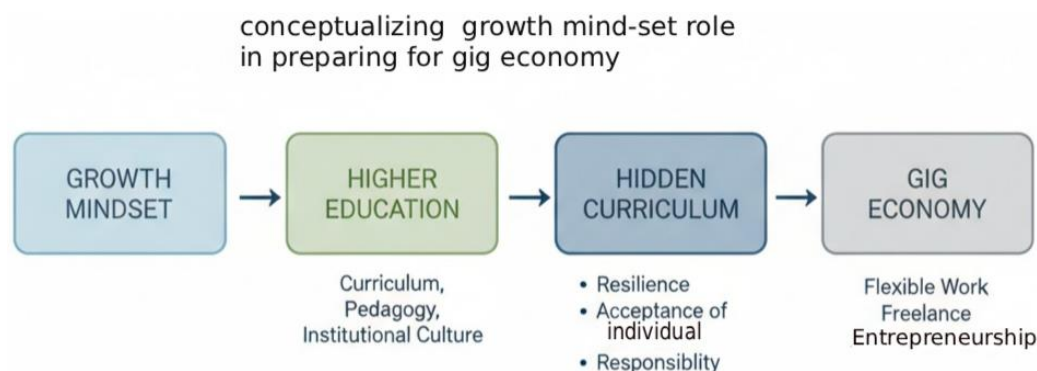


Figure 1. A conceptual model illustrating how the "growth mindset" discourse within higher education may function as a hidden curriculum, socializing students with dispositions suited for the precariousness of the gig economy.

2. A Critical Review

The concept of the hidden curriculum has long been used by critical theorists to reveal how schooling reproduces social inequalities. Scholars like Apple [1] and Giroux [5] argued that schools do more than teach formal subjects; they teach students their place in society. The industrial-era hidden curriculum taught punctuality, deference to authority, and rote obedience—traits desired for a compliant factory workforce [5]. This aligns with the foundational 'correspondence principle' articulated by Bowles and Gintis, who argued that schooling structures consciousness and social relationships to mirror the hierarchical divisions of labor required by the capitalist economy [13].

The "hidden curriculum" is a powerful force in professional socialization, shaping not just what students learn, but also how they come to understand their professional roles and identities. In medical training, for example, the hidden curriculum manifests in the informal norms and hierarchies that fellows must address. These unstated rules often lead to a "general sense of collegiality" that is nonetheless constrained by a persistent 'hierarchy of medical training' that is still observed [9]. This dynamic teaches trainees to conform to the established norms of their program, which is a powerful lesson in professional socialization that occurs entirely outside the formal curriculum.

According to critical scholars, the primary function of the hidden curriculum is to act as a conservative force that socializes students to conform to the existing social order rather than to critically challenge it. Giroux and Penna argued that the structure, organization, and content of schooling serve to equip students with "the personality requisites desired in the bureaucratically structured, hierarchically organized work force" (as cited in McLean & Dixit [7]). While the explicit curriculum purports to advance the interests of all students,

the hidden curriculum often reflects and reproduces socioeconomic inequalities, teaching deference to authority and an acceptance of the status quo [7].

The "growth mindset" framework, on its surface, seems to be the opposite of this. It promotes agency, perseverance, and a proactive approach to challenges. Its proponents, including advocates for teaching "grit" [3], argue that it equips all students with the mental tools to succeed.

However, critics have begun to question its application. They argue that an overemphasis on mindset can inadvertently become a form of victim-blaming, ignoring the profound impact of systemic barriers like poverty, under-resourced institutions, and socioeconomic inequality [6]. When a student struggles, the "mindset" framework can lead lecturers to diagnose a deficient attitude rather than address an inequitable environment. This article builds on this critique by using the hidden curriculum as an analytical lens to systematically investigate what values the growth mindset discourse is actually teaching students about their role in the modern world.

This critique aligns with a broader scholarly concern that the American individualism promoted in "positive thinking" and self-help discourse engenders a self-centeredness that erodes social and political life [11]. The insistence on locating the cause and cure of problems solely within the individual encourages a solitary, inward focus. As Louise Woodstock argues, this therapeutic rhetoric can be detrimental to society because it allows "social ills and inequities to continue unchecked," as citizens are trained to focus on their own thoughts rather than engaging in collective action to address systemic issues [11]. This reflects a broader critique, powerfully articulated by Barbara Ehrenreich, that the relentless promotion of positive thinking individualizes failure and functions as a tool of social control, demanding that individuals adapt their attitudes to harsh realities rather than challenging the realities themselves [14]. When applied to educa-

tion, this suggests a risk that mindset-focused interventions may inadvertently teach students to psychologize, rather than politicize, their struggles.

Furthermore, the scholarly literature on growth mindset is beginning to acknowledge the complexity of its effects, moving away from a simple “one-size-fits-all” model. The concept of the “heterogeneity of growth mindset” suggests that the impact of a growth mindset is not uniform but is instead influenced by various contextual factors, such as the level of support students receive from their teachers [2]. This perspective implies that the environment in which the growth mindset is taught plays a crucial role in determining its outcomes. When teacher support is deficient, for example, the relationship between a growth mindset and academic achievement can even become negative [2]. This adds a layer of complexity to the critique, suggesting that the application of the growth mindset, not just the concept itself, requires critical examination.

3. The Study

3.1. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the hidden curriculum of growth mindset within the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at AASTU. The research involved:

1. Content Analysis: A textual analysis of course syllabi, university strategic plans, and promotional materials related to student development and entrepreneurship.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews with 15 university lecturers and 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students from the college to understand how they implement and interpret the growth mindset philosophy in their academic lives.

3.2. Findings

The analysis of the data revealed a consistent, yet unstated, curriculum that socializes students into a specific way of thinking about work, failure, and success. Three dominant themes emerged.

3.2.1. Theme 1: The Glorification of "Productive Failure"

Across all materials and interviews, there was an intense focus on reframing failure not as an outcome to be avoided, but as a necessary and even desirable part of the learning process, a core tenet of Dweck's work [4]. Course outlines often emphasized iterative projects and learning from mistakes. While this reduces academic anxiety, it also carries a deeper, hidden message. As one lecturer explained:

"We teach them that struggling is the whole point. If you aren't struggling, you aren't learning. The goal is to make

them comfortable with being in a constant state of challenge, to see every setback as just a stepping stone."

This normalization of struggle and failure is a core psychological requirement for a gig worker or entrepreneur, who constantly faces rejected proposals, terminated contracts, and income instability. The hidden curriculum teaches that this instability is not a systemic flaw but a personal opportunity for growth.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Individualizing Systemic Barriers

The second theme was the relentless focus on internal psychology (one's mindset) as the primary determinant of success, effectively minimizing or ignoring external, structural factors. This aligns with critiques that the popular application of mindset theory can place an undue burden on the individual [6]. Lecturers were encouraged to redirect student complaints about resources or difficulty toward introspection. A senior faculty member described the shift:

"It used to be, if a student said, 'This course is too difficult given our resources,' we might look at the curriculum. Now, the first response is, 'That sounds like a fixed mindset. Let's reframe that into a growth mindset statement.' It puts the onus entirely back on the student's attitude."

This lesson is crucial for the modern economy. It discourages graduates from questioning low wages, lack of benefits, or unfair labor practices, and instead encourages them to ask: "Is my mindset holding me back? Do I need more grit?" [3]. The problem is framed as a personal deficit, not a political or economic one.

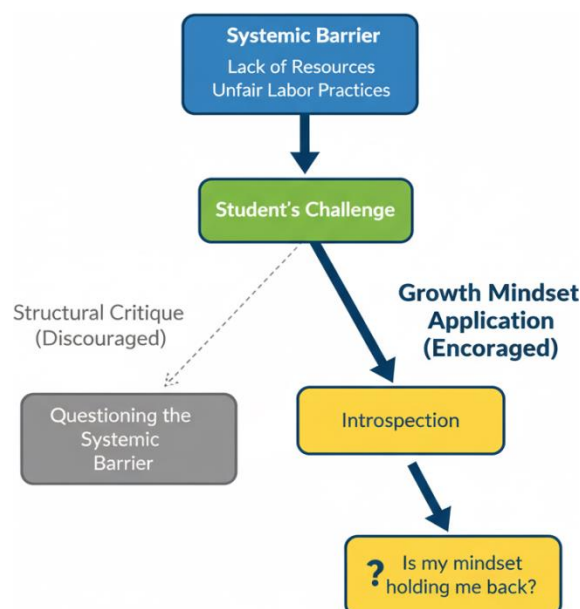


Figure 2. Comparison of the values promoted by the hidden curriculum in the industrial age versus the contemporary gig economy, highlighting the shift from producing a disciplined body to a resilient mind.

This redirection of focus from the systemic to the individual is precisely what transforms the growth mindset into a hidden curriculum for precarious times. By framing challenges as internal psychological hurdles, the curriculum “gives prominence to individual efforts to adapt to precariousness, while marginalizing the potential for collective action to address unfairly precarious forms of social and economic relations” [7]. Students are thus socialized to accept precarious circumstances as a natural part of life that must be met with personal resilience and optimism, rather than as the result of “arbitrary (and contestable) strategies of employers and governments” [7]. The lesson is one of psychological adaptation, not structural critique.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Effort as the Ultimate Virtue

The most pervasive message was the celebration of effort, persistence, and “grit” as the ultimate virtues [3]. The curriculum consistently praised the process of hard work, often more than the achievement of a correct outcome. One lecturer candidly remarked:

“We’re told to praise the effort, not the answer. We’re cultivating persistence. The ideal student is the one who works on a project relentlessly and doesn’t give up. It’s about building their stamina for the hustle.”

This “hustle culture” ethos is the bedrock of the gig economy. The successful gig worker is not the one who works 9-to-5, but the one who is always on, always learning the next skill, always marketing themselves, and always persisting. The hidden curriculum of growth mindset is, in effect, a training ground for this form of labor.

4. Discussion

The findings illustrate a clear parallel between the hidden curricula of different economic eras. The industrial-age curriculum produced a disciplined body for the factory [5]; the growth mindset curriculum produces a resilient, self-managing mind for the precarious modern market. This ‘self-managing mind’ is the ideal subject of a neoliberal order, what Michel Foucault described as the ‘entrepreneur of the self,’ an individual who views their own life as a capital enterprise to be perpetually enhanced and optimized [15].

This correspondence between the curriculum’s covert lessons and the dispositions required by the dominant economic system is a classic feature of the hidden curriculum. As McLean and Dixit argue, “Just as docility and subservience were central to the cultural logic of industrial capitalist workplaces... so is positive thinking central to the cultural logic of precarious times” [7]. The growth mindset discourse, in this context, cultivates psychological resources that are “instrumentally useful to individuals whose professional or personal circumstances are subject to unpredictable changes,” such as resilience, adaptability, and perseverance [7]. In this way, the curriculum functions to promote conformity not to the rigid structure of the factory, but to the fluid instability of

the gig economy.

Hidden Curricula for Different Economic Eras

Industrial Age	Gig Economy
 Punctuality	 Resilience
 Deference to Authority	 Self-Optimization
 Rote Obedience	 Persistence (“Grit”)
Economic Goal: Disciplined Body for the Factory	Economic Goal: Resilient Mind for the Market

Figure 3. A comparison of the values promoted by the hidden curriculum in the industrial age versus the contemporary gig economy, highlighting the shift from producing a disciplined body to a resilient mind.

This new hidden curriculum prepares AASTU graduates for a world without job security, where they are expected to be “lifelong learners” who constantly re-skill themselves at their own expense. It teaches them to accept that their success or failure is solely a product of their own attitude and effort, making them less likely to organize or demand collective, structural solutions to widespread economic problems.

This focus on individual psychology at the expense of structural critique is particularly noteworthy when considering recent research on different types of mindsets. Scholars have begun to explore the “growth mindset of socioeconomic status (SES),” which is the belief that a person’s social and economic position is changeable rather than fixed [12, 8]. Studies have shown that a growth mindset of SES is linked to higher academic achievement, mediated by increased school engagement [12]. By focusing solely on a growth mindset of intelligence, the hidden curriculum at AASTU may inadvertently be promoting a fixed mindset of SES. It teaches students that while their individual intelligence is malleable, the broader socioeconomic structures that create precarity are not. This reinforces the message that the only appropriate response to systemic inequality is individual adaptation, not collective challenge.

By framing resilience as a personal virtue, the growth mindset curriculum obscures the political question of why today’s world requires so much resilience from its citizens. It becomes a tool for adaptation to a harsh reality rather than a tool for questioning or changing that reality, a critique that has been leveled against the uncritical teaching of concepts like grit [6].



Figure 4. The modern graduate's dilemma: grappling a precarious economic landscape where personal resilience is presented as the primary tool for success.

5. Conclusion

The intentions behind the growth mindset movement are undeniably positive: to help young adults overcome challenges and achieve their full potential. This article does not dispute the psychological benefits that can come from believing in one's own capacity for growth. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the hidden curriculum is not an inherently negative force. When consciously cultivated, it can have a positive influence on students' development. For example, the hidden curriculum can be a powerful vehicle for transmitting professional values through "positive role-modelling" and the creation of "supportive team environments". These informal and unstated aspects of education can foster a sense of belonging, promote collaboration, and help students address the ambiguities of their future professions. The critical issue, therefore, is not the existence of a hidden curriculum, but rather its content and its alignment with broader educational and societal goals.

However, it is crucial for educators and policymakers at institutions like AASTU to critically examine how this discourse functions. As a hidden curriculum, the relentless focus on individual mindset, effort, and grit risks becoming a powerful tool of social reproduction for a neoliberal, precarious economy. It teaches students to adapt to systemic instability rather than to challenge it.

The most important question for educators is not just "Does this help my students learn?" but also "What kind of citizens and professionals are we preparing them to be?" If the answer is "resilient, adaptable, and self-blaming workers for an unequal economy," then the hidden curriculum of growth mindset demands our immediate and critical attention.

Abbreviations

SES Socioeconomic Status

Author Contributions

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



globally-conscious inquiry.

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is a senior researcher and philosopher at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. His research spans social and political philosophy, epistemology, and the philosophy of science. Currently pursuing a PhD at the University of South Africa, his work examines the foundations of meaning and value across different cultural frameworks. He investigates the essential role of intercultural dialogue in addressing complex domains ranging from the ethics of artificial intelligence to public policy and the validation of indigenous knowledge. His earlier writings have engaged with questions in analytical philosophy and consciousness, reflecting his enduring interest in the conditions for a more pluralistic and

Research Field

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