

Start with Student Strengths to Promote Learning

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Many people strive to improve their lives and grow through goal setting. They look at the negatives and think about how to eradicate them. A few pounds too many? No more chocolate. Strapped for money? No more dining out. Procrastinating too much? No more putting things off (I'll do them soon, I swear!).

The reason why these well-intentioned resolutions often do not have staying power is because they are firmly entrenched in a place of dissatisfaction, rooted in a negative focus. Notice that the answer to all the previous problems and qualms start with the word 'no.'

If one were instead to focus on building on strengths that already exist in one's life, or on using a strength to target an area for improvement, the results would be decidedly different. If one were open to the power of 'yes,' and to building on the positive strengths already existing in one's life, the process of life improvement would be an entirely different one, an empowering one.

Many of the children at my school, a school where students are twice-exceptional (presenting with gifts and learning disabilities simultaneously), have been cast in light of their "deficiencies," and told that "you cannot do this" or "you are not enough." While it is true that they are not neurotypical, and that they process information more slowly or differently, they have so many strengths to be celebrated that we use these as access points to learning and engagement. Strengths-based education is predicated on the belief that every child has the potential to learn, and that the best way to progress in learning is through a positive lens.

This strength-based lens can and should be used in your teaching practice. Think about your teaching, and take a look at your students. Notice where you see students' strengths. Take these strengths and welcome them into your classroom. Students will delight in exploring their powerful minds and abilities, and their engagement and ideas will soar.

Below, find a few tips for how to get started in creating your very own strength-based community in your classroom.

Find Out Where Your Students' Strengths Lie

In order to harness student strengths, you need to accurately identify what the students' strengths are. There are a variety of tools and informative diagnostics that can be utilized for this purpose. One such tool is educational psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which contends that intelligence does not reside in one or two domains, but multiple arenas where smarts can emerge. His list, comprised of seven types of intelligences, includes musical, visual, verbal, mathematical/logical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal,

naturalistic, and existential. You can use this online tool with your students: (<https://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-assessment>).

An educator can also look at strengths in learning preferences, social strengths, and emotional strengths. Education Professor Robin Schader created a diagnostic called “My Learning Print” that helps educators and their students think about strengths in the classroom (http://gifted.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/961/2015/09/My_LearningPrint.pdf).

Honor and Develop the Strengths that You Discover

Now that you’ve found areas where your students excel and their learning preferences, you have reached the point where you use this information to inform your teaching. Think about ways that you can differentiate your instruction to make it a meaningful experience for a variety of learning strengths, and where a strength can be incorporated to address a student’s area of need. Some students learn well by listening, but others learn well by viewing, building, speaking, or even teaching others themselves. This idea is also important during independent and group learning times. Could there be multiple processes to learn the same content that work well for different students in your class? For instance, if your students are learning about photosynthesis, some students might benefit from watching a video, while other might do better reading a comic about the process. And do not forget to include student strengths at the end of the process, when assessing student learning. There are many different ways to display mastery. Embed a student’s strengths into every part of the learning experience and watch the strengths and the student’s engagement increase before your eyes.

Address Areas of Need Using Strengths as an Entry-point

This is not to suggest that you neglect areas that they need to build or develop. In many cases, you can use an existing strength or interest to target these areas of need. For instance, a child who has difficulty learning to write letters, but who is an excellent builder, should be encouraged to build letters using clay or pipe cleaners. Furthermore, when students feel like they are part of a strength-based community, they have been shown to be more resilient when facing learning challenges and to persevere through academic adversity (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

Create a Classroom and School Culture that Celebrates Strengths

When you banish ‘no’ and ‘you can’t’ from your classroom, and replace them with a culture of ‘yes, ‘you can,’ and ‘you are strong’ instead, students notice. They begin to celebrate themselves and their peers, to encourage one another through difficulties, and to approach learning with a positive attitude.

To integrate this cultural shift, be conscious of the language that you use, and make sure that it is positively framed. Be honest about challenges, but model for students how you can use academic and social emotional strengths to persevere. Create spaces in the classroom to

explore, display, and celebrate strengths; inquiry/discovery centers that are strength aligned, bulletin boards, and strength sharing times are all practices that make it clear that your classroom is a place where strengths are prized.

Talk about your students' strengths to your students, your administrators, other teachers at your school, and to the world beyond. By doing so, you will meet other strength-based educators and learners with whom you can learn and strengthen your own teaching practices. You can also teach your students to identify their strengths, a skill that will allow them to find success as learners throughout their entire lives.

In order to become an even stronger teacher yourself, resolve to identify, welcome, and build student strengths into your instruction, and go from strength to strength.

Miriam Singer is the Director of Curriculum at Bridges Academy, a school in Studio City, California for twice-exceptional youth that uses a strength-based approach. She is also the founder and content curator for Edcouragementor.com, an online community where teachers support teachers. Her strength is finding strengths in others. Email her at Miriam.D.Singer@gmail.com to connect and tell her your strengths or to ask questions about unlocking your students' strengths.

References

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