

THE CUTTING EDGE

Strengths-Based Education: Probing Its Limits

by Gary K. Clabaugh

*It's watcha do with watcha got,
and never mind how muchya got.
It's watcha do with watcha got,
that pays off in the end.*

“It’s Watcha Do With Watcha Got”
—from the 1949 Disney movie
So Dear to My Heart

Except for Timothy Hodges and James Harter’s restrained research summary, the feature articles in this issue are evangelical in their praise of strengths-based education. It is, they assure us, a major innovation.

English teacher Alexis Onishi writes that StrengthsQuest, a specific strengths-based approach, will have “a lifelong impact on how [students] see themselves, others, and life in general.” Principal Kathryn Norwood similarly describes the related Clifton StrengthsFinder as something of a pedagogical Rosetta Stone.

Let’s hope these claims are accurate. Even if they are, however, the environment into which strengths-based education will be introduced may be largely unsupportive. The present status quo conveys benefits to certain people who are unlikely to volunteer to give up these paybacks just to get kids to learn better.

Precursors

Good teachers have long tried to find out what a student can do and work from there. In the late 1700s Johann Pestalozzi stressed the importance of children’s individual differences and the need for teachers to base their instruction on those differences. Similarly, in the 1830s Friedrich Froebel designed his famed kindergarten to bring out, through play, the active powers—i.e., strengths—of children. Hopefully strengths-

based techniques may help educators reach these goals more proficiently. But its general emphasis is not novel.

Organizational Obstacles

In the past, educational innovations have typically blossomed and then died. The forces arrayed against them are formidable, and organizational obstacles have been major. The fact is that our public schools are set up as educational factories in order to effect economies. This style of organization has defeated many previous reforms, and to prosper strengths-based education will have to surmount this obstacle.

In a typical factory-style secondary school, teachers try to teach 120 or more youngsters a day. And usually they can work with them for just fifty minutes a day. So even if teachers have detailed information on each student's strengths and a battery of accompanying techniques, can they use that information effectively in such a setting?

Also consider how many school districts exceed the minimal requirements of the school-as-factory when they totally standardize and teacher-proof their curricula. In some districts, typically large urban ones, these efforts reach farcical proportions. A superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, for example, once bragged that she could tell you what was going on in every classroom in the city at any given time in the school day. Her revealing boast illustrates how little latitude individual educators often have. In standardized, teacher-proofed districts teachers are expected to do as they are told—nothing more. That is hardly an environment in which strengths-based techniques can prosper.

Complex Tasks

There is also the issue of how strengths-based education copes with complex tasks containing critical components that must be done correctly. Sooner or later a strengths-based educator will have to focus on this weakness. Suppose, for example, that we set out to teach someone to shoot a rifle accurately. Five actions must be performed in order for the learner to shoot well:

- correct sight picture must be established;
- correct sight alignment must be maintained;
- proper body position must be established;
- breathing must be carefully controlled; and
- the trigger must be squeezed rather than jerked.

If *any* of these actions is done incorrectly, our learner will shoot inaccurately. Suppose, for instance, that the learner masters everything but trigger pull. The problem here is that he or she anticipates the report and recoil and thus jerks, rather than squeezes, the trigger. Unless the instructor remedies this weakness, the learner will never shoot the rifle successfully. Sure, the focal point of a strengths-based approach is strengths primarily, but not to the point of ignoring fatal weaknesses. Yet once fatal weaknesses surface and have to be dealt with, how is strengths-based education still strengths based?

Time Constraints

Suppose a strengths-based approach is superior, but also more time consuming. In schooling time is critical. There are a limited number of days and hours available to get the job done. That isn't unusual; many projects are time sensitive. But when important projects are carried out, managers routinely use critical-path analysis to identify tasks that must be completed on time if the whole venture is to be finished on time. Critical-path analysis also identifies tasks that can be delayed if resources need to be reallocated to catch up on other uncompleted tasks. (Notice that some tasks cannot be delayed.) Strengths-based education will have to fit into such a context to be fully practicable. Will it work well in such a context?

The Mostly Empty Glass

The ills that fester in the nation's social injustices are another formidable obstacle arrayed against a strengths-based approach. Consider schools in high-poverty areas. They regularly enroll first-graders who have never been read to, have never ever seen a coloring book or storybook, have never seen an adult read, have never owned a pencil or crayons, have never met their father, and who, tragically, may never have been loved. How well can strengths-based education work in situations where strengths are scarce or largely absent?

The central point here is that there are learners who have few strengths to build on—youngsters who are severely or profoundly impaired, for example. Their glass isn't half full—it's nearly empty no matter how one looks at it. How well does strengths-based education work when strengths are scarce? Okay, a strengths-based approach might still be superior to focusing on weaknesses and remediation. But given what some kids have to work with, is it reasonable to expect them to improve substantially?

The Politics of Teacher Optimism

Let's hope that strengths-based education is not co-opted by the political forces insisting that teachers maintain ridiculously optimistic

expectations at the expense of objective analysis. President Bush's inaugural-address remarks about the "soft prejudice of low expectations" are typical of this school of thought.

Since Ronald Reagan's administration, many politicians have been insisting that all teachers need to do to get better results is to raise their expectations. In fact, the less politicians are prepared to spend on schools or do for disadvantaged children, the more they pound the drum for higher teacher expectations. This kind of pressure causes many educators to set common sense and ethical conduct aside and to lie to youngsters about their strengths.

Consider *Educating Peter*, a popular documentary about mainstreaming a youngster with Down syndrome. Peter is mainstreamed and becomes increasingly frustrated as he struggles unsuccessfully to complete simple tasks. Finally he says plaintively to his teacher, "I stupid!" She replies with the phony optimism of high expectations, "No, you're not. You're an excellent student." The teacher knows better. Peter knows better. Every other child in that class knows better. But the teacher continues to insist that Peter has strengths that he doesn't possess.

In another popular documentary, *I Am a Promise*, a typically well-meaning inner-city elementary school principal tells an assembly of the school's low-achieving youngsters, "You're all genius children!" They are nothing of the kind. Geniuses they are not. But she tells them that they are in hopes that something good might come of it. Such relentless optimism is becoming the order of the day, and it is reducing teacher-learner transactions to grotesque parody. Will strengths-based education be co-opted by these forces and corrupted in the process?

The Matter of Fit

There also is the issue of how well student strengths fit school tasks. After all, there are all kinds of strengths that have little purpose in schools as they are currently constituted. Suppose, for example, that a learner is strong in kinesthetic intelligence and little else. Suppose further that the child's school doesn't offer a dance program or anything else that allows the expression of this strength. What is to be done? Should the youngster's math teacher attempt to set algebra to movement?

Strengths cannot be built on if the school environment fails to provide outlets for them in the first place. And that kind of situation is all too common in factory-style schools. For strengths-based education to reach full fruition, curricula from kindergarten to college will have to be modified. Unhappily, such a transformation seems highly unlikely.

School “Strengths” and Real Strengths

A strengths-based approach also requires us to consider what sorts of “strengths” really pay off in school. A tolerance for nonsense and a willingness to undertake essentially meaningless tasks are important. So are sucking up and pretending to be things one is not. Shall we build on those “strengths”? The point is that a school “strength” can be a moral or spiritual flaw in a different social context. Each time we call a trait a “strength” we are making a value judgment that could well rest on dubious suppositions about what is worthwhile and what is really going on. How careful are strengths-based educators to not do that?

Motivation

We should also consider the matter of student motivation. One can readily imagine students who survive a variety of blandishments with their resistance intact. In such cases lack of motivation is not just *a* weakness; it is *the* weakness. For thousands of years educators addressed this problem by applying pain. Kids were brought to care about their schoolwork because of the unpleasant consequences of not caring. (An ancient Egyptian inscription reads, “Learning comes with blood.”) Does strengths-based education offer an effective solution to this age-old problem? Will playing to their strengths cause more kids to care about their schoolwork? If so, that’s in its favor. But to make it happen we still have the school-as-factory to deal with.

Summing Up

Even if strengths-based education merits the evangelical enthusiasm that is shared with us in this issue, there are many reasons it still might fail. Does that mean it isn’t worth a try? No, the obstacles noted above stand in the way of all meaningful improvements. So let’s investigate and learn more about the limits and possibilities of strengths-based education. But we should also remember the importance of doing no harm as we experiment.

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