

**Searching for Strengths in the School Setting: To Enrich
Dignity, Motivation, and Learning
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Similar to previous years, this past August I had the opportunity to offer presentations at a number of schools and school districts prior to the commencement of the new school year. Although I enjoy speaking with educators at any time during the year, there is a noticeable excitement associated with colleagues seeing each other for the first time in a couple of months, being introduced to new staff, and preparing for their classes.

Yet, what has become apparent is that in many public school districts this positive energy is increasingly tempered by concerns and anxieties pertaining to budgetary and financial issues, possible reductions in staff, faculty, and resources, and the need to learn and teach new core curricula that are required by state and federal mandates. In turn, these curricula are tied to standardized tests taken by students, which are used, in part, to assess teacher as well as administrator performance.

As a teacher lamented after one of my presentations, “I hope I can remain focused on all of the positive parts of my work and not become as frazzled as I did last year with so many requirements that I feel actually distract me from my effectiveness as a teacher.” Another teacher with obvious anger in his voice offered a harsh observation: “I feel what I am required to do in the classroom is being dictated by someone in the State Department of Education who probably hasn’t been in a classroom in 30 years.” Whether accurate or not, this was his perception, and as many have said, “Perception becomes reality.”

Given all of the pressures experienced by teachers, school administrators, and other professionals who work in schools, what has impressed me are the ways in which the vast majority of these professionals have maintained a positive outlook in the face of burgeoning demands and uncertainties, who have adopted what I have labeled in previous writings a sense of “personal control,” that is, they focus their time and energy on factors over which they have some influence rather than complaining about factors beyond their control. They never lose sight of their main responsibility to enrich the academic, social, and emotional development of their students.

One teacher eloquently articulated this view when she told me immediately following my talk, “What you said really validated a strong belief I have. I may not have a say in a number of factors that impact on my classroom, but as you emphasized in your workshop, I do have control over the relationship I develop with my students, how I get

to know them, how I respond to them, and how I look for and reinforce their ‘islands of competence.’”

This teacher concluded, “I really want to be a ‘charismatic adult’ for my students.” (As I have written on many occasions, “charismatic adult” is the term introduced by the late psychologist Julius Segal, who defined such a person as “an adult from whom a child or adolescent gathers strength.” Segal noted that in many cases such an adult turns out to be a teacher.)

At another presentation, a school administrator said, “You seem to enjoy speaking with educators.”

I replied, “I do.”

She asked, “What makes it most enjoyable?”

I had been asked the same question on other occasions and thus, I did not hesitate to answer, “Teachers and administrators have an enormous influence on the lives of countless kids. Thus, I love sharing with them both the successes and setbacks I have had in my career. My hope is that just as I’ve learned so much from the experiences of others, that people listening to me will learn something that they can use in their work and lives. One of my greatest pleasures is when people write to tell me that they have applied some of the ideas they heard at my workshops and that these ideas have proven beneficial.”

I added, “Not only does their feedback add meaning to my work, but in addition I continue to learn from the strategies they’ve developed based on some of the ideas I discussed. It’s also gratifying to share their strategies with other professionals.”

A Psychologist Searching for “Islands of Competence”

In past columns I have cited the impressive work of caring and creative educators. I should like to do so again in this article, with special focus on the impact of a strength-based approach when working with students.

A couple of years ago I was very fortunate to meet Dr. Steven Baron, a school and clinical psychologist working on Long Island, New York. We corresponded on several occasions, and it was apparent that we held similar positions about the need to direct more energy to identifying and utilizing the strengths of students rather than on simply focusing on what my colleague Sam Goldstein and I refer to as “fixing deficits.” In 2011 Steve attended a weeklong seminar that I conduct each summer on Cape Cod sponsored by the New England Educational Institute. The seminar focuses on “resilience across the lifespan,” exploring variables that contribute to resilience from childhood through our elderly years.

During the 2011-2012 school year Steve was kind enough to e-mail me examples of a number of interventions he had undertaken with students, parents, and teachers that were rooted in a strength-based, resilience model. His examples demonstrate the effective use of well-timed questions and observations to encourage parents and educators to reflect upon the assets of each child and adolescent. I asked Steve if he would allow me to share some of his vignettes with other professionals via my writings and workshops. He graciously gave me permission to do so.

Since it is the beginning of a new school year and this article is focused on education, I thought it an appropriate opportunity to offer a couple of Steve's stories. My hope is that these examples will illuminate the benefits of employing a strength-based approach, an approach that nurtures creative interventions for enriching the lives of students.

In describing the case material provided by Steve, I thought it best to use with little exception his actual words since they capture his thinking and impressive work. To avoid any confusion I have placed Steve's words in italics. The comments I offer are in regular print.

I was chairing a meeting about a fourth grade boy who has a significant reading difficulty and tends to shut down and avoid doing work due to his frustration. His teachers are very frustrated with him. As the meeting began I asked the mother to talk about her concerns and as she listed them I could feel the vibe in the room turn increasingly sad. Then the special education teacher and classroom teacher each validated the boy's difficulties, adding to the concerns voiced by the mother. An air of helplessness and hopelessness filled the room. Finally, I asked the mother, "What do you see as your son's strengths? What part of his personality is captivating for you?"

As we shall see, it was very important for Steve to introduce the question of strengths given the pessimism that dominated the meeting. I was also taken by his use of the word "captivating." It is not a word that I typically hear at a school conference, but it certainly set a more positive tone.

The mom thought for a few seconds and responded, "He is a good boy. He is just so frustrated." After a pause she stated, "He really likes art." I asked the mom to elaborate on this and she went on to explain that he loves to draw and in fact is very talented at it. His classroom and special education teachers had no ideas about this. I then asked if perhaps his love of art could be incorporated into learning activities. For instance, I said instead of reading about George Washington maybe he can draw a picture of him and describe some interesting facts about him. At that point the two teachers began to strategize about how they could utilize his talents.

Steve then offered an astute observation of the impact that his question had on the staff.

In just a few minutes the tone of the meeting went from despair to invigoration and enthusiasm. After the meeting one of the staff members who attended told me how she loved the question I asked and she could see the palpable shift in the room after the question was raised. I really think it was just as uplifting for the staff as it was for the parent.

The following is another example of the significance of actively identifying a child's strengths:

One of my responsibilities as a School Psychologist is to run Committee on Special Education meetings in which we review students who are receiving special education services and then make recommendations for the following school year. I chaired a meeting of a seventh grade boy with a diagnosis of ADHD who also had learning challenges. As the meeting started I could immediately sense that the parents, both of whom were present, were very down on their son. They spoke about his poor motivation for school, his tendency to lie and steal at home (he was also accused of stealing an exam at school, but it could not be proven) and how they did not trust him. The teachers joined in, going along with the parents' criticisms of this youngster. As the meeting was unfolding I began to think about a strength-based approach and how I could apply it to this situation. The tone was so negative you could feel it in the air. I then asked what assets the group felt this student had. They could not name any. I then reflected how difficult it must be for this child if the main adults in his life are saying they don't trust him.

This last observation, although seemingly simple, had a far-reaching effect. What Steve accomplished was to encourage the people at the meeting to become more empathic and to consider this young adolescent's perspective. Steve's comment served as a catalyst to shift the mindset of the adults in the room from viewing this boy as someone who was unmotivated and a liar to a youngster who was struggling and vulnerable. His intervention bore positive results.

At this point the room became silent. The parents went on to say that all he does is play video games and look for ways to win on various websites. They went on to say that he has recently developed an interest in magic, but they felt it interferes with his studies. I responded that here are two opportunities to capitalize on his strengths. I suggested to his parents that they make time to watch him perform magic on a daily basis as he teaches himself tricks from the internet. I also suggested that since he is so adept at finding ways to beat his video games he can be encouraged to write it down and put it in

book form and even share it with the class. This would not only help establish a sense of competence and improve his interactions with others but also work on his written language deficits.

Similar to the first example, Steve's invitation to look at strengths led to *a marked change in the atmosphere. The teacher and parents immediately supported the idea and the teacher even offered to bind his book. In addition, this seemed to free up the other people in the room to begin to come up with things they have seen which they could apply to promote this young man's competencies. We came up with a very exhaustive list of ideas. It was so exciting to see firsthand how this model helps to deliver hope and optimism.*

The Benefits of Thinking Outside the Box

Given the emergence of the field of positive psychology, a clinician or educator asking about a student's strengths may seem an obvious, even essential, tactic to take. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Far too often at school meetings only lip service is paid to articulating a student's strengths. Instead, much of the session is devoted to naming and fixing deficits. We must not ignore the difficulties a student is encountering, but it has been our experience that by identifying, reinforcing, and displaying a student's strengths, the student will be more willing to address and confront his or her areas of vulnerability.

Creativity and thinking outside the box are demanded on the part of adults when engaged in shifting the focus from fixing deficits to building islands of competence. This was especially evident in Steve's second example when at first glance the suggestion to apply a strength or interest (the use of magic) was seen as another obstacle to success in school. However, Steve skillfully illustrated the ways in which this interest could be incorporated within rather than interfere with this boy's educational program.

As I reflected upon the illustrations Steve sent me, I could not help but think of numerous examples that Sam and I describe in one of our most recent books *Raising Resilient Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)*. I have found that thinking outside the box is essential if we are to help struggling children. For instance, in this book we highlight Laurie, a girl obsessed with movie star magazines, whose parents used her interest and knowledge of movie stars to develop what basically amounted to a social skills training game. The game involved Laurie and her parents examining photos of movie stars from her magazines and creating a story of how the movie star felt in the photo and what would make this star or any person feel that way. This game provided a format for teaching Laurie about emotions and coping behaviors, skills often lacking in

children with ASD. In addition, Laurie's teachers used her preoccupation with movie stars to facilitate her writing skills.

A Dream

At many of my workshops, I mention a dream I have, namely, that schools would develop a roster that contained each student's name. Next to the name would be what that student considered to be his or her island of competence and next to this information would be at least one idea generated by educators of how to reinforce and display that strength in the school setting. I realize this is not an easy task, even more challenging at a secondary school level. Perhaps we can begin by simply asking ourselves when we are thinking about a particular student, "What are this student's strengths and how might I apply them as part of my educational strategies?" As Steve Baron has demonstrated, a consideration of these kinds of questions can be invigorating for staff, helping to create interventions that will enhance the motivation and learning of students.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>