



Creating Strength-Based Classrooms and Schools

A Practice Guide For Classrooms and Schools



Alberta
Mentoring
Partnership

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Introduction

Interest in strength-based practice as a way to enhance the positive development of children and youth has increased significantly as practitioners, educators, researchers and community care providers shift their attention from the prevention of specific problems to a more positive, holistic view on youth development. Interventions have moved increasingly toward creating a coordinated sequence of positive experiences and providing key developmental supports and opportunities. Rather than the traditional perspective of engaging a person with a problem orientation and risk focus, a strength-based approach seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capabilities that can transform the lives of people in positive ways (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Barton, 2005; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

If schools are able to teach young people to have a critical mind and a socially oriented attitude, they will have done all that is necessary. Students will then become equipped with those qualities which are prerequisite for citizens living in a healthy democratic society.

Albert Einstein

Although every adult who interacts with a youth educates in some way, it is in the school setting that teachers, support staff and collaborating community members have a significant opportunity to facilitate students' academic achievement and healthy social development in a safe, caring and supportive learning environment.

As Cummins (1996) has stated, "Human relationships are the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method of teaching literacy, or science, or math. When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike."

To help educators leverage these opportunities with students, the Alberta Mentoring Partnership has developed a resource to support those wishing to explore how to work from the underlying values, principles and philosophy of strength-based practice. As well, this resource will help you develop a better understanding of the benefits mentoring initiatives can have in a school



What is a Strength-Based Approach?

A strength-based approach emphasizes an individual's (in this case, young person's) existing strengths, capabilities and resources. Those who embrace a strength-based perspective believe all youth and their families have strengths, resources and the ability to recover from adversity. This perspective replaces an emphasis on problems, vulnerabilities and deficits. A strength-based approach is developmental and process-oriented. It identifies and reveals a young person's internal strengths and resources as they emerge in response to specific life challenges. A strength-based paradigm uses a different language (see appendices A and B) to describe a person's difficulties and struggles. It allows one to see opportunities, hope and solutions rather than problems and hopelessness.

The strength-based approach is not about denying that youth experience problems and challenges and that these issues do need to be addressed. When the problem becomes the starting point, with an emphasis on what the young person lacks, a dependency is created on the helping profession with lowered positive expectations and opportunities for change blocked.

This dependency is disempowering and often results in the following (Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996; Sharry, 2004) outcomes:

- Labeling and, therefore, limiting of options
- Non-identification of the youth's unique capabilities and strengths
- Focusing on the can'ts as opposed to the cans.
- Ignoring potential growth that can result from adversity
- Professionals prescribing programming rather than youth identifying their own solutions
- Professionals looking for patterns, such as broken homes, dysfunctional neighborhoods and poverty, to explain difficulties
- Interventions lacking credibility to clearly show cause versus effect

If we ask people to look for deficits, they will usually find them, and their view of the situation will be colored by this. If we ask people to look for successes, they will usually find it, and their view of the situation will be colored by this.

Kral (1989)

Principles of Strength-Based Practice

The strength-based approach draws one away from procedures, techniques and knowledge as the keys to change. Instead, it reminds us that every youth holds the key to his or her own transformation and meaningful change process.

Everything a school does teaches values including the way teachers and other adults treat students, the way the principal treats teachers, the way the school treats parents, and the way students are allowed to treat school staff and each other.

Thomas Lickona (1991)

The real challenge is whether educators are willing to embrace this approach to working with students. If so, then change needs to start with the educators, not with the students. It means being part of preparing students to learn, not just teaching when students appear willing to learn. A strength-based approach involves a different way of thinking about students and of interpreting the ways they cope with life challenges. With a strength-based mindset, one engages to invite curious exploration of “what can be” based upon a clear set of values and attitudes.

The following principles are the foundation for guiding and implementing strength-based practice (O’Connell, 2006; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005):

- 1) An absolute belief that every student has potential. Their unique strengths and capabilities will determine their evolving story and define who they are rather than what they’re not.
- 2) What we focus on becomes a student’s reality. Focus on what a student can do rather than on what they can’t do. See challenges as opportunities to explore, not something to avoid. Start with small successes and build upon them to create hope and optimism.
- 3) Being mindful that the language we use creates a reality – both for the educators and the student. (e.g., Saying “It looks like you tried doing this exercise another way; let’s see how it worked for you.” as opposed to saying, “Did you not hear what I told the other students?”).

- 4) Belief that change is inevitable and all students can and will be successful. All students have the urge to succeed, to explore the world around them and to contribute to their communities.
- 5) Positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships. Students need to know school staff care and will be there for them unconditionally.
- 6) What a student thinks about themselves and their reality is primary. Therefore, educators must value and start the change process with what is important to the student . It's the student's story that's important, not the expert's.
- 7) Students have more confidence in journeying to the future (or the unknown) when they are encouraged to start with what they already know.
- 8) Capacity building is a process and a goal. Change is a dynamic process. Your ongoing support of this change has a cumulative effect.
- 9) It is important to value differences and the essential need to collaborate. Effective change is a collaborative, inclusive and participatory process.



Implications of Strength-Based Practice In Education

A shift to the strength-based paradigm requires careful attention by educators to system change processes, curriculum and instructional practice, student rapport and evaluation, and appropriate research and best practices.

The stance we take in relation to others reflects choice. We can position ourselves in ways that invite respect, curiosity, and connection. We can also position ourselves in ways that invite judgment, disconnection, and disapproval. The stance we take has profound effects on relationship and is shaped by our values and conceptual assumptions

(Madsen, 1999).

The role of a strength-based school culture

Developing and sustaining a strength-based school culture requires commitment and leadership that reflects and models its principles. It is about having a strength-based way of thinking, describing and practicing that's consistent and purposefully supported by all staff and supporting community volunteers (McCashen, 2005; O'Connell, 2006).

A strength-based school culture has the following characteristics;

- Understands that a strength-based approach is a philosophy based on values and guiding principles for working with all students to bring about change.
- Relates to students in ways that demonstrate positive attitudes about their dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities.

- Creates conditions and unique opportunities for teachers and students to identify, value and draw upon their strengths and capacity in ways that creates meaningful and sustainable progression towards change and goals.
- Provides and mobilizes resources in ways that complements a student's existing strengths and resources as opposed to compensating for perceived deficits. It is a holistic approach of combining excellent instruction with supporting the student's well being.
- Acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between students and adults (e.g., Not – "I'm the teacher and your role is to respect me and learn from me." Rather – "Being at school is an opportunity for us to learn and I'm looking forward to getting to know you so I can make learning meaningful and a positive experience for you.").
- Seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural barriers to a student's desired goals, growth and self-determination.

A strength-based culture is one where school leadership, staff, families, community and volunteers are supported and invited into open and honest communication. Expectations about all aspects of work, performance, attitudes and behaviours are clear as are everyone's rights and responsibilities. There is a shared vision and responsibility for achieving that vision. Success is celebrated and good practice acknowledged.

The role of a holistic view of students and school success

In an era when school systems are feeling overwhelmed by the problems and challenges facing children and youth, educators are beginning to recognize that cognition and affect are interrelated processes and have a significant impact on one another. There is a growing acknowledgement that student academic achievement and well-being are the two most important goals of public education. The major contributors to each of these outcome goals are excellent instructional practices and positive in-school and out of school environments that are relationship-focused and contextually strength-based (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Children and youth can and will respond to the realistic challenges and expectations for academic success when educators show they believe in students' potential for great things and focus on supporting them to explore, understand and experience their strengths and capacities through supportive relationships, student focused interactions, differential learning environments and strength-based instructional practices. Although academic excellence will always be an important focus and mandate of schools, its achievement is dependent on the constructive and healthy social development of the students (Walsh & Park-Taylor, 2005).

Schools play an important role in nurturing student well-being because of the support and mentoring influence all school staff have in the lives of students. It has been said that parents may be the primary influence in a child's life, but school staff are the second parent in a child's life and, for some children, the only parental influence.

See Appendix C for a list of activities that school professionals can do to support building the social capacity of students.

The role of supporting the educator

If we are going to ask teachers to practice from a strength-based perspective, the school system needs to support teachers developing a world view that sees the cup as half full. In addition, they will need resources that nurture and reinforce that perspective.

The characteristics and beliefs of strength-based teachers can be enhanced when they are supported by colleagues and administrative staff in the following ways (Benard, 1998; McCashen, 2005):

Provide opportunities for school staff to reflect on and discuss their personal beliefs about resilience and strength-based principles: What does it mean in our classrooms and schools if all kids are resilient and at potential? Answering this question as an individual and then coming to a consensus on the answer as a team is the first step towards creating classrooms or schools that taps into their students' strengths and capacities.

Form a strength-based practice study group: Provide opportunity and resources to learn about strength-based practices, the role of positive youth development and resilience.



Share personal stories of individuals who successfully overcame the odds. Who was the person in our lives that made the difference and what was it about that relationship that made the difference? Polakow (1995) stated that “It is important to read about struggles that lead to empowerment and to successful advocacy, for resilient voices are critical to hear within the at-risk wasteland.”

Focus on the school climate: Schools and classrooms that have strength-based cultures and capacity building experiences are often described as being like “family,” “a home,” “a community I belonged to.” Creating a safe haven is just as important for teachers as it is for students. It is about being inclusive, respectful, encouraging, honest, socially just and supportive.

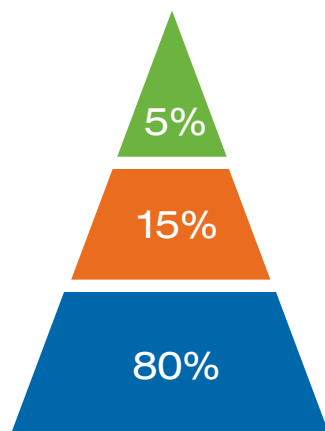
Foster school-community collaboration to coordinate services needed by students and families: If one is to be strength-based, the needs of the whole student must be considered and may require the support of school, family and community in collaborative ways. These supports may include professionals, organizations, information, knowledge, material resources and

decision-making resources. In a strengths-based approach, the types of resources are as important, as how they complement a young person’s existing strengths and goals. Using services to complement student capacity is different than trying to find ways to repair perceived deficits in a person. If external resources and supports are not offered in the context of what is meaningful and do not build on the student’s existing strengths and resources, the whole experience can undermine the student’s ability to learn and be self-determining. It can send messages that say to the young person: “You have no strengths that are relevant” or “You cannot cope or change your life,” or “You need our expertise.”

A strength-based perspective starts with “what’s right with people.” External resources should be added only when required and in ways that are complementary to a person’s strengths and goals.

A student’s strengths and capabilities are supported as necessary by resources in their natural and school networks.

Supports based on Student Profiles



Impoverished Profile: Collaborative-based assistance: intense, comprehensive and long-term focused that requires sustained help.

Vulnerable Profile: Purposeful one-on-one assistance and emotional support to help students facing challenges and stressors.

Resilient Profile: Promotion of strength-based adult/peer interaction that lead to pro-active academic, social, & emotional programs/interactions and relationship building that promotes positive youth development for all children and youth.

Building Staff Capacity: Nurturing and sustaining a belief in a strength-based perspective is not only the critical task of teachers; it should be a primary focus of the school administration.

Teachers need the same concepts and resources as their students: caring relationships with colleagues; positive beliefs, expectations, and trust on the part of administration; and ongoing opportunities to reflect, engage in dialogue, and make decisions together. It is critical that the school culture be supportive of creative teachers who are attempting to respond to students' stories, create opportunities for further training, devote time for staff to request support and share successes, and, finally, create opportunities to be mentored by other teachers.

A good resource of collegial mentoring is *Mentoring: Perspectives on School-Based Teacher Education* by Donald McIntyre, Hazel Hagger and Margaret Wilkin (eds).

The role of relationship building and mentoring

Research is clear that the successful development of a transformative, strength-based culture in schools is created by cultivating relationships, beliefs, expectations and willingness to connect and share power. It is not achieved solely by creating or improving programs.

Schools need to develop caring relationships between all members of the school community: students, teachers, administration, parents and volunteers. Certain programmatic approaches can provide the structure for developing these relationships, and for providing opportunities for active student involvement (e.g., small group processes, cooperative learning, peer helping, cross-age mentoring, and community service) (Children's Express, 1993).

Research has indicated that among the most frequently encountered positive role models for children and youth, outside their circle of family

members, was a teacher. They are described as caring individuals who develop relationships with students by being interested in, actively listening to, and validating the feelings of students who may be struggling. They also get to know the strengths and gifts of the students and clearly convey both directly and indirectly that the student matters.

Schools are in a unique position to help students thrive and meet academic and social challenges with confidence and success. School-based mentoring can also engage the skills, resources and people from the wider community. It provides genuine support for teachers in their challenging and multi-faceted roles. School-based programs create additional benefits in terms of inter generational exchange, relationships across class and social divides and community network building (Keller, 2010).

Formal and Informal mentoring-relational initiatives:

- a) School-based formal mentoring: An increased recognition of the positive influence of mentoring relationships, coupled with a growing number of children and young people in need of support, has resulted in significant growth in school-based programs. The school-based model occurs over a sustained period of time and features established risk-management practices and an effective relationship building focus. The majority of formal in-school mentoring programs result from a partnership between a school, or school jurisdiction, with an established mentoring organization such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. They generally have the following characteristics:

A school can create a coherent environment, a climate, more potent than any single influence ... so potent that for at least six hours a day it can override almost everything else in the lives of children.

Ron Edmond

In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again.

Agee and Evans, 1960

- Schools, or school jurisdictions, enter into a formal partnership agreement with the mentoring organization.
- Volunteers (mentors) are selected, trained and supported by the mentoring organization.
- Mentors commit to meeting with students for an hour a week throughout the school year.
- Mentors meet one-to-one with the students at the school during the school day.

- Teachers or other school personnel refer students who could benefit from the mentoring relationship.
- Mentors and students will often spend some time on school related work but will also engage in other activities (such as playing sports and games, writing a story, doing artwork, exploring an area of interest on the Internet) that help build a strong relationship.

Teen Mentoring Programs are a growing trend within school-based programming. Teen mentors, generally high school students but with a growing number of upper middle school students, fill the role of the volunteer. The standards and characteristics of the program remain as listed above.

- b) School-based informal mentoring: It is important to recognize the existence and value of many informal relationships that exist in schools across Alberta. A variety of activities and programs provide support for students to make positive connections, build strong relationships and develop resiliency. Schools offer programs in character education, skill building and career awareness.

Transition practices, cross-age projects and cultural activities are common. Some schools are fortunate to have parent and community groups who volunteer to provide literacy and homework support while others have great coaches who volunteer with students in sports activities. In some communities, organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, a 4-H Club or Junior Achievement provide after-school activities that encourage wellness and academic success. These examples highlight informal relationships that support students' feeling more connected to school and community. In turn, these students demonstrate more positive attitudes towards school and are more likely to complete high school.

Mentoring, whether formal, informal, community-based or school-based, has at its core the opportunity for children and youth, particularly those at-risk, to make connections and develop positive relationships that can provide the guidance and role-modelling they need to be healthy, well-educated and resilient members of society.

To learn about setting up a mentoring program in your school, see *Framework for Building Mentoring Relationships in Schools* on the Alberta Mentoring Partnership website (www.albertamentors.ca).

To learn more about the characteristics of effective mentoring, see *Strength-based Mentoring: A Practice Guide for Mentors* on the Alberta Mentoring Partnership website (www.albertamentors.ca).

The role of partnering with community

Essential to your success will be the collaboration among different community care providers. Ideally, all organizations will embrace the same strength-based philosophy and will strive to develop staff skills in effective engagement, collaboration, facilitating and mentoring of complex youth and their families. Community agencies and schools will require more of a youth-centered and collaborative template that allows for targeting of interventions based on relationship and capacity building and strengthening key resilience processes that are meaningful to the youth and the community in which they live.

There also needs to be a commitment from all youth agencies to work as partners and include local schools, parents and other significant community supports in developing informed and evolving effective practice models of nurturing resiliency for all youth and their families. In doing so, youth and their families become more resourceful in dealing with crises, weathering persistent stresses, and meeting future challenges as opposed to developing dependence on the system (Taylor, LoSciuto, & Porcellini, 2005).

A strength-based collaborative approach in a school has the following characteristics:

- Seeks to understand the crucial variables contributing to youth resilience and well-functioning families/communities.
- Provides a common language and preventive philosophy.
- Sees social capacity building and resilience as common goals that provide a conceptual map to guide prevention and evaluation. Intervention strategies are youth driven and relationship focused; the young person's story determines the resources to be introduced and drawn upon.

- Engages all youth and their families people with respect and compassion.
- Perceives capacity building as a dynamic process that evolves over a life time.
- Affirms the reparative potential in youth and seeks to enhance strengths as opposed to deficits.
- Promotes successful change through connecting a youth's strengths and their aspirations.

A good resource on exploring the role of connectedness in schools can be found at *Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*, Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.).

Regardless of the context in which mentoring occurs, it has the undeniable power to bring about positive change for many children and youth. Like adults, children and youth are social beings who live their lives in the context of their relationship with others. The goal of mentoring is to connect to and engage children and youth, forming a positive relationship based on empowerment, altruism and mutuality, thus laying the essential basis for the child or youth to move towards ever more positive outcomes and competencies in life.

As teachers and other educators reflect on the atmosphere, they create in their schools and classrooms, the following questions can be asked and discussed among trusted colleagues (Thomsen, 2002);

Do I (We As A School) Provide Care and Support?

Do I communicate in words and actions that I truly care about, respect, and support my students? Research clearly indicates that students who feel cared for and believe they are liked by their teacher will do almost anything (even those odd requests like adding fractions- Benard, 1991)

Do I (We As A School) Set and Communicate High Expectations?

Do I truly believe that all students can succeed and that I provide the necessary support for that to happen? Do I address learning styles and different intelligences in my teaching? Is there an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they are good at? Do I gladly make accommodations for different styles and personalities?

Do I (We As A School) Provide Opportunities for Meaningful Participation?

What opportunities do I create for students to contribute to the constructive learning environment of the classroom or school context? What roles and responsibilities can students assume? Could they take turns teaching each other or support tutoring younger students?

Do I (We As A School) Increase Pro-social Bonding?

How can I promote pro-social bonding? Do I use cooperative learning strategies? Do I connect students in ways that help them get to know one another? Do I give respect and expect it from others?

Do I (We As A School) Set Clear, Consistent Boundaries?

Do we, as a class or school community, develop clear rules and expectations? Are there logical consequences and are they expressed consistently and fairly? Are all teachers and staff on the same page with the expectations?

Do I (We As A School) Teach Life Skills?

Am I teaching life skills that help students make decisions or resolve conflicts? Do my students get to practice making decisions? Can they choose from a variety of topics in projects we are engaging them in? Are there options for them to demonstrate their knowledge? Do they get opportunities to work as a team member? Do I model courtesy and politeness and expect it from my students.



Conclusion

The strengths-based approach is not a model for practice; it is an approach to practice based upon a philosophy and depends on values and attitudes. Strength-based values and attitudes are the primary drivers of the intervention process and outcomes rather than not skills and knowledge. The strength-based approach has a contagious quality and makes deep, intuitive sense to those who reflect a “half cup full” attitude in life. It is a powerful and profound philosophy for practice that

has the power to transform and build the lives of those being cared for and those facilitating the care process. For many, it is not only a philosophy of educational practice but also a philosophy for life because it is based on attitudes and values reflecting a deep respect for the worth and value of others.

We must look on our children in need not as problems but as individuals with potential... I would hope we could find creative ways to draw out of our children the good that there is in each of them.

Archbishop
Desmund Tutu



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Strength-Based and Deficit-Based Concepts: A Comparison

Strength-Based Concepts	Deficit-Based Concepts
At-Potential	At-Risk
Strengths	Problems
Engage	Intervene
Persistent	Resistant
Understand	Diagnose
Opportunity	Crisis
Celebrate (i.e. successes)	Punish (i.e. non-compliance)
Time-in	Time-out
Adapt to	Reform
Empower	Control
Process-focused	Behaviour-focused
Dynamic	Static
Movement	Epidemic
Unique	Deviant
Avoids imposition	Dominant knowledge
Validates people's experience	Diagnoses based on norms
People's context is primary	Professional's context is primary
Identifies and builds on strengths	Minimizes people's strengths
Client-centred	Mandate-focused
Professionals adapt to clients	Clients expected to adapt
Meet clients in their environment	Clients always go to professionals
Flexible	Rigid
Focus on potential	Focus on problems
People are inherently social/good	People are inherently selfish/bad
People do the best they can	People do as little as possible
Support	Fix
Client-determined	Expert oriented
Inclusive	Exclusive

Glossary of Strength-Based Terminology

At-Potential:

The human potential for growth, development and/or change. Meant to counter the still popular focus on deficits and risk, this term re-orient's focus on the great potential of children and youth, including those viewed as "at-risk".

Collaborative:

A philosophy and practice of working together toward a common goal.

Community:

A group of people who share a common territory and/or characteristics (i.e. age, culture, religion, sexual orientation, language, interests).

Capacity-building:

An approach focused on the enhancement of individual and/or community capacity.

Core competencies:

Essential skills, abilities and knowledge that are central to health, well-being and success in life.

Developmental Strengths:

The 31 research validated child and youth developmental sub-factors related to resilience and protective factors.

Empathy:

The ability to accurately understand the experience and perspectives of others.

Empower:

To give power and/or authority to another through insight and opportunity.

Engagement:

The degree to which one bonds and builds rapport with another. Research supports this as the most important factor in developing relationships that influence positive growth and change. It also counters the traditional expert driven model of intervention.

Inclusiveness:

A philosophy and practice of being non-discriminatory - To include all.

Influence:

The degree to which one affects the thoughts and actions of another. A positive outcome of meaningful engagement and relationship.

Participatory-approach:

A philosophy and practice of inclusiveness and collaboration with individuals, families, groups other "community" stakeholders.

Persistent:

Diligence and determination toward the object or activity of focus. Countering the traditional deficit based perspective as seeing others as resistant, this is seen as a strength that can be engaged in constructive ways through meaningful relationship and activities.

Person-centred:

An evidence informed approach first developed by humanistic psychologists to engage people in positive development through authentic relationships and client-directed activities.

Process-focused:

An approach that honours human growth and development as a process that may not appear to be linear in nature.

Protective Factors:

The positive relationships, resources, activities and internal characteristics that enhance well-being and insulate individuals and/or communities from harm.

Relationship-based:

A research validated approach that holds the quality of relationship and engagement as central to positive growth, development and/or change.

Resilience:

Traditionally viewed as the ability to overcome adversity, research links the development of resilience with internal characteristics and the presence of important relationships, resources and activities.

Resiliency Factors:

The 10 research validated child and youth factors related to resilience and core competencies.

Strengths:

Inner characteristics, virtues and external relationships, activities and connections to resources that contribute to resilience and core competencies.

Strength-based approach:

Focus on individual and/or community strengths that place emphasis on meaningful relationships and activities.

Sustainability:

The ability to maintain the positive benefits, growth, development and capacity of an initiative when the temporary components of the project have expired/been removed.

Strategies for Creating a Strength-Based Culture in Schools for Students

(Rutter, 1984; Delpit, 1996; Seligman, 2007; O'Connell, 2006; Mills, 1991)

Teacher Level Approaches

- 1) Respect and demonstrate kindness to all students: A very simple way to let all students know that they are valued is to acknowledge and greet them by name as often as possible through out the day – especially at the beginning of the school day. School staff need to be encouraged to display interest in students through thoughtful words and a pleasant manner.
- 2) Promote opportunities for belonging and ownership: Students need to be allowed to express their opinions and imagination, make choices, problem solve, work with and help others, and give their gifts back to the community in a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment. Students develop a sense of pride and acceptance when they are encouraged to participate in their school by helping in ways that reflect their interests and strengths – helping out in the classrooms, being peer mediators, tutoring younger or special needs children, being asked to support developing ways for the school to meet its goals, etc. After-school involvement in arts and crafts, drama, sport teams, clubs and activities can also increase school bonding.
- 3) Provide opportunity for caring relationships: There is a saying that the key to real estate is location, location, and location. The key to building the confidence and resilience of youth is relationship, relationship, and relationship. Students need to know that they can have supportive and caring relationships with school staff and peers – relationships that reflect trust, respect and non-judgment. School staff can convey caring support to students by listening, validating their feelings and by demonstrating kindness, compassion and respect. Strength-based teachers refrain judging, and do not take a student's behaviour personally, understand that youth are trying to do the best that they can, based upon what they have learned to date and the way they perceive the world they have been raised in. It is through caring and supportive relationships that a student develops their personal values and sense of hope and optimism – not because they were just told they should.
- 4) Recognize and affirm each student's worth: Students need to be challenged to do their best and express confidence in their ability to do many things well. It is important to have clear expectations and encourage perseverance and critical thinking. Celebrate successes, no matter how small, and acknowledge original ideas or unique points of view.
- 5) Emphasize cooperation rather than competition: Structure environments so that students feel safe, secure, and ready to learn. Acknowledge individual improvement as opposed to who has done the best in the class. Give recognition freely and compliment individual and group efforts
- 6) Positive and high expectations: Teacher's with realistic and high expectations can structure and guide behaviour, and can also challenge students beyond what they believe they can do. Effective teachers recognize students' strengths, mirror them, and help students see where they are strong. It is essential to support the overwhelmed student who has been labeled or oppressed in using their personal strengths and capacities to experience thriving by helping them to:
 - 1) not take personally the adversity in their lives;
 - 2) not to see adversity as permanent; and
 - 3) use the student's own strength, interests, goals and dreams as the beginning point for learning. These steps help tap the student's intrinsic motivation for learning.

- 7) Help students discover their strengths and capacities: Many students do not know what their strengths are as they have never been encouraged to explore. Provide time for students to imagine themselves doing something outstanding and worthwhile – their passion. After they set some personal goals, discuss ways to reach them and what personal strengths and supportive relationships would look like to help them towards being successful.
- 8) Model tenacity, emotional maturity and healthy attitudes: A teacher is not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confident and positive role model for personal identification. Be genuine organized, consistent and use appropriate coping skills.
- 9) Involve parents or significant relationships in the student's social network: Help parents see that they are their child's most important teachers, and that as role models they need to spend time teaching, training and exhibiting those habits and values they want their child to have. It is about working together and being supportive of each other. A good resource for parents is "Raising Resilient Children" by Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein and "The Optimistic Child" by Martin Seligman.
- 2) Students participate in developing standards for their work: Working hard and mastering a new task can be frustrating for many students. Time needs to be taken to discuss what is expected and what would be considered successful. By seeing models of excellence and participating in establishing the criteria for success, students know how their efforts will be evaluated and are more easily able to overcome frustration.
- 3) Students have opportunities to work collaboratively: In classrooms where collaborative learning is encouraged, students are given the opportunity to develop and maintain positive relationships with others. These relationships develop and mature over time as the students learn from and are supportive of each other. In collaborative learning, students turn to each other to solve problems, share ideas, and creatively explore new ideas.
- 4) Students participate in meetings to solve classroom problems: Challenges often arise in the classroom and can be used to nurture initiative in students through the use of classroom meetings as oppose to defaulting to the teacher's authority. Calling a meeting conveys the message that "In this classroom, we do not regard problems as something to avoid or that we screwed up. Rather, it is about you as students having the ability and power to solve your problems." Classroom meeting provide the opportunity for students to practice sharing ideas and listening to the story of others.
- 5) Students have the opportunity to make choices: Providing students choices encourages creativity and the realization that there are options. A choice may simply be selecting a book to read, but choices can also allow students to decide how they can express themselves through their work. To better understand what "makes them click" and how they can express their story in ways that others understand.

Classroom Level Approaches

Fostering resilience through strength-based strategies in the classroom does not require teachers to add another component to their curriculum. Rather, strength-based teachers provide students opportunities to develop their social and resilience capacity during daily instruction – it is how one teaches. Bickart and Wolin (1997) have outlined the following strategies:

- 1) Students are involved in assessing their own work and in setting goals for themselves: Constructive feedback (instead of just marks) helps students to honestly consider the quality of their work, think about what has been learned and understand how they performed in relation to expectations. As a student's insight develops, they will begin to evaluate their own work while supported by teachers asking "What was easy (or difficult) for you?" or "What might you do differently next time?"

- 6) Students feel connected in a classroom structured as a community: When classrooms are organized as relational communities rather than as authority-based hierarchies, a group synergy emerges. It is in this atmosphere that students feel safe and learn to build those resiliency factors like humor, positive peer relationships, differential thinking, respect for the cultural views of others etc.
- 7) Students play an active role in setting rules for classroom interactions and behaviour: Developing expectations and boundaries is a way for students to develop an internal value and moral system. Creating their own rules helps them to develop responsibility for their own behaviour, for one another, and for the group.
- 8) Students experience success: Starting with what students can be successful at and building upon cumulative successful experiences will enlist their intrinsic motivation and positive momentum. It keeps the students in a hopeful frame of mind to learn and motivation to take on challenges as a way to learn.
- 9) Students understanding that they have innate resilience: Help students understand that they have the ability and capacities to construct the meaning they give to everything that happens to them (it is their story and their understanding of that story is extremely important). Support them to recognize how their own conditioned thinking (such as they are not good enough or I'm not acceptable to others) robs them of being able to draw upon their innate resilience.
- 10) Students experiencing growth opportunities: This would include asking questions that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking and self-awareness and dialogue around personal areas of interest; making learning more experiential and reflective of differential learning styles; providing opportunities for creative expression (e.g art, writing, theatre, video productions, etc.) and for helping others (community service, peer helping, cooperative learning, etc.) involving students in curriculum planning and choosing learning experiences; using participatory evaluation strategies; and involving students in creating the governing rules of the classroom.

School Level Approaches

- 1) Teacher support: Just as teachers can create a strength-based environment in the school classroom, administrators can create a school environment that supports teachers' resilience. They can promote caring relationships among colleagues; demonstrate positive beliefs, expectations, and trust; provide ongoing opportunities and time, in small groups, to reflect, dialogue and make decisions together as well as share success stories.
- 2) Staff development: Teachers should reflect personally on their beliefs about strength-based principles and practice, and also, and exchange experiences and learnings about successes in enhancing resilience and applying strength-based strategies. They should be provided with resources and training to support their personal and professional development towards being resilient and strength-based. Reaching a staff consensus about innate resilience is the first step towards creating a strength-based classroom or school culture that nurtures resilience in students.
- 3) School-community collaborations: Fostering the development of the whole student needs to involve the school, family, and community collaboration. It is important that the collaborations are based upon the same philosophy of strength-based principles and the goal of resilience. Hence, schools need to be purposeful in what community collaborations they engage in so the students experience consistent relationships and messages.

Suggested Resources:

How Full Is Your Bucket by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton

Strength-Based Teaching by Tim Carman

What's Right with You by Barry Duncan

The Resiliency Factor by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte

Celebrate What's Right with the World by Dewitt Jones (<http://celebratetraining.com>)



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