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BOOK REVIEWS

A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

Complete Edition

Edited by: Lorin W. Anderson and David Krathwohl,
Contributors: Peter Airasian, Kathleen A. Cruikshank,
Richard E. Mayer, Paul Pintrich, James Raths, and Merlin C. Wittrock
New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001

Reviewed by Jack Conklin, Georgian Court University

I believe that every educator needs to read and incorporate *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing* as soon as possible. This four-year-old book updates and revises Benjamin Bloom's famed *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (1956) and its well-known categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Bloom's classic taxonomy is on every teacher educator and curriculum developer's mind as he or she works with future teachers or with a new curriculum. His hierarchy has been a major aid to educators planning for and considering all levels of thinking and focusing on the inclusion of higher-order thinking in lessons, units of instruction, and even statewide and national curricula. Its emphasis on cognitive objectives has helped educators create meaningful learning events and, consequently, worthwhile learning outcomes in students.

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Bloom's classic work is a hierarchy, and as a hierarchy its higher levels are built on each level below.

- The *knowledge* level refers to the ability to remember facts, concepts, or principles. That level would be reflected in the ability to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, a prayer, or a multiplication table.
- The second level, *comprehension*, requires students to understand what they know and to “translate” the known into their own words. To use the Pledge of Allegiance example above, we know that a kindergartener can recite the Pledge of Allegiance, but it would take a sophisticated fifth-grader to demonstrate that he or she understands the complex nature of the Pledge of Allegiance.
- The third level, *application*, assumes that the learner knows and understands something before using this knowledge and understanding in a unique event without being prompted to do so. To expand on our multiplication example, a student who knows that $7 \times 5 = 35$ and understands the principles associated with multiplication might realize that she spends thirty-five hours a week in school if she has a seven-hour day and attends five days a week.

As you can see by these examples at the lower end of the hierarchy, one level serves as the basis of what happens above it. The top three levels of the taxonomy require that learners know, understand, and use what they know before thinking in the higher domain. For example, at the fourth level, *analysis*, learners might be asked to break down the Pledge of Allegiance into its component parts and discuss each element such as “allegiance” or “indivisibility.” At the fifth level, they might be asked to create a new phrase or shorter “pledge” if they were to *synthesize* the original Pledge of Allegiance. And Bloom's highest form of thinking, *evaluation*, requires learners to make judgments about something using selected criteria. In our “pledge” example, students might be asked to *evaluate* the synthesized pledges created by their peers using a set of criteria they either developed or borrowed.

As you will notice, each level in Bloom's hierarchy is more sophisticated than the previous level and requires more cognitive skill to complete. Theoretically a student must be able to know, understand, apply, break down into component parts, and synthesize in order to properly use the intellectual skill of evaluation. Such was Bloom's cognitive hierarchy.

Some history will help explain why Bloom's original taxonomy was developed and ultimately became so important. Before the 1950s, one of the major problems with educational literature was a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of some important words. For example, the verb

“to know” was used by different educators to mean vastly different things. One person might use “know” to mean remembering some facts (a low cognitive skill); another educator might mean that a person must really “know” an entire discipline in all its complexity, modes of inquiry, scope, and sequence (a highly sophisticated set of awarenesses).

Bloom’s taxonomy created a common language between and among educators. Not long before, Ralph Tyler (1949) had already discussed the importance of objectives as tools teachers should use to promote and evaluate student learning. He emphasized the value of having teachers think about the behaviors that learners would be able to perform after a learning event as opposed to thinking about the content to be taught. Others had already discussed the covert nature of learning—that we could not look into a student’s brain and that we needed ways to know that a student had learned. Tyler argued that if we created clear objectives we could “see or hear” what the student had learned. At this juncture in our educational history educators now needed a vehicle to identify different levels of learning and their related behaviors. Bloom and his colleagues set out to solve these problems, among others, and created a working and valuable tool for educators to think about objectives, talk to each other, and create curriculum.

I was ready to endorse *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing* immediately after reading it, but I was hesitant to modify my curriculum because I did not want to confuse undergraduates whose other professors might still be using Bloom’s original construct. However, two considerations helped me to begin promoting the new taxonomy. First, it was especially notable to me that David Krathwohl, one of the authors of Bloom’s original *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, put his imprimatur on this new schema by co-authoring the new hierarchy; then I discovered that Donald Kauchak and Paul Eggen had included the revised taxonomy in the 2005 edition of their *Introduction to Teaching* textbook. As a result, I have modified my curriculum in several courses.

Anderson and Krathwohl’s revision is necessary because over the past half century there have been concerns—even from Benjamin Bloom himself, circa 1971 (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001)—raised both conceptually and empirically with the original hierarchy. This newly edited work is not a typical one: Anderson and Krathwohl do a considerable amount of the writing, and the impressive list of contributors chronicles many of the concerns. Anderson and Krathwohl have identified empirical studies that have been conducted on the taxonomy and even include the findings of a meta-analysis. Though the authors note that there are problems with the meta-analysis because of the size and shape of the data samples, the results are valuable and worth consider-

ing. The data from the meta-analysis recommend reversing the two highest levels: synthesis and evaluation.

But this reversal is only one of the changes that were recommended from the many studied investigations that are reported in the work:

- reviewing much of the current literature on human cognition and learning and modifying the old model;
- revising the way to think about the levels themselves as they recommend placing new and considerable emphasis on metacognition, declarative, and procedural knowledge in their new model;
- recommending that as we write our objectives we need to think about how learners learn and how they think about their own cognition. To that end, as we plan, we need to consider how learners regulate their own metacognitive processes; and
- incorporating contemporary understanding of cognitive-learning theory and newer understandings about memory processing, as well as the distinction between declarative and procedural learning, into their working of a new hierarchy.

As small as these points may seem, they are revolutionary, because the newly created taxonomy now provides a framework for educators to include the latest theory and research in the field of human cognition. Another important recommendation the authors have made is in changing the term of the former “synthesis” level to the new term *create*. This level of the original taxonomy has always been the most difficult for me to teach. Whenever I had my students create a synthesis, my learners’ products tended to reflect Anderson and Krathwohl’s new recommendations rather than Bloom’s original formulation. Anderson and Krathwohl demonstrate in this work that the real nature of a synthesis necessitates creating a new product, and consequently they have re-titled the level *create* and have modified its definition and level.

For a quick review of the new levels consider the following: the new first category (or lowest level), *remember*, is better stated than the former term, “knowledge,” because it is still used in general to mean many different ideas. The new term also better reflects Ralph Tyler’s recommendation that educators focus on a student’s learning at the end of an instructional sequence rather than thinking about the content of the lesson. Remembering through processes like recalling or recognizing is a behavior that a student can demonstrate at the end of a lesson. Knowledge brings us to content.

The new word for the second level, *understand*, better reflects what is meant by the vague term “comprehension,” which often needed explaining. The next two categories of Bloom’s great classic, *apply* and

analyze, remain basically the same and retain much of the same meaning. But the last two levels of the hierarchy switch places: *evaluate* is now in fifth place and the new term *create* (the former “synthesis”) becomes the highest form of thinking and behaving. The authors recommend making the change in part because creating involves inductive thinking, a more complex cognitive task than deduction, which is typically what we use when we evaluate.

Thus the new list looks like this: *Remember; Understand; Apply; Analyze; Evaluate; Create*. With the inclusion of metacognition, procedural, conceptual and factual knowledge, the new model looks something like this:

The Cognitive Process Dimensions						
The Knowledge Dimensions	Level 1 <i>Remember</i>	Level 2 <i>Understand</i>	Level 3 <i>Apply</i>	Level 4 <i>Analyze</i>	Level 5 <i>Evaluate</i>	Level 6 <i>Create</i>
A. Factual Knowledge						
B. Conceptual Knowledge						
C. Procedural Knowledge						
D. Metacognitive Knowledge						

A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing is also filled with practical examples of teachers and curriculum writers using the new taxonomy. Eight chapters analyze teaching or curriculum vignettes on topics as diverse as “adding facts,” “Macbeth,” and “report writing.” The vignettes contain numerous examples of educational objectives written in multiple formats, ranging from behavioral to general. Some of the objectives were associated with metacognitive strategies and related to students learning how to control or manipulate their own thinking. Consequently, these objectives proved to be unique.

For the educational historian, the authors have revisited more than twenty alternative perspectives, from Gagné’s *Conditions of Learning* (1997) to Marzano’s categories found in *Dimensions of Learning* (1997),

in their treatise. These models didn't affect the original cognitive hierarchy, because some of the models presented were not unique; some were too complex an enhancement of Bloom's original work; and some were not intended to replace the original. But the authors reviewed each model and considered the ideas and perspectives in creating this valuable work.

All educators will want to familiarize themselves with *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*; its changes are being implemented throughout the field, and everyone needs to understand them thoroughly before they are implemented in your community.

Maybe you would like to be the first kid on your block. . . .

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The Working Poor: Invisible in America

By David K. Shipler
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal

By Eric Schlosser
New York: First Perennial Edition, 2002;
(originally published by Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

Reviewed by Audrey Ricker, University of Arizona

Unless a teacher works in an affluent district, he or she will have many students from families such as those described in David K. Shipler's *The*

Working Poor: Invisible in America and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Both works examine the ways in which the American dream seems to have gone wrong and ways in which businesses often ignore the needs of people in favor of extra profits.

It's important for teachers to understand the economic pressures and insecurities that plague students from families in such circumstances. They need to understand why these families are living their lives a day at a time, with no hope of receiving benefits—insurance, retirement, travel allowances, or other perks—that teachers themselves might take for granted. Teachers should also know more, for instance, about the unions, training programs, and illegal drug economies that are helping or hurting their students' lives.

Most of all, teachers need to understand the lack of choices their students' families may face. David Shipler's *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* vividly shows the kind of frantic monetary juggling necessary for people earning \$12 an hour or less just to keep the housing, food, and transportation they already have. (Medical and dental care are undreamed-of luxuries for them.) Shipler shows us with case histories and solid economic figures how the odds doom even the best-intentioned working poor. They can't own homes in decent neighborhoods—at least not for long, because they can't own the decent cars they need to get to their jobs. They can't afford the medical care and nutritious food they need to keep their families healthy enough to avoid missing work and losing their jobs.

The Working Poor is not an ethnography, not a qualitative research thesis, but an account of information the author wanted to find and write about. The author spent several years, he tells us in the preface, collecting the firsthand case histories of how such people progress through their lives. He also learned how the businesses they work for were run, and provides a real education in operating a citrus farm, a jobs-training program, a large discount store, and many other operations directly and indirectly involved in exploiting, helping, and always relying on the working poor to exist. At the same time he presents the effects of alcoholism, shop-aholism, child abuse, and drug addiction without blaming the victims. As Shipler shows us, these and other destructive tendencies, created by the pressures of working so hard without getting ahead, are excesses that could happen to anyone in the same situation.

Shipler has not organized the book with definitive chapter headings. The work is written with a more literary feel, sweeping us from beginning to end in a way that makes the reader reluctant to put it down. Those more comfortable with categorization, however, will find a good index at the end.



In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser gives us graphic, carefully documented details of the ways that the fast-food industry has ignored the needs of our citizens—and thus many children—for clean food from healthy animals. *Fast Food Nation*, written like a rich, complex novel with multiple plots, also has a literary feel to its composition. Schlosser's characters include the founders of McDonald's and other fast-food businesses, as well as a manager of a local group of pizza restaurants. Further narratives involve wonderful communities full of family men who enjoyed good jobs with benefits in the meat industry and who helped sustain their families—until their jobs were restructured at a third or less of their former pay—and immigrants bused to the Midwest to live in these once-thriving communities. The newcomers work at restructured jobs in the meat-packing industry, often using methamphetamines in order to withstand the conditions. Of special interest to parents and teachers reading this book are stories of teenagers who work in the retail restaurants, putting their safety, achievement in school, and physical health second to the requirements of their fast-food restaurant bosses.

Schlosser makes many other revealing observations about the industry: franchises required to process and reconstruct most of their food (with the exception of salads); taste and flavors manufactured in special flavor- and odor-producing factories; libel suits filed because criticism might hurt customers' opinions of fast-food companies; and from Europe, the cautionary tale of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (a.k.a. mad cow disease), and vCJD (a.k.a. Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease), its human form, and how it spread under the aegis of agribusiness and government.

Both books reveal to us how the American economy can change almost before our eyes. Shipler's and Schlosser's insights can provide a starting point for educators who want to better understand the forces that affect their students long before they ever enter the classroom.

FROM THE TRENCHES

Strengths and Weaknesses: The Impediments of Formalism

by *Edward G. Rozycki*

. . . [O]ccult causes: the very absurdity which Moliere so happily ridiculed when he made one of his pedantic physicians account for the fact that opium produces sleep by the maxim, Because it has a soporific virtue.

—John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*

Introduction

“Occult” causes abound in education. They are difficult to distinguish from explanations that have some scientific basis. Indeed, it is often lack of knowledge on the part of the explainer that turns a usable concept into semantic puffery. Circular reasoning is a common mark of such pseudo-explanation:

“Why can’t Johnny read this book?” “Because it’s beyond his readiness level!”

“How can you tell that?” “Because, as you say, he can’t read the book!”

Another common one is this:

“How can I get Sammy to behave?” “Reinforce his desirable behavior!”

“How will I know if I have reinforced that behavior?” “If you see him behave!”

Then, of course, there is that good ol’ fashioned distinction between “good kids” and “bad kids.” Good kids you can expect to be good, even when they aren’t, because they merely make a mistake, or misunderstand, or suffer a momentary, uncharacteristic slip. Good kids are worth the investment of a teacher’s time and trouble.

Bad kids, on the other hand, you can rely on to be bad, even when they appear otherwise, because they’re really trying to trick you and lull you into being off your guard, and who knows what mischief they’re up

to when your eyes are off them? Such kids just waste a teacher's time and don't deserve the opportunities so lavishly afforded them.

Weaknesses and Formalism

We tend to overlook the fact that we judge performances in context. That is why people who are generally competent outside the classroom can appear so inept inside it. "Can you read this text?" is not merely a demand to make some sense of it, but often, in school, to identify plot, character, author intent, or at a minimum, to be ready to recast the story in one's own words. I teach philosophical analysis at the university. Educated adults who consider themselves competent readers initially have rough going in my classes when I ask them to analyze a text in the methods of my tradition.

Any individual competence can be recast as a display of weakness if we restrict the manner in which it is performed. Formalisms are the usually social restrictions by which we judge individual achievements. Some formalisms are necessary; others are pernicious.

For example, anyone might traverse a 100-mile stretch of highway in an hour just by exercising a heavy foot on the accelerator pedal. The formalism we call "speed limit" makes this feat difficult, if not impossible. Do we nonetheless complain of a "weakness" in our driving? The recognition of the idea of plagiarism restricts many a student's ability to hand in an impressive essay. Similarly, concepts of theft might interfere with an individual's otherwise quick accumulation of wealth. Yet behavior constrained by rules and regulations is not seen as weakness.

Pernicious formalisms are ones that have been, often unconsciously, introduced as schooling customs from a particular social class or cultural group and that cannot be reasonably expected to be the same for every child. Pernicious formalisms might be the particularly idiosyncratic expectations of an individual teacher. Our schools tend to judge a child's strengths and weaknesses within a framework of expectations that the following constraints are in place and have been adapted to: "Children, even though it is only 8:00 a.m. [or even earlier], behave as though you have had a good breakfast, enough sleep, warm clothing, time to prepare your lessons, supportive parents, emotional calm, high energy despite the long bus trip to school, impeccable manners, and hyper-trained sphincters!"

Academic Formalisms

Then there are the Formalisms of the "subject matter." Whether they are necessary or pernicious is a controversial issue that must be decided on case by case. Whether they even matter is debatable: there is no end

of delight in our society recounting the many examples of successful, wealthy people who were weak in academics.

No students are weak or strong in a given subject except with respect to a task we might assign them. Johnny is never just “too weak” or “strong enough” without provoking the inquiry “For what?” Students who study a foreign language via a reading translation method usually end up weak in communication skills in that language. Phonics advocates fuss that whole-language approaches to reading produce inadequate readers, while whole-language advocates fume to the contrary. Modern approaches to math, some argue, leave students with weak computation skills. Mere computation is not really mathematics, rebut others.

There is a legitimate concern about student strengths and weaknesses. It comes from the recognition that what constitutes the curriculum determines what counts as a given student’s strength or weakness. The curriculum in turn is determined largely by the organizational needs of the school or by mere administrative convenience. It is worrisome, indeed, that administrative convenience might ultimately determine who passes and who fails in the classroom.

Computers, *et alia*

There are, also, the effects of technology on personal competence. Is being a poor speller a weakness, especially since word processors have spell-checkers? Don’t calculators make memorizing “math facts” obsolete? Few people can use a slide rule anymore. Even engineers can let their skills at solving differential equations decline.

We have generally given up the notion that everyone must be prepared to grow and hunt one’s own food. We can and have to depend upon farmers, food processors, and retailers. Must we rebaptize every dependency a weakness?

Harry can enter almost any secure building undetected. Is this ability a strength? It depends. Is he a government investigator, or a burglar?

Louise doesn’t know where the islets of Langerhans are? Is that inability a weakness? It depends. Is she a doctor, or a travel agent?

The moral: Abilities do not necessarily indicate strengths, and inabilities do not necessarily indicate weaknesses.

Pursuing Educational Equity: A Dilemma

The notion of formalism gives us a handle on something that many educators complain about in the present national atmosphere of coercive achievement testing for public schools. The strong test emphasis, the educators complain, interferes with their attempts to reach each child. Such complaints are dismissed as self-serving. But, in fact, “No

Child Left Behind,” or anything vaguely similar, may be a mechanism by which many children are ill-served in the schools.

Purportedly, in pursuit of educational equity, standardized tests are being used—indeed, overused—in public schools as an organizationally convenient means of comparing student abilities. But standardized testing imposes severe and often new levels of formalism in terms of which we evaluate students’ academically relevant behavior. Unless students have received adequate preparation, one ought to expect vast discrepancies in achievement as measured by the tests. Every educator knows, furthermore, that spending most class time preparing for testing is bad curriculum. It is boring to student and teacher alike, and it provokes rebellion and sabotage from both the “good” and the “bad” students and their parents.

Private and parochial schools are special. They are exempt from having to pretend that bubbling in pencil marks on a test grid shows erudition. Their students are not political prisoners.

Edward G. Rozycki, Ed.D., is a twenty-five-year veteran of the school district of Philadelphia. He is an associate professor of education at Widener University, Widener, Pennsylvania.

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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Creating a Culture for Learning

by Sidney Trubowitz

Everywhere we read about efforts to revitalize schools. Such initiatives include restructuring governance by centralizing the power to make decisions, introducing a mandated curriculum for all teachers to follow, and reinforcing an accountability process with a strong focus on test scores. All these school-improvement proposals rely on a belief that change can be imposed from the outside without the participation of teachers, administrators, students, and parents. The likely results of such proposals are the development of learning environments that devote little time to reflection on what constitutes good practice; teachers who function in a mechanical fashion; and, after a momentary flurry of activity, a return to the status quo.

To achieve growth that will be lasting and more than superficial, what is needed are opportunities for public school staffs, parents, students, college faculty, and professional organizations to work together. Their aim must be to build a different kind of school culture, one that develops an exemplary curriculum, identifies effective teaching approaches, and establishes an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Having worked for more than twenty years with the Queens College-Louis Armstrong Middle School collaboration in New York City, I have seen firsthand what helps to establish a different kind of educational tone and what gets in the way of creating a culture promoting learning. Here is what I have learned.

The Elements of a New School Culture

A Thinking Atmosphere

The usual school organization finds the elementary schoolteacher with children all day long and the secondary school instructor seeing 150 students five times a week for a daily forty-five-minute period. The teacher begins each morning by signing in or by punching a time clock. From there it's a walk to a room, a door closed, and a day without peer dialogue. Professional development is restricted to the occasional guru-led workshop. No time is provided for teachers to reflect on the day's

happenings with others or by themselves. In other countries “alone time” as part of the teacher’s day is considered essential. It is not unusual in the corporate world to provide weekly brainstorming sessions for employees. Recent trends toward extending the school day and year will leave teachers with even less time for reflection.

In our public school-college collaboration, no single event or procedure made up the emotional and intellectual scaffolding that supported a thinking atmosphere. Rather, a day-to-day series of happenings contributed to a climate that encouraged reflection before moving into action. School administrators gave ready approval for teachers to attend professional conferences or visit other schools. A well-publicized professional library to which teachers and parents had easy access was established. Administrators, teachers, and professors who worked in the school recommended articles to each other. Faculty conferences were planned with teachers to demonstrate and discuss what colleagues were doing. At brown-bag luncheons and breakfast meetings with coffee provided, such topics as a favorite children’s book or how best to use student teachers were explored. Teacher schedules were organized so that small numbers could meet regularly to discuss topics of mutual interest.

Open Communication

A school culture promoting learning bespeaks an openness of communication in which ideas and feelings are freely expressed and acknowledged. But if that is to occur, there is a need to move through and beyond times of distrust and suspicion. The origin of these negative attitudes is grounded in past experience. There are the years of criticism leveled at public school teachers and administrators by the press, college faculty, the public at large, and even the educational bureaucracy itself. Newspaper headlines highlight the sins of individual instructors and the inadequacies of public education and its personnel. External agencies and professors issue reports describing low levels of student achievement. Central office administrators talk blithely of inferior principals and teachers. It’s little wonder that public school personnel experiencing the never-ending onslaught of reprimand view outsiders and often their own school administrators with skepticism and defensiveness. The messages they hear say “This is what you’re doing wrong.” They never see “This is what you’re doing right.” In our collaboration we found that only after extensive shared experience did staff feel comfortable enough to express its views without fearing retaliation.

Barriers between people eroded as college faculty and school administrators worked with teachers in their classrooms, as parent-teacher retreats took place at the college environmental center, as parents were invited to shadow their children through a typical day, and as

parent-teacher-professor committees explored school concerns. When administrators, teachers, professors, and parents met to discuss educational matters, they interacted not as figures occupying particular roles but as individuals with views to offer. This is not to say that the participants all brought similar levels of expertise and experience to the discussions: only that everyone's contributions received respect. The aim always was to develop an atmosphere of trust in which attitudes of superiority and critical judgments were absent and where opposing stances provided leeway for empathic understanding.

We also recognized the value of social interaction to professional growth. School parties, student-faculty athletic events, theater groups, and book clubs all assisted in getting to the real person, moving past the outer layers of personality, and facilitating authentic communication.

The Value of an Outside Observer

One of the assets school staffs bring to their work is extensive experience within their own institutions. Even the most introspective educators, however, face the dangers of allowing familiarity to influence objectivity and of failing to profit from what others have learned elsewhere. Perceptive observers can ask questions and make comments that broaden understanding and supply insights that may escape those who are immersed in a project.

In our public school-college collaboration, we worked with people of broad backgrounds whose lack of knowledge of bureaucratic strictures proved a boon as they made suggestions free from traditional thinking. For example, at one session dealing with the problem of acclimating students and parents from throughout Queens to a new middle school, Seymour Sarason, a professor emeritus of Yale University and a periodic visitor to the school, recommended conducting a week-long orientation for newcomers and their families before the beginning of the school year. We were able to persuade the board of education of the value of such an activity despite its departure from usual practice. It has since become a fixture in how the school operates.

In another instance, Clarence Bunch, a professor of art education, proposed installing a school museum. After consultation with the principal, teachers, and colleagues, it too has become an integral part of how the Louis Armstrong Middle School functions. It is now the scene of displays of student work, shows by neighborhood artists, and exhibitions of artifacts produced by children from other countries.

The Need to Develop a Common Language

A healthy educational community needs to avoid jargon and to use words and phrases that have shared meaning. The list of terms banded

about in discussions of education without clear definition is long. For example, there is much support for the idea of parental involvement, but there is little talk about how parents are to participate in a school. Are they to help set goals? To be used only as resource people? To evaluate teachers? To establish budgetary priorities? To select texts?

Other ideas needing clarification include accountability, curriculum, staff development, and leadership. To create a culture in which the participants communicate with clarity, there is a need to reach common understanding of these terms and others.

In our collaboration, the effort to ensure that people used mutually understood terms was supported by weekly preschool meetings attended by the principal, teachers, parents, and college faculty. Teachers and professors joining with parents at the monthly Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) meetings also helped to bridge language barriers.

Respecting Teacher Autonomy

In many schools, teachers are besieged by external impositions on instructional time. Public-address announcements interrupt the day. Directives from the district office insist on participation in citywide contests. A steady stream of messages emanating from the school's main office, administrators, colleagues, and others fragments the flow of teacher-student interaction. Test scores become the single measure of teacher effectiveness, with the result that teaching to the test becomes the norm and occupies much of the school day. Teachers are mandated to teach in a prescribed manner. A one-size-fits-all approach views teaching as a robotic endeavor rather than one demanding thoughtful analysis of student needs.

At the Louis Armstrong Middle School, curriculum exploration and experimentation are the norm, undergirded by a belief that a rich educational program will result in good student test scores. That has been the case over the years. It has also become a cardinal rule that the public-address system is used only for the direst of emergencies; that for the first hour at least, messages to classrooms are forbidden; and that demands for written reports are to be kept to a minimum. If time for instruction is to be valued, then the teacher's domain, the classroom, needs respect and not indiscriminate intrusion.

Obstacles to Building a Positive School Culture

The task of building a school culture that promotes learning is ongoing with the constant struggle to overcome obstacles. For example, the traditional way in which schools function inhibits an easy exchange of ideas among professionals. Schools have a hierarchical organization headed by a principal aided by assistant principals, chairpeople, and

deans. The teacher group alone is seen as the target for improvement. A common method for achieving instructional growth is the supervisory observation, with classroom visits followed by a discussion in which the principal, after an initial listing of strengths, outlines areas in need of improvement. Rarely is this process viewed as a conversation in which ideas are shared. Rarely are questions asked that might encourage reflection. Rarely are plans made to pursue issues in greater depth. The subordinate position of the teacher is reinforced by requiring that planbooks gain administrative approval and letters sent home are first screened by the principal.

If thinking is to become part of the school culture, there should be a different conception of how people in different roles are to operate. The hierarchical nature of schools, with communication flowing only one way, leaves little opportunity for groups to dialogue about instructional issues.

The limitations of professional preparation present another problem. Cooperation and collegiality are characteristics of a school culture promoting group exploration of ideas. When educators have had little experience in working together, the attempt to collaborate is likely to meet strong obstacles. The education of teachers, administrators, and such specialists as reading instructors, school psychologists, and special education staff takes place in separate courses. With other faculty I arranged to bring graduate classes of special education teachers, prospective school psychologists, and potential administrators together for a few sessions. The initial inability of the participants to listen to the point of view of the others was startling. It is clear that if school professionals are to work effectively with one another, teacher-preparation programs must help future educators become aware of how roles shape behavior and learn ways of dealing with conflict.

The culture prevailing in the society outside schools also impacts the task of creating a thoughtful school community. We live in an environment filled with demands for immediate solutions to complex problems. Profound political issues are presented in sound bites. Popular television programs appeal to instincts removed from any need to think. The speed of e-mail and fax machines obliterates the opportunity for considered contemplation before making a response. To build a culture supportive of learning, schools must resist external pressures pushing for precipitous action unsupported by prior thinking.

Another obstacle to establishing a culture for learning is the inevitability of resistance to new ideas. The teaching profession draws people who are hard workers, who are committed to service, and who place a high value on stability. Attempts to alter customary work patterns will encounter resistance. The desire for the security of the status

quo will serve to reinforce customary modes of behavior and to block out ideas that are different. The challenge for those trying to create a new school culture is to empathize with the reluctance to change and, at the same time, to support those ready to explore new approaches to education.

To develop schools that are not simply institutions responding to the external pressures prevailing at a particular time but rather are centers of ongoing exploration, learning, thinking, and adapting to the needs of students, we need to look more closely at how schools are organized, how people interact with one another, how change occurs, and how we view the role of the teacher.

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About This Issue

This issue of **educational HORIZONS** departs in many ways from the discussions and analyses the journal typically publishes. To support the mission of Pi Lambda Theta as an honor society and professional association in education, this group of articles focuses on a concrete answer, one that a whole-school approach or even a single teacher working alone can implement easily and inexpensively.

StrengthsQuest, The Gallup Organization's program for achieving academic, career, and personal excellence, has an unusually solid foundation in research and experience outside K-12 education.

- StrengthsQuest is research-based, i.e., founded on more than, for instance, a strongly felt belief about the "right" thing to do combined with some amount of personal experience.
- StrengthsQuest works; predecessor programs have been successful in the private sector for decades.
- StrengthsQuest focuses unwaveringly on achieving excellence and therefore squares philosophically with educational philosophies that emphasize objectively measured outcomes.
- StrengthsQuest is uncompromisingly student centered and therefore congruent with a large set of educational philosophies that enjoy currency today.

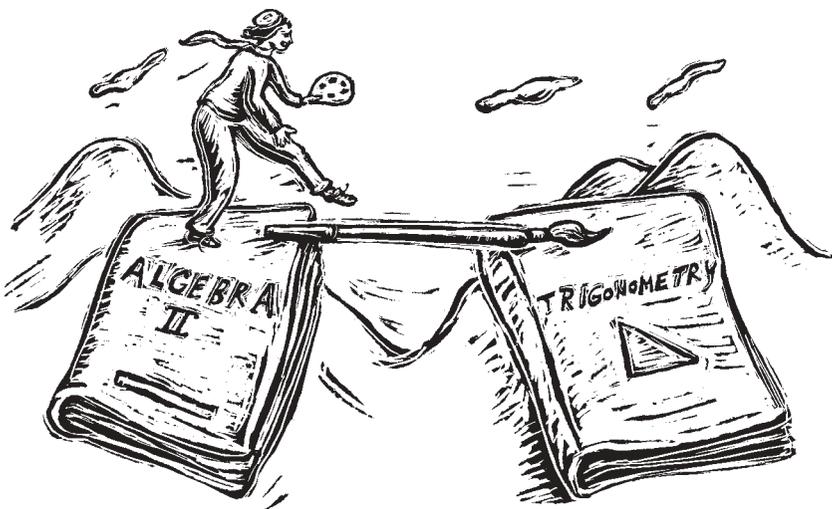
To open the discussion, Chip Anderson, the co-author of *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*, describes how his perspective on education changed from focusing on what students are *not* good at to what students *are* good at—or, more precisely, on who students *are* rather than who they are *not*. Anderson shows how he was able not only to chart a constructive course for himself but also to develop it into a program available to every educator.

Next, Tim Hodges and Jim Harter of The Gallup Organization, which publishes *StrengthsQuest*, describe the development of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, the assessment instrument underlying StrengthsQuest. They cite the research evidence of the instrument's reliability and

construct validity—critical considerations at this early point in the application. Hodges and Harter also cite the early research regarding the impact of StrengthsQuest on students.

Those more interested in the program's practical potential than in its underlying research may prefer to begin with "The Thumbnail StrengthsQuest" (the appendix to the Hodges and Harter article), and then move on to "StrengthsQuest in Application," four anecdotal essays that relate how the StrengthsQuest program has affected a student, two teachers, and an administrator. Those four contributors, all associated directly or indirectly with Chip Anderson and the Center for Strengths-Based Education at Azusa Pacific University, articulate what worked for them (particularly in K–12); how it worked; why it worked; and what long-term effects they think StrengthsQuest will have. Nonetheless, their experiences may not represent the results that will be obtained by independent educators—including, we hope, many of our readers—whom we encourage to test and document StrengthsQuest's potential in K–12 education.

The concentration of relevant research within a small group of scholars creates both the opportunity and the need for independent scholars to verify the construct validity and reliability of the Clifton StrengthsFinder. The Gallup Organization has explained to us that it will address case by case how to safeguard its economic interests as it makes proprietary components of the instrument available to independent researchers. Probably of broader interest and greater import, a series of controlled experiments is essential to collect unambiguous evidence that StrengthsQuest's effects on students are measurable, statistically significant, reliable, and material.



In addition to global outcomes, research should look systematically at

- how the StrengthsQuest program, compared to a different student orientation program (and compared to no orientation program at all), affects student outcomes;
- how differences among students (gender, academic potential, ethnicity, parents' education, and socioeconomic status) affect outcomes;
- how institutional differences (selectivity, size of student body, student-teacher ratio, single-gender versus coeducational, faith-based versus secular, public versus private, and college versus high school as well as, ultimately, elementary school) affect outcomes; and
- perhaps most difficult, how to separate the effects of the StrengthsQuest program from the effects of instructor enthusiasm.

We encourage interested readers to follow up on the Hodges and Harter article and then take advantage of the research opportunities presented by the extension of StrengthsQuest into K–12 education. Those undertaking rigorous investigations can reach out to new implementations in the planning phase so the structures of those implementations support non-confounded experimental designs and valid measures of salient outcomes. With those elements in place, it will be possible to document where professionals can employ the StrengthsQuest program as a reliable, robust paradigm for K–12 education.

Although Pi Lambda Theta enjoys a cordial and constructive relationship with both The Gallup Organization and the Center for Strengths-Based Education at Azusa Pacific University, StrengthsQuest's coverage here, as well as its promise as a key element of PLT chapter support, is predicated solely on its potential value in implementing PLT's mission: to honor outstanding educators and inspire them to be effective leaders who address critical issues in education. No royalties, commissions, endorsement fees, or product-placement considerations are involved outside respecting The Gallup Organization's proprietary trademarks and copyrights. We believe that the mission of Pi Lambda Theta will be furthered by this exploration of StrengthsQuest and its extension at the upcoming Pi Lambda Theta national leadership conference, July 28–31, 2005, in New Orleans.

J. Ogden Hamilton is the executive director of Pi Lambda Theta.

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Strengths-Based Educating: A Concrete Way to Bring Out the Best in Students—and Yourself

The Confessions of an Educator Who Got It Right—Finally!

by Edward “Chip” Anderson

I was wrong!

For nearly half my professional career, I was wrong about how to help students achieve. I adopted the wrong focus, made inaccurate assumptions, used faulty logic, and came to the wrong conclusions about how to increase student achievement.

During almost thirty-six years as a college administrator and instructor, I designed programs and services, taught classes, and conducted workshops with one purpose in mind: to help students gain maximum benefits from college and continue learning and achieving long after they finished school. But looking back, I see that for the first fifteen years, despite my best intentions, I used the wrong approach. During those years I did invest myself in students, express my care and concern for them as people, and encourage them. But although a high percentage of my students persisted in and graduated from the programs in which I worked, they seldom became top achievers, and few achieved to levels of excellence.

Here is where and how I went wrong: I read the research reports. The results from almost every study showed that students who had the best academic preparation earned the highest grades and had the highest graduation rates, and students who had the weakest academic preparation earned the lowest grades and had the lowest graduation rates. Armed with that information, I began designing procedures to identify the least-prepared students so that we could build programs and services

that would help more students achieve. I assumed that students needed certain preparation levels in order to achieve; that if students met or exceeded those levels, everything would take care of itself—that is, if students were prepared and met their professors' expectations, then the normal courses of study and interactions with faculty would be sufficient to help students develop and achieve.

I began to see two problems with my assumptions: 1) many students lack the expected level of preparation and 2) the whole issue of preparation is complex because students require many types of preparation in order to achieve.

After interviewing hundreds of college students who were experiencing difficulties, dropping out, or flunking out, I came to believe that the preparation students needed included three broad areas: academic skills, background knowledge, and self-management skills. Within each area, instructors expected several specific types of skills and knowledge.

Assuming that certain skills and knowledge were essential to student success, I organized diagnostic testing and assessment procedures to determine how well each student was prepared in selected areas. Diagnostic and assessment areas included reading speed and comprehension, vocabulary level, knowledge of mathematical concepts and problem-solving, knowledge of grammar and writing skills, knowledge and problem solving in chemistry and physics, knowledge of study skills and study attitudes, and time and stress management. Using a combination of standardized tests, institutionally developed instruments, and interview procedures, I tried to get a clear picture of whether each student was prepared or not.

*I was actually interfering with students
becoming top achievers.*

In fact, I was very much influenced by what I refer to as the deficit-remediation educational model, which has been predominant in education for decades. Programs and services based on the model are dedicated to “fixing” the student by first diagnosing student needs, problems, ignorance, concerns, defects, and deficits. Those who use the deficit-remediation model must design classes, workshops, programs, and services to help students improve in areas for which they are under-prepared. Based on the diagnosis, participation in remedial programs and services is often required. Students are usually prevented from pursuing other areas of study and from pursuing their interests until their deficits have been removed and their “problems” have been overcome.

Using that approach, students are usually told that they must overcome their deficiencies by a specific time. If not, students are usually dismissed or told that they aren't “college material.”

Mea culpa! I designed and implemented educational programs and services based on that model for almost fifteen years, and with only the best of intentions. In retrospect, it is clear to me that I was actually interfering with students becoming top achievers.

The Conference That Changed My Life

In the winter of 1978, I attended a conference on college student retention sponsored by American College Testing (ACT), which brought together some of the best researchers and practitioners in the field. The conference coordinators were Lee Noel and Randi Levitz, who later founded Noel-Levitz, Inc., the largest consulting organization in college student recruitment and retention.

Noel and Levitz' presentations explained why nearly half the students who enter college drop out or flunk out. They presented research findings and described some of the most effective programs and services designed to help more students persist to graduation. Another presenter at the conference was Robert Cope, the co-author of *Revolving College Doors*.¹ He presented the best theory and research available about the causes of student persistence and attrition.



The combination of presentations by Noel, Levitz, and Cope forced me into a radically new conclusion about student success in college: more students leave because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by the school administration.

That conclusion was a revelation for me. It meant that I had been wrong in my logic and wrong in the way I designed programs and services. Before the conference, I had concluded that students left college because they lacked certain skills, knowledge, and abilities. All the work I had done was based on that false premise. I was eventually forced to an even more devastating conclusion: the deficit-based remediation programming I had used actually *prevented* students from becoming top achievers.

I feel bad about what I did unwittingly: I hindered students from reaching new levels of excellence. But I wasn't alone. The deficit-based remediation approach was widely embraced by educators—and, unfortunately, it remains the prevalent approach. Although most educators claim to identify not only their students' weaknesses but also their talents and strengths, in practice most focus almost solely on the weaknesses. As a consequence, many students become demoralized and disillusioned, which severely impairs the very motivation that I now believe to be the most important factor in student learning and achievement.

Donald O. Clifton

At the same conference I met Donald O. Clifton, the man I feel honored to have known and collaborated with in writing *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond?* Dr. Clifton was introduced as a former professor at the University of Nebraska and recipient of the state's Most Outstanding Educator award. He had gone on to form a company called Selection Research, which helped companies select employees through studying the "best of the best" in particular roles and positions. Selection Research was extremely successful, and as a result The Gallup Organization, well-known for management consulting, training, and polling, named him as its chairman and later that of the Gallup International Research and Education Center.

I will never forget how Dr. Clifton slowly walked to the front of the stage, turned to the audience, and immediately took command. His presentation drove home a key point: to *produce* excellence, you must *study* excellence. The point hit me hard. Once again, I had been wrong! In my efforts to help students persist and achieve, I had been studying dropouts. I should have been studying the top achievers. It had seemed reasonable that in order to increase student persistence, I needed to study why students were leaving school and flunking out. Likewise, it had seemed rea-

sonable that in order to improve student achievement, I needed to study why people didn't achieve. Therefore, I had spent endless hours interviewing dropouts and students who were underachieving.

It had never occurred to me that I might be studying the wrong students to produce the best insights on how to help students achieve levels of excellence. After the conference, I began reading and trying to understand what made top achievers tick. Time and time again, I found that my assumptions about the differences between top achievers and low achievers were inaccurate. For example, I had always assumed that top achievers set high goals, and low achievers set low goals. But research indicates that top achievers tend to set goals slightly above their current level of performance, whereas low achievers often set almost daunting goals.

Top achievers tend to set goals slightly above their current level of performance, whereas low achievers often set almost daunting goals.

The combination of reading books and articles, sitting in on classes, attending workshops, and consulting with scholars in the field reinforced Don's contention that if you want to produce excellence, you have to study excellence. His approach had produced many successes in developing business leaders, but I wanted to use it to produce success in teaching university students. I borrowed from Don's approach and "studied excellence"—specifically, what he had done himself to develop his approach. Then I approached him personally and asked him to collaborate with me in extending his approach to university teaching. The upshot of the collaboration was the systematic application of Don's assessment instrument, the Clifton StrengthsFinder, to university students, interpreted in the context of the StrengthsQuest program, which we co-authored.

StrengthsQuest is designed for the student. After explaining the theory underlying the strengths-based approach to learning, growth, and development, the text guides the student through completing and interpreting the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Armed with an understanding of the results of the StrengthsFinder, the student moves through their implications for academics, relationships, and careers. The book emphasizes understanding one's own strengths through understanding the different strengths that others bring.

Even standing alone, the StrengthsQuest book is comprehensive; understood as what it really is—a portal to a Web-based complex of information, ideas, and forums—the book takes on the aspect of a set of encyclopedias. However, like any viable theory, the theory underlying

strengths-based learning, growth, and development can be conveyed in relatively few words. I have attempted to do so here.

The Key Observation

Here is the most important insight I have gained from investigating excellence among college students: *Top achievers aren't all alike*. There are major variations in how they approach learning and studying. Some seem to learn best in isolation; others learn best in social settings. Some learn best through group discussions; others learn best from self-testing and repetition. There isn't any one-size-fits-all set of learning and study techniques. Top achievers capitalize on personal uniqueness as they learn.

Essentially, top achievers build their academic and personal lives, and later their careers, on their talents. They develop talents into strengths and apply those strengths, and they manage their weaknesses. It is the approach that Don Clifton always advocated, and its effectiveness is supported by decades of research by The Gallup Organization.

Talent: The Beginning of Strength

What is a strength? That's a good question, but a strength begins with a talent, so let's start there. A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Many talents exist naturally within you, each of them quite specific. They are among the most real and authentic aspects of your personhood. Your specific set of talents is a major part of what makes you a unique person, and that uniqueness holds great value for you and those around you. Your talents work in various combinations each time you do something very well, in your own unique way.

There is a direct connection between your talents and your achievements. Your talents empower you. They enable you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. That is why it is so important for you to know, understand, and value your talents. A talent represents a capacity to *do* something. In fact, when you are able to do something very well, you can be sure that at least one of your talents is involved. Just think about all the things you do very well. You'll realize that you have many talents!

Not only do talents help you do something well once; they help you do it well over and over. Because talents are naturally recurring patterns, they are autonomic, like breathing, so they repeatedly help you achieve. And that's not all. Each of your many talents can enable you to do more than one thing very well. I'm not saying that each of your talents enables you to do *everything* well: just that each of your talents can be applied to multiple areas of achievement.

The great value in your talents is not merely that they help you achieve, but that they help you achieve *at levels of excellence*. Your greatest talents are inextricably linked to your top achievements and to what you do best. Your talents make you exceptional. Therefore, coming to know, understand, and value your talents is directly linked to achieving in classes, in careers, and throughout life.

Talent versus Other Concepts of Ability

The concept of talent is specific in terms of the quality it describes and the actions that various types of talent help a person to perform very well. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (for example, IQ and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do. The concept of talent also goes beyond the limits of traditional concepts of academic abilities (for example, in the areas of reading, math, and composition) to address the qualities that help a person achieve in all aspects of life.

Themes of Talent

What is a theme? Essentially, a theme is a group of similar talents. The thirty-four most widespread talent themes are measured by the Clifton StrengthsFinder, and it is upon the identification and development of a participant's five dominant themes—the Signature Themes—that StrengthsQuest is based.

What Is a Strength?

A strength is *the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity*. As a result of studying top achievers for more than three decades, The Gallup Organization has identified more than 400 different strengths.

Talents are like “diamonds in the rough”; strengths are like diamonds that show brilliance after careful cutting and polishing. Just as finished diamonds start as diamonds in the rough, strengths start as talents. And just as rough diamonds are naturally found in the earth, talents are naturally found within you. But whereas diamonds are refined with blades and polishing wheels, strengths are produced when talents are refined with knowledge and skill.

Unlike talent, which must naturally exist within you, skills and knowledge can be acquired. Skills are the abilities to perform the specific steps of an activity. Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned. Many of the skills and much of the knowledge used to refine a talent into a strength come through experience—sometimes a great deal of it. Many of the most technical skills and knowledge are developed by

“book learning”—the academic areas of high school, college, technical school, and training classes.

When you have refined a talent to the point at which you can provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity, you have a strength. And in applying and even further developing your strengths, you move closer and closer to fulfilling your potential as an individual. Each person has a unique and profound set of talents and strengths that are developed and used to different degrees. That combination of talents and strengths makes each person like no other.

Each person defines success for himself, but achieving success—in a word, “excellence”—always results from fully developing and applying strengths. Some roles require several strengths, all working together, to produce excellence. You probably have already developed some strengths, and you certainly will have plenty of opportunity to develop more strengths throughout your lifetime.

What Do Strengths Produce?

Achievements will naturally follow your development and use of strengths. But there is also a great sense of personal satisfaction that results from knowing that you are becoming more and more the person you have the potential to be. In a sense, the development and application of strengths generate a feeling that you are fulfilling your personal destiny. That can produce enormous satisfaction and enhance the quality of your life.

Although the experiences of individual people differ tremendously, most report that it is a rewarding experience to be living fully in tune with their natural talents, building and using their strengths. Almost everyone reports increased confidence and optimism in discovering, affirming, and celebrating personal talents. Many report “coming alive” or even feeling joy as they develop and apply strengths. Descriptions of the exact inner experiences may differ, but nearly everyone who develops and uses strengths reports a sense of positive and pleasant psychological reward.

Top achievers aren't all alike. There are major variations in how they approach learning and studying.

One Thing in Common

Through more than 2 million in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life, The Gallup Organization has made a finding that is simple but profound: top achievers in virtually every profession, career, and field all build their lives upon their talents. That forms the heart of the

strengths-based approach to leadership, teaching, and learning. Here is what Gallup has learned about top achievers:

1. *Top achievers fully recognize their talents and develop them into strengths.* In contrast, underachievers, the merely average, and even above-average achievers often fail to recognize their talents and develop them into strengths. But the best achievers are certain to do so.
2. *Top achievers apply their strengths in roles that best suit them.* Clearly, to achieve one must apply his abilities, and many do so to some level of success. But the best apply their strengths and do so in roles that are best suited to those strengths. The ability to achieve with excellence in one area is not proof of the ability to perform equally well in another area. A proper fit between an individual's strengths and the task at hand is essential.
3. *Top achievers invent ways to apply their strengths to their achievement tasks.* Every role, position, and career entails a group of tasks that must be completed, and quite often the person who performs them must consciously seek, even invent, ways to apply his or her strengths to that end—even when one's role is well suited to his strengths.

In other words, top achievers fully develop whatever talents they happen to possess and apply the resulting strengths in a way that positively impacts their role or the task at hand.

Strengths-Based Teaching, Learning, and Leadership: K–12

As described earlier, the seeds of potential greatness—a person's talents—already exist in the person. Therefore, a strengths quest—a quest to achieve excellence and become all one can be through individual natural talents—is really a quest to discover, develop, and apply what one truly is.

If you apply that thinking to the challenge facing educators, you will see a simple but profound opportunity in shifting from deficit-reduction teaching to strengths-based teaching. Strengths-based teaching harnesses student energy in a way that deficit-reduction teaching cannot, and common sense says that a student who is working with the teacher will accomplish more than a student who is not.

The strengths quest—or quest for strengths—begins as students look within themselves to recognize their own natural talents. The quest continues as they develop their talents into strengths—abilities to provide consistent, near-perfect performances in specific activities. As they

do so, their self-identities and personal values should become clearer, and as a result, they will likely become more confident, optimistic, and focused. As they achieve through their strengths, they will likely aspire to—and achieve—higher goals.

The Gallup Organization's research on excellence goes back three decades; the Hodges and Harter piece in this issue provides an overview. Applying strengths-based thinking to education, however, goes back only a few years, and so far the focus has been on higher education. Extension to K–12 education is just now beginning. The companion essays in this issue report the earliest results of that extension. Those results are, of necessity, anecdotal; it will be awhile before the objective effects of strength-based teaching can be measured.

You have read my description of the philosophy of strengths-based teaching, and I hope you found it exciting. If you did, you will find the companion essays, all written by practicing educators, even more exciting, for they describe how strengths-based teaching is being applied in the K–12 classroom and the remarkable results that are being achieved.

Although just a few years old, StrengthsQuest is a complete turnkey tool for implementing strengths-based education. However, applying StrengthsQuest to K–12 education certainly will become more textured and sophisticated as our experience grows. I hope that after reading the companion essays, you will be inspired to be part of that growth.

Notes

1. Cope, Robert, and William Hannah, *Revolving College Doors* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975).
2. Clifton, Donald O., and Edward “Chip” Anderson, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: The Gallup Organization, 2002).

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A Review of the Theory and Research Underlying the StrengthsQuest Program for Students

by Timothy D. Hodges and James K. Harter

Abstract

StrengthsQuest is a student program that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. It is intended to lead students to discover their natural talents and gain unique and valuable insights into how to develop such talents into strengths—strengths that equip them to succeed and to make important decisions that enable them to balance the demands of coursework, extracurricular activities, employment, and family. This article provides an overview of the StrengthsQuest program and the theory of strengths development upon which it is based. It explains the Clifton StrengthsFinder, which is the assessment at the foundation of StrengthsQuest, and provides documentation of its construct validity and reliability. The article concludes with a review of several studies indicating that strengths development has a positive impact on student productivity, life choices, self-confidence, goal-directed thinking, interpersonal relations, and academic success.

Overview of the StrengthsQuest Program for Students

StrengthsQuest is a student-development and -engagement program designed to help high school and college students achieve success in academics, career, and life. (See Appendix, “The Thumbnail StrengthsQuest.”) StrengthsQuest is also intended to help instructors, academic advisers, career counselors, residence hall directors, and others who advise students incorporate strengths-based experiences in college preparation, freshman orientation, and student life programs, in the classroom, and in small-group and one-on-one feedback sessions.

The theory of strengths development has its own nomenclature. A talent is defined as a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, and

behavior that can be productively applied. A theme is defined as a group of similar talents. By refining dominant talent themes with knowledge and skill, individuals embark on the process of building strengths. A strength is defined as the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

Theory of Strengths Development

The StrengthsQuest program is based on the theory of strengths development. The roots of strengths-development theory can be traced back more than fifty years to the early work of Donald Clifton, the co-author of the StrengthsQuest text (Clifton and Anderson 2002). Clifton's early research was conducted during his tenure as a professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska. His early research stream included the study of positive and negative attitudes (Clifton, Hollingsworth, and Hall 1952) and the study of teacher-student rapport and student-teacher characteristics (Dodge and Clifton 1956). Clifton, later awarded a commendation by the American Psychological Association as the "father of strengths-based psychology and grandfather of positive psychology" (McKay and Greengrass 2003, 87), based his life's work on his belief in the critical importance of identifying and developing the positive attributes of individuals. He based his research and practice on one simple question: "What would happen if we studied what is *right* with people?"



Content analysis of college student reflection papers suggested that strengths development involves three stages: identification of talents, integration of identified talents into one's self-view, and behavioral change (Clifton and Harter 2003). In the first stage, individuals increase self-awareness by discovering positive self-knowledge. Spontaneous reactions (noticing grammatical errors in the campus newspaper, naturally taking charge of a student group in a tense situation); yearnings (the desire to learn a new language, the aspiration to learn the name of every student in a large lecture hall); rapid learning (of a musical instrument or a computer program); and satisfaction (derived from delivering an important speech or organizing a major campus event) may all serve as indicators that one is drawing on areas of talent (Buckingham and Clifton 2001).

Strengths development begins with individuals recognizing and psychologically owning their talents. Next, individuals must recognize the value derived from performing activities congruent with their talents. They should make a conscious effort to seek out opportunities to exercise talents and share information about talents with family, friends, and fellow students or co-workers. To complete the strengths-building process, they should add relevant knowledge and skills to the talents.

The themes of talent that are the basis of the strengths-building process are identified and measured by an online assessment, the Clifton StrengthsFinder. (See Appendix.) The assessment is currently available in seventeen languages, with several more translations planned. More than 110,000 of the first one million respondents completed it in a language other than English. Respondents have come from nearly fifty different countries, twenty-five of which have had at least 1,000 respondents. More than 225,000 respondents report a country of residence other than the United States.

Development of the Clifton StrengthsFinder

The Clifton StrengthsFinder is grounded in more than three decades of studying success across a wide variety of functions in education and the workplace. Data from more than two million individuals were considered in developing the assessment. It is designed for participants with at least an eighth- to tenth-grade reading level (in most cases, people at least fourteen years of age). In pilot studies, teenagers had neither significant nor consistent problems completing the assessment.

Potential StrengthsFinder items were identified in part based on their power to predict desired positive outcomes. Items were initially derived from a qualitative review of item functioning and a content review of the representativeness of themes and items within themes, with an eye toward the construct validity of the entire assessment

(Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004). The items thus derived were organized into hundreds of criterion-related validity studies, including more than 100 predictive validity studies (Schmidt and Rader 1999).

Construct Validity

Many items were pilot tested during the development phase to assess their contributions to the measurement of themes and the consistency and stability of theme scores. Those with the strongest psychometric properties, including item-to-theme correlation, were retained, thereby balancing the amount of theme information and the length of the assessment. Items with construct validity should correlate to their proposed themes (constructs) at a higher level than to other themes (constructs). Consistent with that expectation, in a study of more than 600,000 respondents, the average item-to-proposed-theme correlation (corrected for part-whole overlap) was 6.6 times as large as the average item correlation to other themes (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004).

Construct validity can also be assessed based on convergent and discriminant validity evidence. Harter and Hodges (2003) explored the relationship between the Clifton StrengthsFinder and the “five-factor model of personality” (McCrae and Costa 1987). As predicted, there was a statistically significant correlation between the Discipline theme and “conscientiousness” ($r = .81$), Woo (“winning others over”) and “extroversion” ($r = .83$), Ideation and “intellectance” ($r = .70$), and Positivity and “agreeableness” ($r = .58$).

A recent item-to-theme correlation study that explored properties specific to culture and demographic variables found that the psychometric structure of Clifton StrengthsFinder scores was stable across countries, languages, age, and gender (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004).

Internal Consistency and Reliability

The internal consistency of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, as measured by the coefficient alpha level, meets accepted standards (coefficient alpha = .70; AERA/APA/NCME 1999). In a recent study of 706 professional employees (Gallup 2000), twenty-three of the thirty-four themes of the Clifton StrengthsFinder had coefficient alpha levels greater than .70, and only three themes had coefficient alpha levels less than .65.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder also demonstrates test-retest reliability—the extent to which scores are stable over time. When the reliability of StrengthsFinder themes was evaluated, almost all of them exhibited test-retest reliability after a six-month interval of between $r = .60$ and $r = .80$ —very respectable by current psychometric standards—and the average correlation of an individual’s theme ranking across multiple time periods was $r = .74$ (Gallup 2000). A recent study of 106 college students

provided similar results, with an average correlation of theme ranking of $r = .71$ and two months between administrations (Schreiner, in press). (A maximum test-retest reliability score of $r = 1.0$ would indicate that all respondents received exactly the same score on two assessments.)

Ongoing research will explore how long the themes of talent measured by the StrengthsFinder endure. There is growing evidence (for example, Judge et al. 1999) that some aspects of personality are predictive throughout many decades of a person's life. Therefore, we expect that the stability of the themes will prove to be measured in years rather than months. Gallup's research team is pursuing an ongoing program of research to evaluate the construct validity, test-retest reliability, and other psychometric properties of the StrengthsFinder.

Impact of Strengths Development Programs

Strengths development has been linked to various positive outcomes in several studies. Follow-up surveys with 459 readers of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham and Clifton 2001), conducted seventy-five days after completion of Clifton StrengthsFinder assessments, indicate a perceived value of strengths development (Harter and Hodges 2003). Even in a simplistic developmental context consisting of self-paced study from a book, the majority of respondents reported that they were making better choices in their lives, were more productive, and had increased self-confidence as a result of learning about and focusing on their strengths (Hodges and Clifton 2004).

Several studies have explored the relationships between participation in the StrengthsQuest program and increased levels of confidence. One of the first was conducted with a sample of 212 students at the University of California-Los Angeles (Crabtree 2002; Rath 2002). In that study, researchers collected pre-post surveys to measure the potential impact of the StrengthsQuest program on various desired outcomes. Each of the factors measured on the pre-post survey moved significantly in the hypothesized direction, suggesting improvement in constructs such as "aliveness," altruism, direction, and confidence. A pre-post survey completed by students contained several self-confidence and efficacy items ("I am confident in my ability to build friendships" and "I am an academically confident person") (Clifton 1997; Rath 2002). Student confidence was significantly higher at the end of the semester (post-test) than at the beginning (pre-test). In addition, qualitative surveys were collected to understand the results better, and statements from student reflection papers at the end of the semester tended to support the statistical findings. For example, one student reported, "I think learning my strengths gives me much more confidence and hope for myself. I am

able to be optimistic about what my future holds for me—that there's more to life than what I see right now in college" (Crabtree 2002).

An empirical study was conducted with undergraduate students in an organizational-behavior course at a large public university (Hodges and Clifton 2004). Students participated in various levels of strengths development consisting of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, online learning, and individualized developmental conversations with a Gallup consultant. Across levels of treatment, strengths-development programs yielded meaningful increases in state hope, a construct designed to measure an individual's current goal-directed thinking (Snyder et al. 1996).

A mixed-methods study of sixteen undergraduate teacher-education students applied the StrengthsQuest program in a mentoring context (McEntarffer et al., under review). The one-semester program involved weekly meetings between the mentor-mentee dyads, weekly meetings for the mentors as a group, and two interpersonal skill-building workshops. The quantitative results indicate that the mentors and mentees were able to focus on both their own strengths and the strengths of others. Overall results highlighted growth in relationships due in part to the heightened awareness of personal strengths.

Academic success has also been linked to strengths development. A recent study with English-composition students at a private university (Williamson 2002) involved a control group that completed the StrengthsFinder assessment but did not participate in further strengths-development programming. The treatment group completed the StrengthsFinder assessment and participated in two one-hour presentations on strengths theory, a presentation of the participants' individual StrengthsFinder results, and a one-on-one advising session with a trained strengths consultant. High school GPA and ACT scores, which are accepted as valid predictors of freshman-year academic performance, were the same for the two groups. Nonetheless, the treatment group—the one that participated in a strengths-development program—finished the first college semester with significantly higher GPAs than the control group. In another statistically significant finding, only two of the thirty-two students (6.25 percent) in the treatment group failed to meet minimum academic standards, compared to 20 percent of the control group (eight of forty students).

Concluding Comments

The StrengthsQuest program was released in 2002. Its roots lie in more than fifty years of theory and research. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment of positive individual differences included within the StrengthsQuest program is also based on many years of research. Research on both the StrengthsQuest program and the StrengthsFinder

assessment is ongoing. Several empirical studies indicate that participation in the StrengthsQuest program can have an impact on desired outcomes such as confidence, hope, relational growth, and academic success. Future research should continue to explore the effectiveness of the StrengthsQuest program and should expand the number of outcome types studied. We encourage educators and researchers to assess the most salient outcomes for their students and design studies that can measure the impact of strengths-based development programs on those outcomes.

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Appendix

The Thumbnail StrengthsQuest

The StrengthsQuest program is intended to encourage students' awareness of their potential. It is also intended to help students approach all aspects of achievement from a strengths-based perspective. StrengthsQuest is designed to increase student involvement through a strengths-based campus philosophy. Finally, it enables students to create practical plans that use their greatest talents to build strengths. The StrengthsQuest program consists of three components designed to help students achieve those objectives:

First, students complete the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an online assessment that reveals a person's Signature Themes—the five greatest areas of talent.

Second, students are introduced to *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton and Anderson 2002). That workbook, available in printed form and online, helps students understand their talents, teaches them how to build strengths, and provides insights into how they can apply their talents and strengths in academics, careers, and life.

Finally, students are introduced to the StrengthsQuest Web site (www.strengthsquest.com), which facilitates student learning and development using interactive features, learning modules, customized action plans, and a discussion forum.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder

The Clifton StrengthsFinder presents the participant with 180 items. Each item lists a pair of self-descriptors, such as "I read instructions carefully" and "I like to jump right into things." The descriptors are placed as if anchoring ends of a continuum. The participant is asked to select the better self-descriptor from each pair and indicate the intensity of the answer, that is, the extent to which one descriptor is better than the other. The participant is given twenty seconds to respond to each item before the system moves on to the next item.

To indicate intensity, the respondent chooses among three response options for each self-descriptor. A value is assigned to each response category.

The Thirty-Four Clifton StrengthsFinder Themes

The items in the Clifton StrengthsFinder represent thirty-four different themes of talent. The intensity values of a participant's

responses to the items in each theme are averaged to derive a theme score, and the five themes with the highest scores are designated the participant's Signature Themes. As a rule, it is upon those five themes that strengths-building efforts are focused. The thirty-four Clifton StrengthsFinder themes are these:

Achiever: People strong in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.

Activator: People strong in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.

Adaptability: People strong in the Adaptability theme prefer to "go with the flow." They tend to be "now" people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.

Analytical: People strong in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.

Arranger: People strong in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements that ability. They like to figure out how all the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.

Belief: People strong in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. From those values emerges a defined purpose for their life.

Command: People strong in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.

Communication: People strong in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.

Competition: People strong in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.

Connectedness: People strong in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.

Consistency: People who are strong in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat

everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.

Context: People strong in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.

Deliberative: People strong in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.

Developer: People strong in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from those improvements.

Discipline: People strong in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.

Empathy: People strong in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.

Focus: People strong in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.

Futuristic: People strong in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They inspire others with their visions of the future.

Harmony: People strong in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.

Ideation: People strong in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.

Includer: People strong in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make efforts to include them.

Individualization: People strong in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.

Input: People strong in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

Intellection: People strong in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.

Learner: People strong in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to improve continuously. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.

Maximizer: People strong in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.

Positivity: People strong in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.

Relator: People who are strong in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Responsibility: People strong in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.

Restorative: People strong in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.

Self-Assurance: People strong in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Significance: People strong in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized.

Strategic: People strong in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.

Woo: Woo stands for “winning others over.” People strong in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.



StrengthsQuest in Application: The Experience of Four Educators

The Power of Teaching Students Using Strengths *by Gloria Henderson*

Like Chip Anderson, whose essay you read earlier in this issue, I was initially taught to use the deficit-remediation model with my students. Even in that negative context, though, and with no exposure at all to strengths-based education, I unconsciously based my early teaching on four of my five Clifton StrengthsFinder signature themes: *Significance* (I wanted to be recognized for having made a difference to each student); *Achiever* (I focused on individual students and tried to energize them to establish and reach their goals); *Restorative* (I was confident that I would create success in even those students who had lost all hope); and *Futuristic* (I developed a vision for my students with the identified deficits reduced or eliminated).

As I learned about strengths-based education after I entered Azusa Pacific University's doctoral program, I came to realize the importance of systematic research and the application of research results in developing the most effective instructors possible. I became determined to use my own strengths consciously and deliberately.

Consciously Applying Strengths to Decide on a Job

I knew I had found my calling when I saw a position posting for a late-term-replacement teacher of at-risk kids in a program structured as a school-within-a-school. The school offers more Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes than regular classes. The students I would teach composed the "school within." They had covered only a minimal amount of content and had not met the state standards.

Being Restorative, I found it natural to identify and take a constructive approach to the students' deficits in skills and the lack of decorum in the classroom. I looked at each student as an individual to determine

areas in which performance was satisfactory and those in which it needed improvement. Being Futuristic, I dreamed big for my new students, and being an Achiever, I developed a plan to make my vision a reality. I conducted research to find lessons, discipline plans, and other resources to assist my students. I also sought advice from other teachers, who brought different strengths to bear. Although I endured many tests from those students, I became a much more effective teacher by consciously using my strengths and encouraging them to use theirs.

Consciously Applying Strengths to Develop Teaching Style

I now teach a sophomore English class for at-risk students at the same school. As an Achiever I set high expectations because I know that if I lower the bar and set expectations that are too easy to reach, the students will meet the expectations yet still not pass the required high school exit exam.

Although I fully intend that every student will pass the exit exam (Significance), I employ a Restorative teaching style that seems to fit my students particularly well. I tease them, cajole them, encourage them, tell them they are better than they think they are, and express my concerns and my hopes for them. I do not focus my efforts on content, but they seem to have a huge impact on how well the students learn the content.

So far the fit between my strengths and my job seems to be working well for the students. I have overheard students telling their friends, “Our English class is fun,” “We didn’t learn how to do that last year,” “Can I take this class next semester?” and “I got a B on a test!” And although it is expected that my at-risk students will not perform as well as the others in the school, they did perform as well, if not better, on recent vocabulary benchmark tests.

After I initiated a video-technology program for the school, my at-risk students successfully took on the challenge of learning theory and abstract application with very limited experiential learning. Even though the equipment arrived late, the students completed a number of well-done projects—remakes, public service announcements, school- and community-focused films, music videos, instructional videos, independent films, and trailers—in only a few short weeks.

For years my students have been told that they are not the best—or worse than that. Evidently, though, many students simply did not understand what was expected of them or lacked the incentive to perform. By consciously using my own strengths, I have been able to address such specific needs. In return I have found it gratifying to make a real, measurable difference. By consciously matching the challenges I undertake with my strengths, I have been able to enjoy greater initial success than I would have otherwise. I have come to believe that although most

people already use their strengths intuitively, any teacher will foster greater student achievement and success by clearly identifying and consciously applying strengths.

Gloria Henderson teaches English, video technology, and psychology at Diamond Bar High School in Diamond Bar, California.

A Principal: The Power of Strengths-Based Leadership

by Kathryn Norwood

I discovered the strengths-based perspective in a doctoral class taught by Chip Anderson at Azusa Pacific University when he was in the last stages of developing the StrengthsQuest program. After completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, I was able to identify five of my top talent themes: Focus, Maximizer, Strategic, Relator, and Self-Assurance.

With my Signature Themes identified, I could examine successes in both my personal and professional lives and see how they reflected talents that I had turned into strengths. As a child, for instance, I would organize the other kids on the block and plan the activity for the day. As a teenager, peers often selected me as the organizer or leader of small groups within my church, club, and school.

I believe I used my talents when I was a teacher, too, but I see that more from the results than from the process at the time. Consider the shy, quiet young man who struggled with academics but was incredibly artistic. In my biology class I encouraged him to express the water and carbon dioxide cycles by drawing sketches. The pencil and charcoal drawings were so good that I have kept them to this day. Five years after he left my class, he returned to ask, "Remember me? . . . You were the only one in my life who ever believed that I could succeed. My whole family voted me 'least likely to succeed' at my high school graduation party.

"But you always believed in me. Now I am a college graduate and I have two offers for postgraduate work in the field of art, one in New York and one in Paris." I had combined my themes of Maximizer—what a particular student was really good at—with Relator: nurturing, refining, and asking that student to stretch himself to become successful.

The next year I became a high school counselor—essentially a full-time Relator—and in four years in that position I felt that I was helping teenagers become successful and realize their potential. A district assistant superintendent, however, kept asking me, "Do you see yourself as a high school assistant principal or maybe principal someday?" I began taking credential courses to prepare myself for an administrative posi-

tion. In retrospect, I see that I was using my Strategic theme by implicitly asking myself, “What if that opportunity arose?”

Although the opportunity did indeed arise, as a first-year high school assistant principal I struggled with my career aspirations. At that point I was introduced to StrengthsQuest. For the first time I articulated Focus and Self-Assurance as well as the three themes that had been evident earlier in my career. Once I had identified and affirmed those talents, I could see the opportunity to achieve excellence in leadership positions. I consciously began using my Focus theme to serve as a compass and my Self-Assurance theme to prepare to become a high school principal. Less than a year later I secured a position as a principal.

Strengths-Based Leadership

Coming into an established school as a stranger, I knew that I had to devise a method of understanding the existing culture and climate. I turned to my Strategic theme and scheduled carefully designed fifteen-minute interviews with every staff member. My final question in each interview was, “What do you see as your greatest strengths?” Besides ending the interview on an upbeat note, the question also allowed me to identify the strengths of each staff member to make the most of his or her potential.

During the first staff meeting I announced a discovery I had made during the interviews: “I discovered that I am the principal of the best high school in the world.” Then I asked all five members of management to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Now, those who enter the management office are able to recognize a new culture and climate that identify individual talents and strengths used by each member to achieve excellence.

To focus staff members on their strengths, I added a “Best Practices” segment to our monthly meeting. High school teachers typically do not get the opportunity to observe other teachers, so Best Practices allows each teacher to showcase ideas that have been successful. Best Practices focuses on the results of using strengths rather than on the link between the strengths and the results. In effect it is a derivative of a StrengthsQuest-based segment. It is effective, and I plan to build on Best Practices so staff members can explore the personal strengths that underlie their successes.

Acting as co-facilitator in a recent management-training program designed to promote leaders from within the district, I combined strengths-based instruction with the existing program. I randomly selected eleven of the twenty-two participants to experience immediate intervention with strengths-based instruction. The remaining eleven participants later began a delayed intervention.

The first eleven completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder, read *StrengthsQuest*, and attended five sessions of intense training and instruction led personally by Dr. Anderson. When I distributed *StrengthsQuest* material to the eleven delayed-intervention participants at a recent meeting, the eleven who had just completed their final strengths session could not contain themselves. Their faces shining with excitement, they eagerly endorsed strengths-based instruction: “I know my unique strengths now”; “I use [my strengths] every day, and I observe others and can identify their strengths”; “I now understand why and how I can be successful.”

Looking back on my own life, I see clearly how my talents have always been present. But until I took the Clifton StrengthsFinder, I couldn’t put a name on them, and until I could put a name on them I couldn’t develop and apply them. Now I consciously use my strengths daily to foster excellence in my staff, my students, and myself in a way that would not have been possible previously.

Kathryn Norwood is the principal of Beaumont High School in Beaumont, California.

A Teacher: The Power of Teaching Students about Their Strengths *by Alexis Onishi*

“What’s wrong with me?” Every day, high school students ask that question in one form or another: Why don’t some people like me? Why don’t I look right? What could I possibly offer anyone? Am I ever going to actually make my parents happy? Such focus on the negative saps effort, initiative, creativity, confidence, and enthusiasm just when those qualities are most needed to carry adolescents into adulthood. Until recently the students in my school were victims of that negative focus.

Last fall, seeing an urgent need for a change in how students perceive themselves, Principal Don Austin led the implementation of a mandatory freshman seminar that revolves around StrengthsQuest. Implementing StrengthsQuest provided an opportunity for students to stop asking “What’s wrong with me?” and start asking “What’s right with me?”

StrengthsQuest seems to have changed how students think of themselves. For example, during the first week of the course, one freshman referred to herself on several occasions as a “loser,” saying that she was not a “likable person” because “*everybody* says I can’t do anything right.” After four weeks’ exposure to StrengthsQuest, she told me that she believes she does have talents, wants to develop her strengths so she can

improve in school, and believes that she has the ability to be successful in any class.

StrengthsQuest has also affected the way in which students interact. Walking down the hall, I was stopped in my tracks to hear one student ask another student, “Hey, what are your strengths?” Contrast *that* to the snippets you usually hear in the halls of a high school. With so much of academic achievement being a function of self-concept, we also hope to see gains in objective performance after enough time has passed to measure them.

To accomplish such changes in perception, students devoted the first six-week section to learning about their talents and strengths. We broke down the section into five emphases: 1) a three-day introduction; 2) taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder and comprehending the results; 3) accepting and owning our talents and strengths; 4) understanding the strengths of other people; and 5) applying strengths to academics.

Introduction

The three-day introduction achieved two things: preparation and fascination. Preparation was necessary because the vocabulary the students would encounter in the Clifton StrengthsFinder is geared to college students. In practice, however, preparation amounted to little more than learning a few vocabulary words. In both discussions and reflective writing about the discussions, I found that the students were intrigued by the idea that they might have the same talents as graduates of UCLA, Harvard, or Yale.

The introduction seemed to have a positive effect on the students’ attitudes toward the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Every student put effort into the assessment and no student dismissed it as unimportant—a rare thing for a group of ninth-graders. Even before we began our structured study of the students’ Signature Themes, the students were comparing and discussing who had what talents.

Taking StrengthsFinder and Comprehending the Results

We structured the comprehension process around three tools: “catchphrase collages,” “tea-party explanations,” and a worksheet. Students build catchphrase collages with words cut out of magazines that define or remind them of what their talents entail. Tea-party explanations require the students to mingle as if they were at a party. We structured that work around a picture that each student drew, and also the worksheet “Signature Themes in Common—Similar and Dissimilar Experiences” found in the StrengthsQuest teacher’s guide.

Accepting and owning talents and strengths was a particularly difficult step for many students. Some had simply never entertained the idea

that they have strengths, and it took time and thought for them to accept the idea. Others appeared to find accepting and owning talents threatening. Discussing one student's resistance with him, I found that he recognized that in accepting and owning his talents, he implicitly assumed responsibility for his own success. Thus, he was effectively waiving excuses for nonperformance with which he had become comfortable. I feel that the students who had the most difficulty accepting and owning their talents are those most significantly affected by the class.

Understanding the Strengths of Other People

Two worksheets from the StrengthsQuest teacher's guide, "Building Awareness of Our Signature Themes" and "Understanding and Respecting Talent Differences," require students to interact with one another and to learn the description of each of the thirty-four talent themes and their benefits and challenges. In the process, the students discovered that focusing on talents and strengths changes not only how they view themselves, but how they view others as well.

That was a major insight for most of them, and to emphasize it we listed ways that people judge others—looks, race, grades, athletics, money, and clothes. We brainstormed what it would be like if people based their opinions on strengths instead, and the students said that it would "change everything." They said they would feel less pressure, wouldn't try to be someone they are not, and probably would be less sensitive to what people thought of them. I was surprised at how readily the students acknowledged that they often judge others by unfair standards and how willing they were to consider judging others in new ways.

To develop skill in picking out other people's strengths, we used journals and activities, speculating, for example, about what strengths popular television or movie characters might have.

Applying Strengths to Academics

The StrengthsQuest book offers suggestions for how to use each Signature Theme in academics, so we asked students to come up with three ways in which they could actually accomplish the suggestions offered for the first theme. We also used a worksheet from the StrengthsQuest teacher's guide, "Academic Tasks I Do with Ease." Listing the tasks and associating them with their own strengths helped the students recognize that they tend to do well in academic tasks that employ their strengths, and tend to enjoy doing tasks they do well. Thus they came to see that school is more enjoyable when they use their strengths than when they don't. Greatly to my surprise, that revelation seemed to have a positive effect on even some of the true hard cases: rebellious,

angry, immature students who often behave as if they do not want to learn, grow, or accomplish anything.

During the second six-week section the students will apply their newfound talents to choosing relationships, colleges, and careers. I don't know what the effect of that section will be, but do I believe that the first six-week section made an immediate and significant difference in several students' lives. I believe that for many others it will have a life-long impact on how they see themselves, others, and life in general. At a more concrete, objective level, I am confident that the class will lead to better academic performance. Unlike the qualitative life changes, it is an outcome we may be able to measure in the near future.

Alexis Onishi is an English teacher at La Sierra High School in Riverside, California.

A Student:
The Power of Learning Your Strengths
by Jenna Friesen

Throughout my life the consensus expectation has been that I would “get better” at things. To that end, my teachers’ approach was to point out what I had done wrong, and my track coaches tried to inspire me to make my worst into my best. I was constantly told to “change this” or “improve that.”

Please do not misunderstand me: I have been surrounded with adults who love me and want only life’s best for me. But they thought the only way to achieve that was to correct my flaws and strengthen my weaknesses. Consequently, for the first twenty years of my life, I pushed myself to overcome my weaknesses.

A year ago I was introduced to StrengthsQuest. For the first time I was asked to think about only my talents and my strengths. Since then I have come to realize how sensitive I am to what people say to me. I now see that when my teachers and coaches focused entirely on helping me correct flaws and address weaknesses, I was constantly discouraged. StrengthsQuest, however, gave me a confidence I had never felt before by causing me to focus instead on my talents and strengths—Discipline, Empathy, Belief, Responsibility, and Communication.

Once I became attuned to my Signature Themes I immediately recognized three: Discipline, Belief, and Responsibility. These were talents that I had always shown—I had just not been able to name them. Merely articulating obvious Signature Themes, however, had an impact. For example, people have always joked about how I tend to be less flexible than many others, I crave routine, and I don’t like change. Because I now

understand, however, that those traits accompany the talent theme of Discipline, I no longer see them as necessarily negative.

I am in my early twenties, a time when many of my peers have experimented extensively with sex, drugs, and alcohol. I have not. That used to be difficult to explain to others, and even to myself. Now I can see that my Signature Theme, Belief, causes me to see life in black-and-white, right-or-wrong contrasts more than most people do and to make choices that trouble others but are quite clear to me.

Although three of my Signature Themes were easy for me to see in my usual behavior, the themes of Communication and Empathy were not. Before learning about my talent for communication, I had been hesitant to answer questions in class, confront others, or speak in a group. When I learned from StrengthsQuest about my talent for finding the “right” words, I knew it was all right to speak up more often, because others’ silence often meant simply that they did not know what to say.

Applying Empathy, my other less-obvious Signature Theme, has enabled me to choose questions and comments in my classes, phrase them, and time them so they feed into the instructors’ structure and delivery. I think that often helps the instructors’ responses and that most of the students understand them more clearly as a result.

Knowing my talents has even helped my relationship with my fiancé. As we all know, relationships require work, and strengths-based thinking has provided the context and direction for that work. Because each of us knows the other’s Signature Themes, we are better able to understand each other. Knowledge of my Signature Themes has affected my life in many smaller ways, too. After learning about talents and strengths-based thinking, I even find myself making calls and sending e-mails and notes, telling people what they are good at.

Focusing on my talents has opened doors I did not even know existed. I am grateful for that opportunity; nonetheless, looking back I cannot help wondering what kind of student or athlete I could have been if my teachers and coaches had focused on what I did well instead of what I could not do.

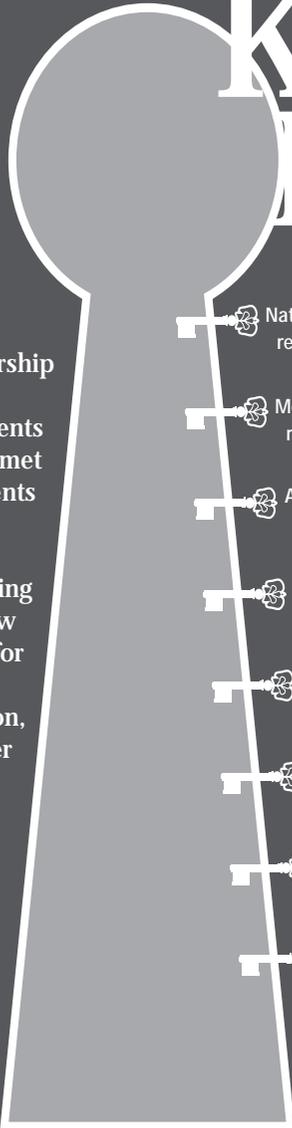
My wish is that many more people will have the opportunity to discover their Signature Themes and develop their strengths.

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Toxic Testing: It's Time to Reflect upon Our Current Testing Practices

by Betsy A. Gunzelmann

Over many years, both as an educator and as a psychologist, I have been involved with assessing students' knowledge and skills. Since my early years diagnosing students with learning disabilities and other disorders, my viewpoint on the usefulness and effectiveness of many testing approaches has taken a 180-degree turn. In fact, I see many approaches as inaccurate and even harmful for many students.

Take Scott, for example.* Scott is an easygoing thirteen-year-old who throughout his school years has been a delight, but oftentimes a puzzle, to his parents and teachers. He is a conscientious student who overall still likes school. He does very well on classroom work and easily follows the lectures and activities, although at times he gets his teachers off-track with his insatiable curiosity and unique approach to problems. He seems to know a lot about many subjects and is inquisitive about most topics.

Scott has a few close friends, no diagnosed learning difficulties, and several intense interests. Math, language arts, and Spanish are his favorite subjects. So what is the problem? one might ask. Well, Scott is one of those bright, creative students who underachieve on standardized, multiple-choice-format tests, despite honor-roll grades and accelerated classes.

Many students like Scott know more than they demonstrate on standardized testing. Very few countries use standardized testing with children before the age of sixteen. But in the United States we use such tests with very young children, even though we know that the practice runs counter to research. Furthermore, very few countries use multiple-choice formats with children of any age (Kohn 2000).

*The case histories are composites of numerous individuals I have known over the past twenty years. The stories reflect many of the students that psychologists and educators encounter on a daily basis.

So what's going on? There are many hidden problems with our current approach to testing, and it's high time that we understand the issues behind the obsession with standardized testing in our country.

History

To understand how we got into this testing dilemma, it's necessary to take a step back and look briefly at specific historical precedents in psychology and education. Testing and assessment procedures have been a part of civilized society for centuries, and individual differences have been recognized since the dawn of history. The first tests were designed by the ancient Chinese around 2200 B.C. Plato and Aristotle wrote on individual differences some 2,500 years ago. Many of the early tests used were oral and subject to certain biases (Aiken 2000).

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, testing was beginning to take on a more critical role. In 1904 Binet and Simon were asked to develop the first intelligence test to weed out children who would not benefit from traditional schools (Aiken 2000). Certainly this approach does not meet our needs today, when all children are entitled to an education.

Early psychological theory was closely related to philosophy and understanding the world through a qualitative methodological approach. Then, in Germany during the late 1800s, Wilhelm Wundt started developing research approaches that would allow quantifiable results. In the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s, the behaviorist B. F. Skinner and numerous other psychologists and educators became caught up in the need to make everything measurable. Unfortunately, the outcome was that people put more credence in these



numbers than was healthy and forgot about the importance of measuring both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Significant historical and political developments also prompted changes in testing needs. For example, both world wars brought about increased calls for innovative approaches to testing many recruits in a short time. Then came the race to get the first man in space and the first man on the moon: the domino effect resulted in a frenzied attempt to increase student learning in math and science. One might cite this as the beginning of an academic Olympics among the industrialized countries. Thus the big business of testing was born along with an increased fervor for competition in academics.

These earlier attempts at testing seem to have established a mold that has been difficult to break. The pattern seems to address the style needs and thinking strategies of many students, but it does not adequately address the needs of all. In fact, I think it is fair to question whether we are actually measuring the true abilities of any student!

Current Understanding

Psychologists and educators know that it is wrong to make decisions based upon a single test score and that decisions should reflect a balanced, complete understanding of each child. Numbers and scores can be very misleading if we don't consider the whole picture, something that means using both a qualitative and quantitative approach. Yet due to economic, time, and political pressures, psychologists and educators are forced to rely more and more heavily on solely quantitative methods, and many have been deceived into believing that numbers tell the whole story.

Across the country we see continued movement toward more accountability, increased use of standardized tests, and high-stakes testing. Along with these trends come teaching to the test, test anxiety, lowered self-esteem, misunderstanding of children, and missed opportunities for many. Dr. David Elkind, the author of *The Hurried Child* (1989), believes that our current testing obsession is a factor behind the dynamics of our hurrying schools. Administrators, under pressure to demonstrate student learning, are therefore teaching concepts at earlier and earlier ages. The result is no greater knowledge but added pressure for children to measure up and to hurry their learning.

"There are plenty of kids who think deeply and score well on tests. There are also plenty of students who do neither."

— Alfie Kohn

Deborah Meier (2002) believes that the increased use of standardized tests actually undermines student achievement and increases distrust of

teachers, students, and our own judgments. The misunderstanding of testing develops toxic conditions for everyone affected by test scores: students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the entire school system and community. We know from research that no one test can determine a student's ability or achievement. Nor is there a test that can measure a teacher's or school system's effectiveness. To think otherwise is a flagrant misuse of testing.

Much of the drive toward greater accountability is fueled by political platforms. But well-meaning politicians, untrained in the art and science of testing, are influenced by the huge testing industry. Our children's education is too important to leave assessment decisions in the hands of those who do not comprehend the underlying issues.

Problems with Standardized Testing

Traditional tests attempt to show what a child does not know or what is wrong or deficient about a child's abilities, rather than what is valued and unique about the child's particular way of learning, coping, reasoning, or problem solving. Test developers are looking at assessment too narrowly. We need to break out of the mold of traditional assessment and develop assessment procedures that value the uniqueness of each individual.

Traditional testing is, at best, a selection of test items, which may or may not be relevant to the curriculum to which the student has been exposed and is always subject to many forms of bias, including cultural, gender, socioeconomic, and learning-preference bias. Bias leads to assessment discrimination against many students, including creative thinkers; students with learning differences; students with a preferred learning modality; boys (due to gender differences); students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds; and many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. That is a lot of children!

With so many children at risk, why are we reliant on traditional testing approaches? As I stated earlier, *testing is a big business*, and the testing manuals advertise questionable advantages. For example, traditional standardized testing allows:

1. *Standard practices and scoring.* The tests are given to all students in the same way and scored the same way. Standardizing the process, however, does not eliminate subjectivity. We are still making judgments, but in the case of most standardized testing instruments we are using very little information to make judgments upon individuals. This is a toxic situation for many students!
2. *Comparing students.* When students are rank-ordered, the process ensures that half will always be below average.

Such practices give the illusion of being scientific, yet educators know from the work of Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) that they must meet individual needs in order for children to learn and thrive. A one-size-fits-all approach to testing does not address individual needs. Many children have learning difficulties or just learning-style differences. Most teachers do a good job of addressing these preferences in their teaching, and then testing ignores the individual needs of most children. We expect them all to perform using one format. This is testing-preference discrimination. Students should be allowed to demonstrate their competence in ways that show what they really know and are capable of doing.

Thus kids like Scott with unique, idiosyncratic responses to test items are penalized. Their creative, deeper-thinking approaches can actually handicap them on standardized tests. For example, a creative student may come up with correct answers that may not be what the test designers score as correct.

Alfie Kohn (2000) gets this point across succinctly. He believes there is a correlation between high scores on standardized tests and relatively shallow thinking and that these tests are geared to a different, less-sophisticated kind of knowledge (p. 9). Kohn goes on to say,

There are plenty of kids who think deeply and score well on tests. There are also plenty of students who do neither. But as a rule, good standardized test results are more likely to go hand in hand with a shallow approach to learning rather than with deep understanding. (p. 10)

Deborah Meier (2002) concurs that deeper and subtler thought is often an impediment to scoring high on such tests. Meier and Kohn are not alone in their beliefs about deep thinkers. Even in 1962, Banesh Hoffmann, in the classic book *The Tyranny of Testing*, demonstrates that these tests penalize the finer mind.

He [the deep thinker] would see more in a question than his superficial competitors would ever dream was in it, and would expend more time and mental energy than they in answering it. That is the way his mind works. That is, indeed, his special merit. But the multiple choice tests are concerned solely with the candidate's choice of answer, not with his reason for his choice. Thus they ignore the elusive yet crucial thing we call quality. (p. 99)

Furthermore, Hoffmann states: "Multiple choice format also penalizes the creative student. Students who can imagine several possible correct answers, and may think the most obvious answer could not be the correct answer" (p. 101).

The effects of socioeconomic levels and race on test scores have been well documented in the literature. However, there are lesser-known issues of gender impacting standardized test scores. Dr. William Pollack (1998) believes that most schools fail boys if the environment is not conducive to the way boys learn. Many schools are not, and we are seeing a decline in boys' test scores as a result.

Beginning in kindergarten, boys are expected to achieve a standard that favors girls. This standard is reflected in traditional assessment strategies as well. Left-brained cognitive skills such as speaking, reading, and writing abilities tend to develop more slowly in boys, yet both genders are expected to show competence in these areas at the same ages. Conversely, until the curriculum was changed to meet the needs of girls, girls used to fall behind boys on standardized tests (Connell and Gunzelmann 2004).

W. J. Popham (1999) believes that educational quality is being measured by the wrong yardstick, and the evaluations are therefore apt to be in error. He also believes that most educators as well as parents do not really understand why standardized tests often provide misleading estimates of learning and of a school's effectiveness. Yet many of these tests are being used for high-stakes decisions, including student promotion or retention in grades, graduation, and acceptance into certain schools, as well as judgments and punishments for the teacher—purposes for which the tests were not designed and cannot really accomplish!

All this has developed from tests that we know unfairly discriminate against a variety of students; show only a limited sample of behavior; presume similarity of educational content across classrooms; ignore individualizing ideas such as progressivism and constructivism; make teachers and administrators narrow their curriculum to the test content; and require teachers to focus on test-taking skills, thus forfeiting valuable instruction time. Furthermore, we are wasting taxpayer money on these tests rather than using the funds for educational materials that would enrich all students. Most important, we are not obtaining an accurate picture of many students who may suffer humiliation and serious consequences from low scores.

It puzzles me how our country prizes and protects the rights of the individual, yet our approach to educational testing forces everyone to demonstrate learning in the same way. Because we are all individuals with different achievements, learning styles, backgrounds, and response styles, only a variety of testing formats will allow test takers to accurately demonstrate their learning.

Of course we need high educational standards, but we need to be more reflective about our purposes for testing. Such purposes might include the need to pinpoint learning problems accurately in order to

design appropriate educational programs, to improve the learning of all students, and to demonstrate that the children within our classrooms and schools are learning. In order to accomplish those goals of testing we need to develop more accurate assessment tools that do not have toxic side effects.

“[The deep thinker] would see more in a question than his superficial competitors would ever dream was in it, and would expend more time and mental energy than they in answering it.”

—*Banesh Hoffmann*

We are overusing and misusing a fallible method of assessment. We can no longer afford to rely on a limited repertoire of assessment approaches. In order to break out of our current obsessive pattern of testing, we need innovative, motivated thinkers who know children well and realize the limitations of traditional tests—individuals who can develop and fine-tune approaches that measure learning over time, not just take a snapshot of a specific behavior at a specific time.

Toward a Workable Solution

Alternative assessment approaches can portray each student's unique abilities and learning styles. For example, many teachers have been using a form of portfolio assessment for some time (some more effectively than others). Portfolio assessment can be time-consuming, yet it has the added benefit of helping students to take responsibility for their learning and pride in their accomplishments. Used well, portfolio assessment can demonstrate student learning as well as strengths and weaknesses. With further refinement, this approach (along with other qualitative and quantitative approaches) could be used to compare students' abilities and demonstrate the effectiveness of teachers' performance as well.

The Case of Noel

The case of Noel demonstrates the power of portfolio assessment. Noel experienced difficulty in her early grades in elementary school. Reading and writing did not come easily for her. Diagnosed with a learning disability during fourth grade, she functioned below her peers in language arts despite high intelligence scores. Noel began to think of herself as less smart than her peers; her self-esteem and self-confidence began to erode. Test after test, year after year, her scores showed only her weaknesses.

Noel developed a pessimistic outlook toward her future and felt trapped by a misleading approach to understanding her knowledge and

skills. Not until Noel reached college did she finally begin to understand her strengths and value her abilities. Through portfolio assessment, she demonstrated her skills to herself as well as to her professors. She became a confident and competent young woman, graduating from college with honors, and she is now applying to graduate school with strong, well-earned recommendations from her professors.

Noel was unique because she didn't give up. I suspect that many individuals have not persevered after test scores put roadblocks in their way. What a waste it is when human potential goes unrecognized, or even more sadly is misunderstood!

The Case of Suzie

Suzie had always been an excellent student who performed well on all standardized tests administered throughout her elementary and secondary school years. While in college she continued on this path, clearly demonstrating her abilities as a scholar. Yet with all the praise and glory, Suzie had focused too narrowly on scores and competition. She did not understand all her numerous strengths. So even in Suzie's case, testing did not reveal a complete picture of what this young woman might become.

When Suzie became involved with an evaluation process that required her to focus on her strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, she discovered new talents and a balance to her life that allowed more focused career goals to emerge. Suzie was involved with experiential learning in her chosen field, trying out her knowledge and skills. This approach also allowed outside, objective professionals as well as her professors to evaluate her abilities. Suzie took responsibility for her learning and discovered artistic talents, strong interpersonal skills, and a desire and ability to help others. Focusing only on scores, rank-ordering each student, and concentrating on what a child does not know make it easy to lose sight of the individual and what a person can become. Portfolio assessment is just one approach we should be looking at more seriously for use with all students, not just the severely handicapped.

Future Directions

Additional research must be conducted on alternative assessment techniques. Advances in technology afford us many unique opportunities to meet the needs of all students. For example, Scott, whose case was presented earlier, discovered that he did much better on computerized versions of traditional tests.

Other technological advances have allowed us to use e-portfolios with many added benefits. Storage of materials is much easier; many reviewers can assess students' material online for a more complete evaluation; and

students can prepare and present their own portfolios, thus cutting the cost and time required.

Most professionals in psychology, social work, medicine, and education strive to do good work with children. Once in a while, it is a good idea to step back and reflect upon the ramifications of our work so that we can improve our future efforts. We know that:

- Assessment should be undertaken for the right reasons.
- Assessment should be helpful to the students and teachers.
- Assessment must be accurate.
- Assessment should not cause harm.

Relying too heavily on traditional standardized assessment harms many individuals and does not yield accurate understanding. Therefore, more precise assessment requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. There is no doubt that both methodologies require more research and refinement, but we must not allow judgments and decisions to be made on our children without a complete picture. We have underutilized alternative approaches that can yield a more complete and accurate picture of all students, while they are ultimately affirming and motivating . . . in a word, nontoxic!

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