TEACHING STUDENTS LIVING WITH TRAUMA-CHRONIC STRESS USING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

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Session Anchor Questions

1. What's the urgent call for using a strengths-based teaching approach?
2. How can we identify and cultivate our professional and our students and families’ strengths?
3. What strengths-based instructional practices are critical?

Quick Info

“Almost half of the nation’s children have experienced one or more types of serious childhood trauma…”
National Survey of Children’s Health, 2014

Definitions

• **Trauma**: a response to an experience that is so stressful that it overwhelms an individual’s capacity to cope
• **Violence**: the use of physical force to harm someone, damage property
• **Chronic Stress**: a physiological state of hyper arousal that can result in chronic anxiety, hyper vigilance, & limit in regulating behavior


Literature mostly about counseling/supporting (not teaching) school-aged learners experiencing...

• physical, sexual, verbal abuse
• physical and emotional neglect
• addicted or incarcerated parents
• loss or abandonment (by death or divorce)
• mental illness in the home
• abused parent

(National Survey of Children’s Health, 2014)
Limited literature on teaching ELs experiencing trauma, violence, and chronic stress

Why is it critical

- To use a strengths-based approach?
- Scale the power of positive asset-based, caring, and empowering interactions?
- Draw from our own and our students’ and families’ unique circumstances and strengths?

Research is clear-

- When we focus on people’s inherent strengths (what they bring), it leads to better outcomes than operating from what we perceive as their weaknesses
- We can help students be more successful and engaged when we draw from their internal strengths and capacities

When...Then... Theory of Change

- When we believe that every human being is valuable and possesses many strengths,
- Then we intentionally look for these strengths and support individuals in using these for their personal growth.

Adopting a Strengths-Based Perspective

- Students, teachers, schools, communities have strengths and resources
- Strong belief in the positive nature of human beings
- Embracing a belief in human resilience and strengths

A mind/mental shift...

From what we believe is not happening and impossible, to what is happening and possible.
How can we identify and cultivate our professional strengths as well as the strengths of our students and families?

Finding our own strengths: Looking at ourselves first
- Examine experiences
- Take stock of assets and strengths
- Identify values and assets in positive and challenging situations

Importance of -
- Identifying strengths
- Acknowledging (reflecting back) strengths
- Helping students to see their own strengths
- Building instructional programming based on strengths

Finding strengths and assets hidden under adversity

Be intentional...
Create opportunities for students to display their strengths...

Strengths-based practices for working with families
- Check preconceived beliefs
- Remain open-minded
- Be genuine when partnering with families
- Reach out for support from colleagues
- Create opportunities for partnerships
- Look (intentionally) for strengths
Partnership meetings

- Personal
- Open-minded
- Less-structured
- Flexible

Example of using asset-based language to acknowledge strengths

**Background information:** Luis has showed inconsistent attendance throughout the years. Mrs. Herrick has observed that he has not missed a day in the last couple of weeks.

**Teacher's positive affirmation to the parent:** "Thank you for helping Luis have such excellent attendance lately. I can see how much you value education because you are making sure he is here every day. I'm glad he has not missed a single day of school in this past two weeks. Thank you for being such a responsible and dedicated mother and a great partner in education!"


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What strengths-based instructional practices are critical?

**Four Essential Pillars of an Assets-Based Classroom/School**

- Safe
- Belong
- Valued
- Competent


What does a strengths-based learning environment look like?

**Physical Environment**

- Seating conducive for paired and groupwork
- Locating lesson details in area agreed by and accessible to all
- Paying attention to lighting, air quality, and acoustics

Building relationships with students

Examples
Keith—high school
1. Activities you are involved in school
2. Activities you are involved outside of school

Teachers of young learners
1. What I wish my teacher knew about me…
2. I wish my teacher knew that…

“There are many young people out there just like him.”

Marvin Quiñones, high school teacher, MA

Promoting student voice and choice

“Leading with our Ears”

Larry Ferlazzo, high school teacher

“Do not underestimate the power of characters in literature.”

Everly & Firestone, 2014

“I choose books that teach about experiences and feelings…”

Kathy Lobo, elementary ESL teacher, Belmont MA
Putting it together: Example of teaching to strengths

Our background knowledge of students supports instruction being relevant and compelling
Example: 2nd grade teacher

Routines and Practices

**STEP 1**
Mr. Zimmerman:
1. Reviews overarching unit objective on odd & even numbers
2. Reviews day’s learning objective and what student will do to meet concept

**STEP 2**
Mr. Zimmerman thinks aloud & models the skills and how students will do it. Example: What does it feel like when you are the ‘Odd Man Out’?

**STEP 3**
Students engage in pairs finding solutions to being the ‘Odd Man Out’ at recess using the language of math

**STEP 4**
Whole class reviews paired and small group activities and solutions and comes to agreement about them.

**STEP 5**
Students discuss the problem of participation at recess with a family member or friend and ask for additional solutions.

Reflection and Next Steps

What did Mark Zimmerman do that resonated with you and will help you to further embrace a strength-based perspective in your work?

Recognizing and acknowledging

Energizers and affirmations
- What we observed
- How those observations translate to values/assets/strengths/qualities others exhibited
- Reflect them back

It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.

— John Joseph Powell