




**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?

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What's the urgent call for using a strengths-based teaching approach with students and families living with trauma, violence and chronic stress?

**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

Zacarian D, Alvarez-Ortiz L, & Haynes J, Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress. Alexandria: ASCD. Forthcoming September 2017.

**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

---Craig (2006) Yoshikawa (2011)

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)

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**Limited literature on teaching ELs experiencing trauma, violence, and chronic stress**

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**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?

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**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

**Psychotherapy** (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006)  
**Positive Psychology** (Seligman, et al, 2006)  
**Psychology** (Dweck, 2007)  
**Positive Youth Development** (Floyd & McKenna, 2003; Lerner, et al, 2005)  
**Educational research** (Biswas-Dienera, Kashdan, & Gural, 2011; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Steele, 2010).

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**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.

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**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


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**A mind/mental shift...**

**From** what we believe is not happening and impossible, **to** what is happening and possible.

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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


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**Importance of -**

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

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**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!"

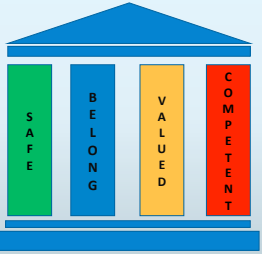
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### 3

What strengths-based instructional practices are critical?

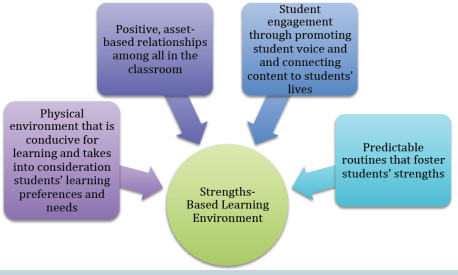


### Four Essential Pillars of an Assets-Based Classroom/School



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### What does a strengths-based learning environment look like?



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### 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

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### **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...

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

Marvin Quiñones, high school teacher, MA

### **Promoting student voice and choice**



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**“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: 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher



**Routines and Practices**

**STEP 1**

**Mr. Zimmerman:**

- a. Reviews overarching unit objective on odd & even numbers
- b. Reviews day's learning objective and what student will do to learn concepts

**Step 2:** Mr. Zimmerman thinks aloud & models the skills and activities students will do. 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:** Students engage in small groups discussing solutions to 'Odd Man Out' using the language of math

**Step 5:** Whole class reviews paired and small group activities and solutions and comes to agreement about them

**Step 6:** Students discuss the problem of participation at recess with a family member or friend and ask for additional solutions

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**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?

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**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



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