
From Strength to Strength

Strengths education for schools

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AN INTRODUCTION TO STRENGTHS-BASED EDUCATION:

Introduction:

We all want our students to thrive at school and to be the best they can be in the world.

When we understand and cultivate young people's character strengths, we enable them to be who they are at their very best. In other words, they flourish.

So what are 'Character Strengths'?

Put simply, strengths fall into two categories: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. Extrinsic strengths are our talents and skills; intrinsic strengths *direct* our talents and skills. "Character strengths are the fuel and the rudder that energize and direct our talents," says Dr Neal Mayerson, Chairman and Founder of the VIA Institute on Character.

(www.viacharacter.org)

For example, if you have a talent for playing basketball, it will be your intrinsic strength/s of say, perseverance, teamwork, and/or self-control that will focus and direct your talent to a higher level of achievement.

It is our *intrinsic* strengths that are our 'character strengths'. This semantic distinction is taken from the science of **positive psychology**, a relatively new branch of psychology initially brought to the fore by Professor Martin Seligman, then president of the American Psychological Association in the early 90s.

Evidence-based research supports the claim that when we use our strengths we have more fulfilling and happier lives, less stress, increased vitality, a stronger self-esteem and greater resilience.

Who wouldn't want that? And who wouldn't want that for our teenagers – and our teachers?

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive Psychology shifts the enquiry from 'What is clinically wrong?', to 'What constitutes a good and satisfying life?'

Martin Seligman – now deemed as the 'father of modern positive psychology' – is renowned author of many books, including *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, and his latest, *Flourish*. In 2004 Seligman co-authored with Christopher Peterson to

produce the ground-breaking handbook, *Character Strengths and Virtues* – ‘the DSM of positive psychology’ – which unpacks the notion of character. Based on explicit criteria and research cross-culture, history and religion, *Character Strengths and Virtues* classifies the resulting 24 universally and morally valued strengths.

What Positive Psychology *isn't*.

Positive psychology *isn't*:

- ‘Positive thinking’
- ‘Happy-ology’
- ‘New Age’ thinking

Positive Psychology is grounded in science.

Strengths-based education in the Classroom

Traditionally, character education in schools is seen as a set of traits or values upheld and promoted to instill these values in its students. However, what the VIA Classification does is celebrate our own constellation of top strengths, that once learned and engaged, enables teachers and students alike to flourish.

If we see each of the 24 strengths as 24 different ‘seeds of potential’, and give each child the opportunity to nourish and grow their own top strengths (whilst still having ready access to their lesser strengths), we give them the greatest gift: to thrive, and to be the best they can be in the world.

When children and adolescents learn about and engage their top strengths, they develop a ‘strengths-language’ and culture. As an offshoot of this, they begin to:

- celebrate differences in themselves and others;
- apply specific strengths for specific tasks;
- have a sense of ‘this is the real me’; and
- shift their own focus from ‘what’s wrong?’ to ‘what’s right?’.

Also, when a young person develops their ‘strengths muscles’, their self-esteem and resilience increases, resulting in them being able to recover more quickly from adversity.

We don’t just want our children to be okay. We want them to flourish,

And isn’t flourishing at the heart of what education is about?

So what, now what?

It is **From Strength to Strength**'s vision to make Strengths-based Education easily understood, implemented and accessible to all schools, and to underpin all aspects of school curricula.

Implementing a strengths-based culture in the classroom can either be facilitated by **From Strength to Strength** and/or schools can purchase an extensive range of teaching aids and programs available on our website. These have been designed specifically for teachers to bring Strengths-based Education to the classroom with fun and ease. Professional Development can also be arranged for in-house teacher training.

However, as a first step, teachers and students can learn what their strengths are – in ranked order (from 1-24) – by completing a free on-line survey at www.viacharacter.org. (A free 'youth survey' is also available for children 10-17 years old.) These surveys take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. (More comprehensive surveys are also available for purchase.)

Please visit our website for further information and free samples of our programs. (www.fromstrengthtostrength.com) or contact us directly if we can be of assistance.

We look forward to working with you and your students on their 'strengths' journey!

References:

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The Strengths Book, by Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R, CAPP Press, UK (2010)

Pursuing the Good Life, by Christopher Peterson, Oxford University Press, USA, 2013

Celebrating Strengths, Jenny Fox Eades, CAPP UK, 2010