

Your Best Plans Must Use Your Best Strengths

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A Draft of a Chapter
For the book

UNFOCUSED KIDS: INNOVATIVE PRACTICES TO HELP STUDENTS FOCUS
ON THEIR PLANS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL:

A RESOURCE FOR EDUCATORS

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Abstract

High school students are encouraged to articulate their strengths and use those strengths when making their most important plans. The rationale for articulating strengths is based on the psychological literature describing the well-documented advantages of optimism, hope and focus on strengths. Haldane's process of Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA) is recommended. Activities that can help a student identify significant strengths are suggested for those who can not gain access to the recommended DSA process right away. Those activities encourage a participant to describe a few events which are very positive. Using those events to look for strengths, participants are encouraged to find three or more peers to help in the identification of strengths. Identified strengths are prioritized, reviewed for reliability, and seriously considered when making plans.

Introduction

High school students are rapidly approaching the most crucial crossroad in their young lives. For many of these students, high school graduation will mark the beginning of the most momentous transition period they will face. Many will not have thought a great deal about what comes next, and many others will be anxious about their uncharted future. For many, this marks the first time in their lives when their daily decisions will not be influenced or determined by the structure of their school's schedules and rules laid down by their parents and the other significant adults in their lives. After graduation they will probably be more responsible for the plans they make. As these students increase their personal decision-making and make more of their own plans, they will require somewhat different guidelines than they have been using. These new guidelines will be coming more from their personal experiences than from their parents, their teachers and the authority figures in their lives. More than ever before, they will be using themes and patterns from their personal experiences to inform their ideas of personal identity and choice. More than any time before in their lives, their self-identities will influence what they choose and what they do. Decision-making will be confusing because they will have many changing identities. As they become aware of changing identities, they may be unsure as to which identities should receive their primary focus. They will have choices as to which aspects of themselves will get the most attention and focus. They may not recognize that they are taking a bigger role in choosing who they are and what they will do, but it will be happening.

The primary idea of this chapter is that high school students approaching graduation can be more successful and make better plans if they focus on their strengths. This recommendation is based on the premise that if a student's self-identity is more firmly grounded on his or her strengths, that student will be more optimistic and hopeful. Better plans will be made if those plans are based on awareness of personal strengths.

One purpose of this chapter is to build the case for articulating and using strengths when building self-identities, making plans and implementing those plans. Another purpose is to provide suggestions as to how strengths can be articulated and then used to make plans.

How are strengths, optimism and hope related to personal success?

The psychological literature on optimism and pessimism (Chang, 2001) demonstrates the "optimistic advantage." Scheier, Carver and Bridges (2001) tell us:

this 'optimistic advantage' is due to differences in the manner in which optimists and pessimists cope with the difficulties they confront. That is, optimists seem intent on facing problems head-on, taking active

and constructive steps to solve their problems; pessimists are more likely to abandon their effort to attain their goals.” (p. 210)

In his book, The Optimistic Child, Seligman (1995) makes a strong case for optimism, when he writes:

I have studied pessimism for the last twenty years, and in more than one thousand studies, involving more than half a million children and adults, pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people in three ways: First, they get depressed much more often. Second, they achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur. Third, their physical health is worse than that of optimists. So holding a pessimistic theory of the world may be the mark of sophistication, but it is a costly one. It is particularly damaging for a child, and if your child has already acquired pessimism, he is at risk for doing less well in school. He is at risk of greater problems of depression and anxiety. He may be at risk for worse physical health than he would have if he were an optimist. And worse, pessimism in a child can become a lifelong, self-fulfilling template for looking at setbacks and losses. The good news is that he can, with your help, learn optimism. (pp. 51-52)

Another branch of the psychological literature focuses on the quality of hope. Snyder, et al. (2001) write “furthermore, individuals with higher levels of hope would be expected to have an enhanced sense of self-esteem both because of past successes and because of their beliefs that workable routes to future goal pursuits are likely.” Snyder and his co-authors go on to show how hope is correlated with psychological adjustment, achievement, problem solving, and coping with health-related concerns.

Optimism and hope are marked by the extent that people focus on positive experiences and expectations. As Carver & Scheier (1990) write: “Optimists, by definition, are people with favorable expectations about the future. Such expectations should make success on a given problem seem more likely and should thereby promote continued problem-solving efforts, resulting in better outcomes.” Scheier, et al (2001) when describing one of their research findings, write “Optimists, as compared to pessimists, also tended to report being less focused on negative aspects of their experience - their distress emotions and physical symptoms.” (p. 202)

Optimists more often focus on their positive experiences, which are experiences wherein they are using their strengths. People who can articulate their strengths and focus on their most positive experiences have more hope about their futures. The research evidence is quite clear. People who focus on their strengths cope better than those who are more pessimistic and depressed. In light of that evidence, it is somewhat puzzling

why educators and parents make few attempts to focus on the strengths of young people. Why do those who are responsible for the optimal development of youngsters ignore the psychological literature that describes the “optimistic advantage?” Maybe it is because we still lack well-developed methods that encourage people to articulate their strengths. Maybe most people think that optimism and pessimism are like temperaments that are programmed by genetic codes. Whatever the reasons, young people are not usually encouraged to focus on their best experiences and their strengths. In the remainder of this chapter, I will suggest activities that will encourage high school students to articulate their best strengths and then use those strengths to help them plan their futures.

How Can People Identify Their Strengths?

The most effective approach to identifying strengths has been developed by Bernard Haldane (1996). This approach, called Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA), evolved from Haldane’s pioneering work when helping World War II returnees identify their motivated skills (Haldane, 1960; Haldane, et al, 1982). During the 1980’s and 1990’s, Dr. Haldane spearheaded a research and development program at the University of Washington, wherein an eighteen-hour workshop was devised to help people identify their strengths and increase their employability. This carefully developed process emphasizes the oral description of Good Experiences and the identification of strengths in small groups. The small groups usually have four members and are called quads. Professionals are trained to implement this basic 18-hour workshop by taking a full-week course that includes the basic DSA process in the first half of the week, and training in how to implement the basic course during the second half.

Curriculum materials have been developed to carry out the DSA process. Boivin-Brown (2001) wrote a comprehensive manual for use in the 18-hour basic DSA program for adults. Boivin-Brown(1990) also wrote the curriculum guide for using the DSA process in high schools. The curriculum guides developed by Boivin-Brown were written in a way that potential users are expected to take a training session before they use the written materials. Usually, potential trainers are encouraged to take the one-week course mentioned above.

There is also DSA curriculum for helping students in grades two through six identify their strengths. Huggins (1994) wrote a curriculum guide that can be used by teachers and counselors in elementary schools. Fortunately, these curriculum materials are written in a way that the users do not need special training. Even though such special training would certainly benefit the person who plans to use the written materials, such training is not required of people who want to use the materials authored by Huggins.

There is also software available to help high school students go through the DSA process on a computer. This software is available from the Washington Occupational Information System (WOIS, 1997). While this computer program is useful, it does not include the aspect of the DSA process that is generally considered most important, that being the small group (usually a quad) wherein participants take turns describing their good experiences to each other. During the workshop-format, other quad members listen to these stories of good experiences and then suggest the names of possible strengths that were demonstrated in the stories. The WOIS software enables a person to go through the strengths-articulation process working alone on a computer.

Results of DSA Workshops

Participants who have been trained in the one-week courses at the University of Washington have offered hundreds of DSA workshops to others. In evaluations of the one-week courses, as well as the workshops offered by graduates of the one-week courses, participants report very positive results. More often than not these participants used the very much description to rate statements like "I have learned new things about myself" and "I can articulate my strengths more clearly."

In addition to standard evaluation results, Forster (1991) collected evidence that most DSA participants changed their self-descriptions after participating in a workshop. He administered the Adjective Check List (ACL) prior to and after three workshops. Post-workshop measures indicated that participants described themselves with adjectives that were more favorable than the adjectives used prior to the workshop. Scales measuring Self-Confidence and Achievement increased so much that such a difference could have been found only 1 out of 1000 times by accident.

Limited Opportunities for DSA Training

Since the evaluations of the DSA process have been so positive, I urge school practitioners to get the training and to use the DSA curriculum materials. Unfortunately, I make this recommendation with the knowledge that most of the curriculum materials for high school students were written with the intention that curriculum users would be trained in workshops or courses requiring approximately 35 hours of participation. The only exception, is the computerized materials available through WOIS, and evaluation results using this approach are limited. At the time this chapter is being written, accessibility to DSA training and related materials is somewhat limited. It is likely that there will be more opportunities in the future to obtain the training suggested for using DSA methods. For information about future workshops designed to prepare you to

use DSA methods, write to Dependable Strengths Institute, Center for Learning Connections, Highline Community College, MS-Omni/PO Box 98000, Des Moines, WA 98198-9800. For more information, contact 206-870-3759 or Internet address: <http://www.learningconnections.org/>.

Given the immediate need for guidelines to help high school students articulate their strengths, and the limited access to training and DSA curriculum materials at this time, I will offer some suggestions for identifying strengths in this chapter. As a temporary measure, I will describe activities that might be used until you have access to appropriate DSA materials and training.

The activities that I will describe in the next section are not the same as are included in the DSA process, but they do use general principles articulated by the DSA process. These activities should help motivated participants articulate and use their most significant strengths. Participating in these activities will not be nearly as effective as programs offered by professionals who have been trained to help others participate in the Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA) process. I offer these suggestions because I believe that even limited efforts to articulate strengths will be better than no efforts. Hopefully, well-developed materials and methods, such as the DSA process will be readily available in the future.

How Can High School Students Identify Their Strengths?

Described below is a six-step process designed to help high school students identify and then use their most significant strengths. It is recommended that school personnel who have special interests in the articulation of strengths provide guidance to high school students who are participating in the six-step process. Before school personnel attempt to help students go through this process, they should themselves go through the process.

Step 1. Identify 15 positive events:

The first important activity of students who are trying to identify their strengths is the systematic review of events recalled from their past. The events that should be reviewed are those that are remembered by the student as being very positive. The remembered events should be ones where the student took an active role in making the event happen. The events should be remembered with very positive feelings, including feelings of accomplishment. After a systematic review of at least the last ten years of his or her life, the student should identify about 15 remembered events and label each event. After prioritizing the events, the student should write a brief description or a short story about seven of his or her most highly prioritized events.

Step 2. Looking for strengths demonstrated during positive events:

Strengths are positive qualities characterizing a person. Strengths can be thought of as skills, personality variables, resources, attitudes, temperaments, talents, or other positive qualities. Participants in this activity should be encouraged to come up with their own definitions of strengths, in that strengths are often in the eye of the beholder. There is no final authority that determines if a quality is a strength. Generally, a person's definition of a strength will be similar to what is held by the general population.

During Step 2 the student studies each of his or her seven stories describing the most positive events and then attempts to name personal qualities or skills that might be called strengths. The student then writes a name for each possible strength on a sheet of paper entitled: Strengths I have demonstrated. Hopefully, the student will list several strengths that were demonstrated in each of the seven positive events, resulting in a list of at least 20 to 30 strengths.

Step 3. Getting help for identifying possible strengths:

Students need to find other people who will help them identify possible strengths that were demonstrated in each of the seven positive events they have written about. This step is very important because strengths become more real to the person when there is consensual support for identifying the strengths. While it is possible for students to find people who will listen to them talk about their seven positive events; most high school students find it difficult to ask people to do this. I recommend that a particular staff member in the school take responsibility for organizing small groups of students who will participate in the process of listening to other students talk about their positive events. The process works best when three to five students agree to take turns sharing their most positive events. While one person tells each story of a positive event, the other group members write down names for the strengths being demonstrated in the story. After all of the stories have been told, the lists of strengths are given to the storyteller. When everyone gets a turn, the whole process becomes satisfying and beneficial for all of the participants. The person responsible for organizing these small groups should prepare everyone for the experience by explaining the process and exploring the enthusiasm of all participants. Those students who are not enthusiastic might be told to wait until they talk to other students who have already participated in the process. In other words, students should be screened before they are included in small groups. It is also possible to arrange for small groups that include adults. It is even possible for family members to participate in the process of listening to descriptions of positive events. Whenever small groups are organized to do

this, it should be agreed that all group members will have a turn to talk about positive events from their lives.

Step 4. Naming those strengths that are most significant:

After a participant has identified many strengths that were used during each of the seven positive events, those strengths should be carefully named and prioritized. The strengths that are listed should include those identified by the student, plus those that were named by others in the small groups who listened to descriptions of the most positive events. The student should take a lot of time considering all of the possible strength names. After considerable study and analysis, the student should write the names or short descriptions of at least eight most significant strengths. These eight strengths become the ones that the student agrees to claim as his or her most significant strengths.

Step 5. Verifying the reliability and validity of each significant strength:

The student should carefully consider each significant strength to ensure that the strength does in fact show up in two or more of the seven most positive events. Only strengths that were clearly evident in two or more positive events should be considered sufficiently reliable to qualify as significant strengths. If a strength only shows up in one of the seven positive events, it should be put aside and only considered after several other strengths have been examined for highest significance. Hopefully, the eight significant strengths that are finally listed will be sufficiently different from each other, so that they don't all seem like the same quality with slightly different names.

Step 6. Using strengths as foundations for plans.

When high school students are making plans, they should start with a review of their eight significant strengths. This does not mean that their plans are totally based on their significant strengths. But it does mean that all plans should be screened through the filter of the individual's most significant strengths. If significant strengths are not being used, the plan should be re-evaluated and modified so that significant strengths will be used. If a plan does not allow the student to use at least one significant strength, the plan does not suit the student very well.

A cautionary warning on Step 6:

In Step 6, students were advised to make sure that their significant strengths are being used in any plan they devise. This advice works well

except in the case of students who have not done a very good job of identifying eight significant strengths that represent a somewhat broad spectrum of possibilities. In other words, if the strengths are very similar to each other, it will be difficult to devise complex plans that are not too narrow and restricted. If a student is not able to come up with a somewhat diverse listing of significant strengths, that student may not be able to devise realistic plans that also use strengths. The sixth step of devising plans, which always allow the student to use one or more strengths, requires that the person was able to articulate strengths that have some variety or diversity.

Despite the qualification on Step 6, I repeat the basic idea that all plans should be grounded on one's significant strengths. If the significant strengths are different from each other and if they were developed with care, they should be seriously considered when devising any plans for the future.

An Example of Articulating Strengths in a High School

Jennifer was a junior in high school when she heard about the opportunity to identify and clarify her strengths. Her school counselor, with the help of Career Center staff, had put a notice in the school paper describing a process where interested students could get together in small groups to articulate their strengths. Jennifer signed up and was assigned to meet with three other students who had volunteered for the same process. The four students met with the school counselor who laid out several steps in the process. The first step was to identify fifteen positive events that had occurred during the past ten years. She worked on this assignment at home. After writing down the names of 15 events, she studied and prioritized the list. She then selected seven of the events that seemed particular meaningful. After this she described the seven events by writing a short story about each event. Later in the week she met with the other three classmates who had also written about seven of their most positive events. When it was her turn, she read four of her short stories and her classmates wrote down the names of strengths that they thought were demonstrated by Jennifer during four of her most positive events. Jennifer had described one event where she had organized all of her notes and handout materials for three of her classes. She described with pride her new system for keeping track of things, and her classmates all mentioned her strengths of being organized and systematic in how she kept track of things in her life. In her second story, she described her work in the school's library, where she helped the librarian implement a new system of keeping track of pamphlets and brochures. In her third story, she described how she had helped other members of the debate team collect and store information on their debate topics. Although she was not one of the top debaters, she was proud of her role in helping all members of the debate team assemble their case materials

and to think of ways to retrieve ideas. Her fourth story was about how she had prepared for a five-week summer trip to Costa Rica with a small group of students.

After telling her stories, Jennifer received lists of possible strengths from the other three listeners. These lists included descriptors such as being organized, a good planner, and able to devise systems for keeping track of things. Later in the day, she studied the lists of strength words she had received from others and compared their feedback with ideas she had about her own strengths. She eventually came up with eight short descriptions of her strengths. They were: (1) being organized, (2) being a superior planner, (3) being able to see patterns in masses of data, (4) able to devise systems that allowed people to find what they needed when they needed it, (5) able to see the big picture after getting a lot of detailed information, (6) being intelligent, (7) getting along with people, and (8) being a good researcher.

During her senior year, when she was making her post-high school plans, Jennifer considered several options. Since she had been a good student who did well in science classes, she thought about being a pre-medicine major at a school known to have strong science programs. Jennifer also considered teacher preparation at the local branch of the State University. Jennifer's mother, who had been a teacher before she had her own children, recommended that she consider this option.

After considering the science and teaching options, Jennifer decided to develop a plan that would fit more closely with the strengths she had articulated during her junior year. She decided that she would apply at universities having strong programs in Information Sciences and Library Sciences. She considered her special strengths to be organizing and managing information or data. By using the Internet, she found a university that was known for its programs in Information Sciences and she applied to that university. As she is making her plans, she remembers that her strengths might be especially well suited to being a librarian or a specialist in some related field. She plans to start college in a general liberal arts program that will eventually help her get into a more specialized program of information sciences or library sciences.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have urged that students be encouraged to be optimistic, to have hope, and to focus on their strengths. I have identified the Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA) process as the best approach I know about to help high school students identify and use their strengths. I have also offered a series of activities described as steps by which students can identify and use their strengths. These steps are suggested if training for the DSA methods is not accessible to staff members in a given school at

the present time. While the DSA methods are clearly superior, the activities described in this chapter will be useful until DSA methods can be offered.

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