

Strengths-Based Approach to Teaching Gives Special Education Students Hope

Strengths-based teaching focuses on students' positive qualities and contributions to class instead of the skills and abilities they may lack. Learn more about this educational approach, which results in hope — and higher academic achievement.



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It's easy for special education teachers to get overwhelmed by all the things that are “wrong” with a student.

We often work with students who have low working memory, poor comprehension, difficulty focusing — and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are themselves full of holes needing to be plugged.

So when a special educator posted a video of a radical daily ritual — which consists of complimenting his students — the video went positively viral, and positive is indeed the key word. Christopher Ulmer, the special education teacher in the video (he is currently on the road promoting his project Special Books by Special Kids), has discovered firsthand the magic that can happen when you begin your work with the unique qualities that students bring to the classroom — instead of everything they don't.

Focusing on Strengths

Ulmer's strategy is a beautiful example of a strengths-based approach to education, which is the identification and development of a student's natural talents in order to educate the whole child. When a teacher comes to work with a picture of the student as a unique human being, the student's weaknesses become opportunities for instruction, rather than the entirety of the education plan. Ulmer reports that his students have become more confident and more positive in their interactions with others. He works from what Paulo Friere would call a “Pedagogy of Hope,” using the key components of strengths-based programs: establishing a warm and caring atmosphere; fostering one-on-one relationships with students; using multiple learning strategies; rewarding efforts; recognizing progress; and embodying love, acceptance, and respect.

All children bring unique strengths to school, but they learn to think about themselves in ways that align with how adults talk about them. If children in special education become accustomed to thinking of themselves in terms of their learning disabilities, they become fixed on the idea that they will forever be perceived as “deficient.” If this is the case, then the best that child will ever do, even given all of the available special education interventions, is reach the minimum expectations.

In a strengths-based model, children can do more than just survive school; they can actually thrive — and the results are real. In a [review of strengths-based research](#), David Osher explains that programs focusing on talents foster [resilience](#), confidence, and flexibility in children. Kids show up to school ready to learn and are more engaged with what they are learning. According to [data from Gallup](#), students in strengths-based programs are absent less and have higher GPAs, greater confidence, and more hope. And while “hope” itself seems like a funny thing to measure in school, a child’s belief that she can change, grow, learn, and succeed — that is, her level of hope — is absolutely key to educational success. Ultimately, a child will not sustain effort unless she believes it will have a positive effect.

Modeling Hope

A child’s hope comes largely from the hope of the adults around her. A strengths-based model builds social support into the educational community and beyond, a process that creates a natural positive feedback loop. Just as Ulmer observed that his complimented students became more likely to compliment one another, the same is true on a larger scale: When a community focuses on strengths first, it allows both children and adults to see the strengths — rather than the deficits — in one another, even outside of problem-solving situations. And when teachers compliment rather than critique one another, they create a positive work environment, with better productivity and less burnout, according to research by Gallup and by Shane J. Lopez and Michelle C. Louis in their article [The Principles of Strengths-Based Education](#). In fact, the Clifton Institute, where Lopez is research director, created the [Clifton StrengthsFinder](#), a tool for recognizing and developing strengths based on the premise that strength building is relationship building, and vice versa.

Strengths-based teaching, like everything else, comes with a caveat; praise alone does not work. Students must also be taught that [hard work leads to results](#), as Lopez and Louis found in their research:

An ideal strengths-based education model highlights the investment of effort and the creation of strengths as critical components in a developmental process, and invites students to consider how they might formulate new strategies or access previously unutilized resources to aid them in the process of developing their strengths.

A child who is taught that she is talented may assume her talent will be all that she needs to do great things. When talent alone doesn’t deliver, the child is likely to quit. Pairing positivity with rewards for effort gives children the hope for growth, as well as the tools to achieve it.

Children will do well if they possibly can. (This is the driving theory behind [Ross Greene’s work with behaviorally challenged children](#)). And children also seek love and acceptance. Operating from a child’s strengths does not deny that there are deficits (as is the case for every one of us), but rather uses those strengths to catalyze and accelerate learning. Like adults, children want the opportunity to do what they do best on a daily basis. Giving students that opportunity is an investment in education, [social-emotional well-being](#) and, ultimately, hope.

[Read the latest updates and opinions on education-related news](#), and [ask schools near you](#) about whether their instructors employ a strengths-based approach to teaching.

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