Olusola and Renée
"Not Broken"
Challenge, Solutions, Proposal

The Challenge

Our two schools (HTH and HTHMA) share a long history of celebrating students' achievements. Right now though, we seem to be focusing our attention not on their successes but on what our students have suffered, lost, failed and missed out on, during the pandemic. This focus seems problematic. Ferlazzo (2021) agrees that we need to understand and respond to what students have suffered and lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, but points out that by limiting our attention to the negative, educators and policy-makers are doing students a disservice, ignoring what they *have* learned, and compounding students' own anxieties and the tendency for many young people to undervalue themselves. Cantor et al. (SLDA, 2020), in discussing the conditions for learning, argue that students reach fixed and negative conclusions about themselves when they lack opportunities to "make meaning" from their learning experiences. This is borne out by our experience with students. In empathy interviews we've conducted with students this year, our students described anxiety about "always being so behind," on "missing out on a lot," and "not being prepared." Worse, they've experienced shame for "being so lazy," "being selfish," "having no self-control," and, as one student said resignedly, "being such a total procrastinator -- that's something I'm really good at." One student talked for nearly fifteen minutes, describing feelings of guilt for not *suffering* more during the pandemic. Another wondered if she"just doesn't have much empathy" because she still feels happy so much of the time.

As our students return to school we need to find ways to combat deficit mindsets. By fixating on the negative, educators and policy makers may be increasing student anxiety and missing out on a powerful opportunity to leverage our students' strengths. That our students have suffered and continue to suffer is bitterly indisputable. But to assume that without school they haven't learned anything worthwhile is both incorrect and unjust. Our students *have* learned during the two pandemics -- if not math, then knowledge and skills in compassion and empathy, in analysis, persistence, courage and survival; and they've done it while still managing to be kids. In fact our students know things that the adults around them have not yet learned, and would not know how to teach them. They have catching up to do, and more hurdles to face, and we can better help help them fight "learning loss" by focusing on relationships (Merrill, 2020; also Berger, 2021) and by fostering their sense of empowerment, teaching them to see and to leverage their new abilities in meeting these new challenges. Discussing the "narrative of loss," Berger (2021) suggests that "addressing concerns about learning loss by *raising* difficulty level may seem counterintuitive," but that by giving students work that is meaningful and challenging, we are supporting their confidence, emotional wellbeing and identities.

Current Solutions

The teachers at our schools are deeply concerned with students' well-being, and in theory, any subject-area class could implement a project or learning experiences that included a focus on student

strengths. For now, at both sites, we have embraced largely unscripted wellness-oriented approaches for students' on-campus learning, providing students with plenty of community-building, macrame, yoga, outdoor activities and down-time aimed at reducing student anxiety related to returning to school. We're trying to foster well-being, but without taking away the source of the anxiety, which is students' sense that they are less able, and less prepared than they should be. We're engaging in "team-building," but without establishing the conditions for learning to leverage the particular strengths of the team. If Berger is right, our students may benefit more at this moment from worthwhile challenges that remind them that they can succeed, that they are not "broken." Helping them to see and understand the skills and dispositions that have supported them during this challenging time could support our students in "making meaning" from their experience, and in building their essential toolkits, as learners and human beings. But teachers, who may be dealing with pandemic-related traumas of their own, may need support to help students focus on positive things. They may lack training in strengths-based education, or confidence in approaching the topic with their students. And given the current challenge of hybrid learning, it's hard to imagine teachers finding the energy or creativity, let alone the time, to develop and inject a complex new theme into their projects just now. HTHI's return-to-school slogan is "Getting Stronger Together." How could we help students at our two schools embrace a similar sense of personal and collective efficacy?

Impact Gaps
- The current solution is to lower academic and other performance expectations while providing experiences to help students feel comfortable and safe with one another, and school. This may have limited effectiveness in supporting students needing academic remediation.
- There is currently no plan in place to help students see that they are not "broken", or to build their awareness of strengths with which they can address the very real academic and life challenges they currently face.
- Teachers lack professional learning opportunities that would help them know how to help students identify, articulate and build upon their strengths.
- Mentorship programs with older student "buddies" might help, but are not present.

The Proposal
Alvord and Grados (2005) discuss the importance of building young people's resilience through helping them recognize strengths and positive experiences, fostering self-esteem through meaningful responsibility, and helping them to realistically attribute success to themselves. Advisory seems to offer a promising context for an authentic challenge designed to foster a strengths-based orientation for students. Our Inclusion advisory teams are deeply invested in helping students to meet challenge, and, in Renee's school, have been looking for ways to provide more of a learning arc for their Advisory. Inclusion Advisors in both schools are interested in piloting a set of student learning experiences that will challenge students to examine their experience of home-learning critically, so that they can see, name, share and build explicitly upon their growth, and on the strengths they have found within themselves.

Advisors would gain valuable data and knowledge of students' strengths, which could help them provide guidance to students in the future. This data could also be shared with teachers. Because student advisory classes are mixed-grade, this gives younger students the opportunity to "buddy" with older students, who have different insights and experiences, including into school culture. By sharing strengths and taking responsibility for helping one another to constructive metacognition, students will build a sense of personal and collective efficacy, drawing strength and courage from one another and the sense of solidarity that comes from sharing and meeting challenges together.

The overall goal is to improve students' metacognitive awareness and skills, and increase their sense of responsibility for metacognitive reflection, as contributors to a collective. Ideally, students who participate in this project will have a better sense of what they have accomplished during this challenging past year, how they accomplished it, and how they can apply those skills and understandings to meet new challenges in their lives.

This pilot could be preparatory to a new advisory content strand in this area. For now, the initial survey and student conversations at HTH indicate that students appreciate the approach for its student-centeredness and for its focus on their strengths. Teachers, similarly, seem to find the approach positive and potentially powerful. As we continue implementation, there will be ongoing opportunities to iterate and adjust the approach to better suit the changing needs of each group of students. Kids realize their strengths and how to use those to meet challenges to be--and feel--successful.

The inclusion specialists at HTHMA are excited about the pilot and its approach, and appreciated the interview and discussion process that gave rise to this proposal. They have been unable, however, to implement the pilot in their context. They anticipate implementation at the beginning of the new school year.

Next Steps
- Finish discussions with Inclusion Advisory teachers
- Develop a plan for learning experience for Advisory students, that will help them recognize, elevate, share and build upon their individual and collective strengths.
- Distribute the See, Say, Share, Elevate, Celebrate survey, to prompt students to begin recognizing their achievements, and give Advisors useful information to plan and guide conversations during the learning experience.
- Create a professional learning series to help teachers know how to build on engage students in learning about, and with, their strengths in a post-pandemic world.

References

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