

Reach Out May 15, 2009

Seeing the Best in Our Students

Asset Profiles, Zero Tolerance, Learning and Unlearning

By Dan Sackheim

Students, including those identified as at-risk of not completing their education, do not come to us as just a collection of wrongs needing to be fixed. Each one arrives with many things right about them.

Professionally, I support special schools and programs for students who have been in trouble. This article is inspired by the types of referral forms used to send “those students” away to the intervention programs. These forms commonly provide room, even a check-off system, to list the student’s faults. Sometimes, but not so commonly, they also include a quick mention of previous interventions that had been tried, but had not succeeded. They rarely say much that is positive about the student. When educators change their focus to a student’s assets, then they will begin to understand and reduce the dropout situation.

Out with the Old and In with the Better

The old research about what would increase the likelihood that a student would drop out of school included the following elements:

- socioeconomic status
- ethnicity
- repetition of a grade
- student mobility, both in residence and between schools
- family situation

Two points about the factors listed above are notable. First, they are largely beyond the reach of educators to presently impact (repetition of a grade is something that schools can control, but past retentions are beyond the reach of the student’s current teacher). Second, they don’t apply to a substantial number of dropouts.

In contrast, much of the newer research focuses on two key areas. The first is that dropping out of school is a process of disengagement, not an event. The second major research advance has been focused on resiliency and youth — those factors that support the perseverance of students when development others might quit. These including the following:

- caring relationships and feeling of belonging
- high expectations
- meaningful participation
- support and empowerment
- sense of self-efficacy
- problem-solving orientation to challenges

This article is premised on two extremely important points. The impact of the presence or absence of these elements of resiliency and youth development has been found to be significant within subgroups defined by any of the “old research” factors. For instance, students with the same socioeconomic status, ethnic group and mobility rates are more or less likely to drop out of school depending on how many resiliency, or protective, factors they have. The other point is the superior utility of this research — educators can have tremendous impact in how they design services and settings that can either support or undermine student resiliency.

Framing Statements

“Education” is defined in the Netherlands as “upbringing.” The expertise of educators is found in our knowledge of youth development, learning theory, and motivational theory.

We can’t build towers out of the blocks that are missing. But we can build edifices out of the blocks we have, adding new blocks as we go along.

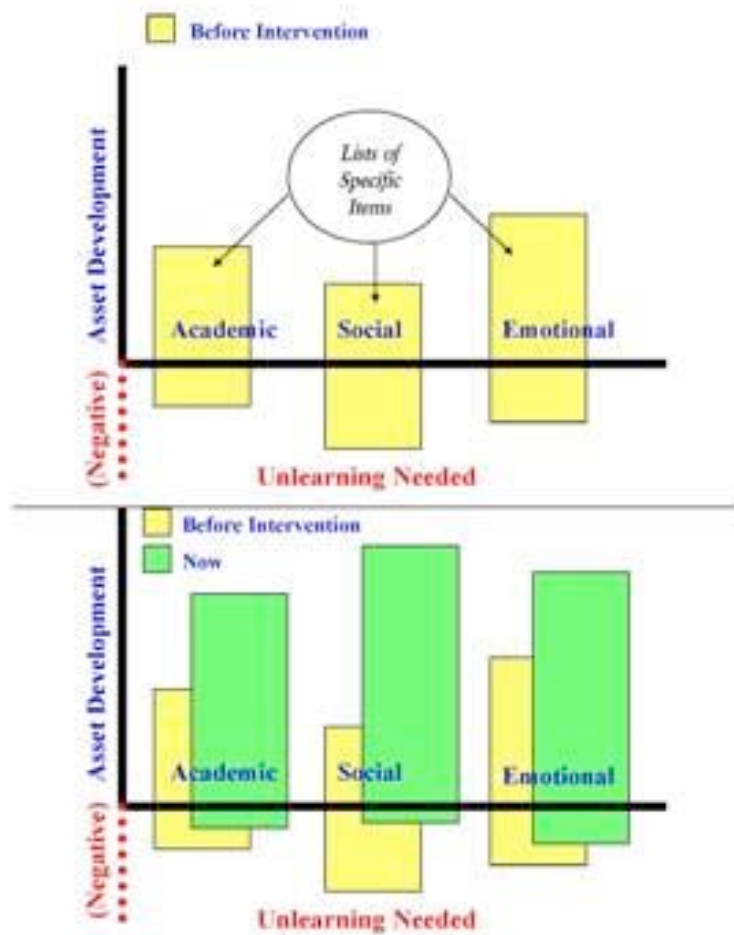
Each of our students brings substantial building blocks with them. These building blocks, or strengths or assets, represent the student’s academic, social, and emotional development. Often, some of these assets are not as extensive or sufficiently developed as we would like. Sometimes, some assets we would like to see are missing.

Students also arrive with some negatives – areas in which they have developed tendencies that are counterproductive.

Asset Profiles

The list of a student’s assets, divided into academic, social and emotional categories, comprises what I refer to as the student’s asset profile. As can be seen in the first illustration, some items on the list fall into the negative area below the baseline. These negatives, or challenges, are the targets for unlearning – approaches implementing what we know about learning theory and youth development to work towards positive goals.

Student's Asset Profile



Over time, we hope our interventions will be successful — using what is right about each student, from the list of already existing assets in each of the columns, to support development. This means that, in time, the list of the student's assets will grow to include not only the original array of assets, but also the expansion of some of these assets and the addition of other new assets. This also means that some of the items that were in the negative area of the asset profile chart will be less negative than they were, gone, or even have moved into the positive area above the line. This development can be seen in the second illustration, that overlays the student's asset profile prior to the intervention with a depiction of the student's current asset list and list of challenges.

It is valuable to have the students and their significant adults, including both educators and family (or family-like) representatives, develop the initial asset profile together. Periodically, the students, supported by peers and adults, can report to each other on how their asset profiles have evolved to date, and the goals and expectations for future improvement. These presentations incorporate key elements of resiliency – a sense of self-efficacy, contributing to others in one's community by being a positive example, focusing on problem-solving rather than labeling flaws, seeing problems as challenges, which in turn engender goals and

mastery, high expectations, meaningful participation, and empowerment.

When students are ready to transition from the intervention setting, they can make an exit/re-entrance presentation, outlining the overall evolution of their asset profile. This will form the basis for whatever following classes, services, etc. the student will receive – which may include continued unlearning of any lingering challenges, but all based on identified strengths.

Zero Tolerance

As mentioned above, students sometimes have developed tendencies that are counter productive. Sometimes they can be spontaneously negative.

We cannot simply snap our fingers and, instantly, the students learn. Why would anyone expect students to stop negative behaviors when we snap our fingers (figuratively or literally, sometimes in their faces) and tell them to stop the behaviors, immediately and forever?

In my workshops, I often surprise participants by maintaining that I am one of the greatest proponents of practicing zero tolerance.

In California, expulsions are divided by law into three levels, depending on the grounds for expulsion (see California *Education Code* Section 48915).

- Expulsion is mandatory: must recommend expulsion – e.g. selling drugs, brandishing a knife
- Expulsion is expected: shall recommend expulsion unless particular circumstances render inappropriate - e.g. possessing drugs or a knife
- Expulsion is discretionary: may recommend expulsion e.g. disruption of school activities

Most proponents of zero tolerance advocate treating the middle level as equivalent to the top level, as illustrated above.

Literally, tolerance involves allowing something to continue, even if you don't like or agree with it. The opposite of tolerance, from this perspective, is to not permit that behavior to continue. It does not necessarily follow, however, that one must be negative, or punitive, towards that which you can't, or won't tolerate. I suggest that there can be a second working definition for "zero tolerance." I suggest that, as educators committed to the successful and safe upbringing of youth, zero tolerance should be understood as a commitment to intervene early, instead of the more common definition of rushing to punish. Within the context of expulsion policy, it looks like this:

- Expulsion is mandatory: must recommend expulsion – it's still the law
- Expulsion may be needed: shall recommend expulsion unless particular circumstances render inappropriate or unnecessary – such as consideration of potential use of specialized learning approaches and possible program modifications, that could be used while still maintaining safety
- Expulsion is discretionary: may only recommend expulsion if no other safe

intervention is possible

While the line is drawn in a different place than in the first model, this second approach is no more tolerant of negative behaviors than the first – and is likely to be more effective. It is certainly more consistent with our purpose as educators.

Conclusions

There is nothing simple about education. However, a few basic truths should be clear.

- Education is not about what we do to students — it is what we do for students. We talk about constructs in education because we are builders. It is wonderful that we educators find the growth of students to be rewarding. How else would we be able to put up with the pesky parts of our jobs?
- For the students, their goal after they eventually leave us is to be as well-equipped as possible to function successfully without us. The more and varied knowledge, skills and abilities (assets) they have, the greater the repertoire of strengths they will be able to bring to future challenges — especially if we help them be aware of these assets. The fewer negative tendencies they exit with, the less likely they will be to be caught on future snags.
- Despite all of the talk about testing, testing, testing, education necessarily includes the development of the person doing the learning, not just the acquisition of, and facility with, facts and figures. We know (and complain) that success in academics can be completely undermined by a lack of social-emotional skills. We should know that a person without resiliency becomes stuck in place or moves backwards in the face of any challenge.
- I did not intend to demean the “old research” factors identified at the top of this article. They all have powerful impacts and are well deserving of deeper study so that we can function better within these identified contexts. My concern, however, is that we, as educators cannot afford to be derailed by learned helplessness. We cannot look at the students in front of us as a list of obstacles. Of course there may be obstacles, but they are not beyond our reach. They are not insurmountable. Instead, we need to recognize that the student before me is the student before me — who is bringing his or her own starter set of building blocks to our classes. Our challenge, expressed in how we approach, work with, and intervene with students, is to help the students see that they have these building blocks, and that they are accumulating more. Our jobs are to support the students in wanting and being able to build the strongest edifices of themselves, even if they might be building in a challenging environment.
- I conduct focus groups with students, and sometimes the conversation turns to school disciplinary approaches. Surprisingly (or not, if you respect students for having wisdom and positive goals among their many other qualities), the complaints they raise are not about disciplinary actions being too harsh, but that the common approaches are ineffective. As they explain to me, “I already know how to look and talk tough. The teachers and administrators don’t need to model those behaviors for me. I also know how to not come to school. I don’t need to be suspended to be good at that. What I need to learn are alternative ways to deal with anger and disappointment. I need to learn better how to be in school. Sending me away doesn’t teach me those things.” The

students, and I, certainly understand that when safety issues are involved, separation may be necessary. It is also clear that one of the greatest needs in schools is for more counseling resources. The key is that disciplinary actions without a guided learning component are at best incomplete. And with the appropriate learning component in the response to misbehavior, the punishment part might not be needed in order to be effective. Resiliency research says to see challenges as problem-solving opportunities. Disciplinary situations are an opportunity to put this theory into practice.

Anne Frank once said, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Let's start now.

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Also, see www.cdsnetwork.org

¹The research referenced in this section is summarized in the document, *Zero Dropouts for California: Information, Analysis, Recommendations, and Compendium of Resources on the Dropout Issue and Educational Practices in California*, which was developed by the Educational Options Office of the California Department of Education and was first presented at the Superintendent's Achievement Gap Summit, November 13-14, 2007. Questions or comments should be addressed to the Education Options Office by e-mail at edoptions@cde.ca.gov or by telephone at 916-322-5012.

²Key frameworks by researchers and authors about resiliency and youth development include those developed by Bonnie Benard, as described in her book, *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* and at http://www.wested.org/cs/chks/print/docs/hks_resilience.html by the SEARCH Institute <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>.