

The Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer Assessment: Identifying the Talents of Today's Youth

by The Gallup Organization

Introduction

The aim of many educators is to help youth reach their maximum potential. The Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer gives teachers a tool to help identify the talents of their students, as well as actionable suggestions for utilizing those talents. Such information can help teachers to individualize the ways in which they respond to youths, and the manner in which they can teach most effectively. In addition, it provides teachers and parents a common language, goals, and sets of action, all based on the unique talents of youth.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on youth development in relation to talents and strengths. Substantial advances in research have been made on topics under the positive psychology framework, such as prosocial and moral development, altruism, volunteerism, and youth civic engagement (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998; Lerner et al. 2005; Park 2004). Underlying the focus on talents and strengths is the idea that in conceptualizing normative development, it is not sufficient to understand and address the deficits, challenges, and problems that youths face. Rather, for youths to succeed and fulfill their maximum potential, it is essential that their assets, capabilities, talents, and strengths are also recognized. In this article, we describe a new Web-based tool for identifying the best in youth.

The Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer

The Gallup Organization, best known for its polls, has been involved in the measurement of human talents for several decades. Under the leadership of educational psychologist Donald O. Clifton, Gallup developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder, a Web-based talent assessment for

adults. To facilitate the development of strengths, the Clifton StrengthsFinder measures the presence of talents in thirty-four general areas, or “themes.” While talents (recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied) naturally exist, strengths (the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a specific task) must be developed and are the product that results when one’s talents are refined with acquired skills and knowledge. As of December 2005, more than 1.7 million people worldwide had completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment.

Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer Development

The Gallup Organization also has been involved in the measurement of talent among youth. The first assessment tool used by Gallup in this regard was the Youth Perceiver—a structured interview developed by Dr. Clifton that has been used since 1975. The interview consists of eighty-one open-ended questions and measures the presence of talent in sixteen themes (e.g., Accommodation, Success, Gestalt). Gallup experts as well as more than 1,000 trained teachers and administrators across the country have given the interview and talent feedback to people ages eight to twenty.

With advancements in Web-based testing technology, Dr. Clifton began to work on an online assessment that would provide a faster and less-costly method of helping youths discover their talents. After Dr. Clifton passed away in 2003, his efforts to develop an online assessment tool were continued by a team of Gallup researchers and strengths experts. The finalized Web assessment, the Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer (CYSE), became a key component of StrengthsExplorer—a package consisting of a workbook with activities that help youths understand and apply the results of their talent assessment as well as parent and instructor manuals that provide additional activities to assist youths in further building upon their talents. The goals of StrengthsExplorer are to:

- Help youths identify their positive characteristics
- Help youths improve their understanding of self
- Help youths develop from their areas of greatest talent
- Improve parents’/instructors’ understanding of their children/students
- Provide an opportunity for an important kind of communication between parents and their children (i.e., discussion of one’s unique nature, the positive characteristics/gifts that one has, and how those can be developed)
- Provide the theme-based language that youths and parents/ instructors could use to discover and describe positive characteristics

In the initial stage of the assessment development, using Gallup's talent framework, the researchers examined the range of talents ("patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior") of children in the target age (ten to fourteen) and established a list of constructs to be measured in the pilot version of the assessment. Based on analysis of the interviews with the youths and focus groups with parents, teachers, and strengths experts, twenty-one categories of talent called "themes" were hypothesized and included in the Pilot 1. Two hundred ninety-two items were carefully written or selected from the Gallup item bank to measure talent within these themes. Additionally, cognitive interviews with youths ages ten to fourteen were conducted to investigate their understanding of different types of scales being considered for use in the assessment. Based on the analysis of those interviews, a three-point scale and a four-point scale were tested in Pilot 1. Forty-seven youths completed a version of the assessment with a three-point scale, and fifty-eight youths completed the version with a four-point scale. Data gathered from the pilot instrument were used to evaluate the psychometric properties of each item and the instrument as a whole. The evaluations included analysis of item characteristics and appropriateness. Analysis of the data from Pilot 1 resulted in reduction of the number of themes and items. Further, Pilot 1 data were used as the basis for selection of the four-point scale (1. Almost Always or Always; 2. Often; 3. Sometimes; 4. Almost Never or Never) to be used in the final version of the assessment. Pilot 2, completed by 535 students from geographically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse school districts in the country, consisted of 154 items hypothesized to measure talent in 18 themes. The data gathered from Pilot 2 were factor analyzed. The resulting ten-factor instrument, measuring ten themes with seventy-eight items, was created.



The assessment measures talent in the following talent themes:

Presence: Youths especially talented in the Presence theme like to tell stories and be at the center of attention.

Confidence: Youths especially talented in the Confidence theme believe in themselves and their ability to be successful in their endeavors.

Competing: Youths especially talented in the Competing theme enjoy measuring their performance against that of others and have a great desire to win.

Relating: Youths especially talented in the Relating theme are good at establishing meaningful friendships and maintaining them.

Achieving: Youths especially talented in the Achieving theme like to accomplish things and have a great deal of energy.

Future Thinker: Youths especially talented in the Future Thinker theme tend to think about what's possible beyond the present time, even beyond their lifetime.

Caring: Youths especially talented in the Caring theme enjoy helping others.

Discoverer: Youths especially talented in the Discoverer theme tend to be very curious and like to ask "Why?" and "How?"

Organizer: Youths especially talented in the Organizer theme are good at scheduling, planning, and organizing.

Dependability: Youths especially talented in the Dependability theme keep their promises and show a high level of responsibility.

A preliminary test-retest study shows satisfactory stability, with the median correlation between theme scores of two test administrations (over a five- to seven-week interval) above 0.60. Convergent and divergent validity studies are planned.

CYSE Feedback

Assessment takers receive a unique numeric code that provides access to the Clifton Youth Strengths Explorer (CYSE) tool. The assessment consists of seventy-eight items (e.g., "I study hard") to which respondents indicate (on the four-point Likert scale) the degree to which they feel the statements do or do not apply to them. An additional option allows respondents to indicate that they do not know the meaning of the statements by selecting "This item does not make sense to me."

The CYSE assessment uses individual responses to measure talent in ten themes, then rank orders the themes. Immediately after the assessment is completed, respondents receive a report of their top three talent themes and brief descriptions.

Youths can then access more detailed descriptions of their top talent themes as well as “action items.” Action items are suggestions for concrete steps that the youths and their parents and teachers can take to further discover and build upon talents. The access code also provides access to the Youth Workbook and Parent Guide, both of which provide activities that can be used to further explore, understand, and build the youths’ greatest talents. An Educator/Group Leader Activity Book is also available from Gallup’s Education Division (more information is available at <<http://www.strengthsexplorer.com>>). The Educator Activity Book, designed specifically for small-group or classroom use, includes a reproducible classroom map, guided activities to promote theme-based interactions, and suggestions for highlighting the talents of students. Further, it includes an individual development plan for teachers or anyone who works with youth in settings such as teams, church groups, or clubs to use to guide the development of young people.

Each document can be printed from the Web with the purchase of an access code or, in the case of the Educator Activity Book, with the purchase of a block of access codes from Gallup’s Education Division.

Examples of the brief theme description, detailed theme description, and action items for youth and adults are on pages 188–189.

Identifying Talents as a Standard Element of the Educational Experience

The CYSE is a research-based tool based on decades of scholarship and rigorous testing to ensure its effectiveness in identifying the unique talents of youth. Initial feedback from youth and educators has been positive, indicating that the StrengthsExplorer program and the assessment it includes are useful in helping identify and build upon the talents of youth.

The aim of many educators is helping youths reach their maximum potential. The CYSE gives teachers a tool to help identify the talents of their students, as well as actionable suggestions for utilizing those talents. Such information can help teachers to individualize the ways in which they respond to their students, and the manner in which they can teach most effectively. In addition, it provides teachers and parents a common language, goals, and sets of action, all based on the unique talents of youth. The assignment of names to talent themes communicates to those individuals and the people around them (e.g., teachers, parents, peers) that those characteristics are important and need to be valued for both their intrinsic and extrinsic worth (Lopez and Snyder 2003).

The talent-based approach to youth development recognizes that addressing deficits and challenges is not sufficient to help youth become healthy, fully functioning individuals. Instead, to create healthier out-

Talent Theme: Organizer

Brief description: Scheduling, planning, and organizing your world makes life better. People count on you to get the details right and pull a plan together.

Detailed description: You like to create order in your world. Schedules help you feel in control of your life. Planning makes you comfortable and calm about what you are going to do. It is fun to think ahead, organize, and include all that you want to do in your plan so you don't leave anything out. You like to think about both the big ideas and the details. It feels good to make something absolutely perfect, whether it is as simple as your hair or as complicated as a big project for school. It is important to you to be on time or even early so you are ready to start whatever you are about to do. Not only do you like order and rules for yourself, you like them for other people too. You help yourself and others by pulling all the pieces together.

Action items:

- You like to make a schedule and stick to it. Keep a calendar for yourself so you can look at what you want to do each day and also look ahead to the week, month, and year coming up. You will feel more in control of your life if you can see it on paper.
- Planning projects and events feels good to you. If you are working in a group, volunteer to be the planner and organizer. Keep a list of all the things that need to be done and who is supposed to do each one. Organize it by person or by due dates, and share your list to help everyone understand the plan.
- A list can help you keep track of what you need to do. Next to each activity on your list, draw a box to the left. Then, when you have finished a task, put a check mark in the box so you can easily see how many things are done and how many are left to do. You might be surprised at how good it feels to check that box and see what you've accomplished.
- You are good at creating neat, clean order. Find the best and most useful ways to organize your school supplies, your locker, or your bedroom. Creating neatness and then keeping up with it makes you feel good and helps you and others find what you need.
- Look around you—who could benefit from the way you like to organize? Could you help organize a family collection or event? Would a teacher appreciate the way you can help organize papers? Find a way to use your talent to help someone else.

Action items for adults

- Ask this person about how he or she likes to schedule the day. Does this person feel the time is well planned? Plant the seeds of thought by asking how someone could schedule the day, week, weekend, semester break, or summer. How can you help with these ideas and plans?
- Are there ways this person can be helpful to others by organizing things for you? For instance, could he or she organize the classroom, clubroom, or science lab, or manage the sports equipment? From a drawer to a family event, what would he or she feel is fun or important to plan and arrange? Offer ways that this person can organize things for you or others.
- Could you connect this person with someone who is at least two years older and is good at organizing? Find someone who can model the value of organization in a person's life. This will provide more ideas and examples of ways to put organization into action.

comes, we must establish a positive psychological focus on identifying and building upon the individuals' talents (Lopez and Snyder 2003).

References

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