

# Foreword



Game changer! This book will change how you think about teaching children mathematics. The perspective provided by Beth Kobett and Karen Karp should literally rip deficit-based instructional decision making from our bookshelves, our conversations with colleagues, whether online, in schools, in professional development sessions, and, yes, from faculty room chats as well. It's time! Over 60 years ago, J. Fred Weaver (1954/1970) noted that diagnosis is relevant to all elements of mathematics instruction. However, he also indicated that "only when we have diagnosed the difficulties and determine the needs of children, can we provide the kinds of instruction designed to remedy those difficulties and meet those needs" (Kramer, 1966, pp. 334–335). Yes, diagnosing and determining instructional expectations and needs are ongoing, but focusing on "what's missing?" has provided our schools and, frankly, our culture with funding opportunities and related support, instructional techniques and materials, grouping practices, a myriad of assessments, and so much more, all with a seemingly singular focus—identifying, intervening, addressing, and remediating "what's missing?", a deficit model driving instructional thinking and, sadly, the teaching of mathematics.

Again, it's time! *Strengths-Based Teaching and Learning in Mathematics: 5 Teaching Turnarounds for Grades K–6* operationalizes an instructional paradigm shift that truly provides access to effective teaching and the instructional support needed to maximize the learning opportunities for every student. Yes, this book thoroughly and convincingly presents the case for teaching that begins with and consciously and consistently considers student strengths. What such an instructional focus requires, of course, is changing the way many of us think about instruction, hence the need to "turn around"—to approach instruction based on what students know and care about. In essence, a teaching turnaround is a reflective reminder to consider elements of your teaching differently. Let's consider the teaching turnarounds necessary to not just acknowledge and value but that truly define *Strengths-Based Teaching and Learning in Mathematics*.

Chapter 1 starts with you. Teaching Turnaround One: Identify Your Teaching Strengths engages teacher readers in identifying and exploring their strengths, recognizing that many teachers would rather not openly "share" and, as

noted earlier, would prefer to discuss their instructional deficiencies. So, right in the first chapter, Kobett and Karp expose the deficit model. Teaching Turnaround One offers appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) as a process designed to discover and highlight teaching strengths. This book, in its initial chapter, launches an instructional focus that frankly is much more than “things for you to try.” No, what Kobett and Karp have provided is a full tapestry related to accessing instruction that fully engages you and your colleagues in strengths-based instructional considerations, with each turnaround chapter providing activities titled Turnaround Tip, Spotlight on Your Practice, and Try It!—all designed to directly connect you to the intent of each turnaround and support both your understandings and teaching.

Teaching Turnaround Two: Discover and Leverage Your Students’ Mathematical Strengths establishes the importance of determining and addressing student strengths mathematically. It addresses mathematical proficiencies, processes, and practices (Chapter 2) and critical mathematics content strands (Chapter 3). Classroom-connected activities that address the mathematical proficiencies defined and emphasized in *Adding It Up* (National Research Council & Mathematics Learning Study Committee, 2001), the mathematical processes of *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2000), and the *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) shape the emphasis of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 emphasizes a selected collection of content topics from standards within Number and Operations, Fractions, and Geometry. This content focus is not about identifying computational deficiencies or error patterns, analysis of test results, perceived misconceptions, or other considerations of “what’s missing?”; rather, it’s directed toward truly capitalizing on what’s known, what students can do, and their interests within critical mathematics topics and standards.

I might, in fact, argue that Teaching Turnaround Three: Design Instruction From a Strengths-Based Perspective presents the greatest challenge for teachers as they consider moving away from an instructional focus that spends an inordinate amount of time on identifying and attempting to address (I often see the word *remedy*) “what’s missing?” in a learner’s mathematical background and experiences to an emphasis on determining student strengths and then using the strengths to truly influence instruction. This teaching turnaround addresses grouping (Chapter 4), tasks (Chapter 5), and feedback (Chapter 6). The Mathematics Teaching Practices (NCTM, 2014) are used to launch Chapter 4, which then addresses challenges related to fixed versus flexible grouping, ability grouping, mixed-strength whole-group instruction, and targeted small-group instruction, among other grouping-related topics. Any teacher interested in ensuring that their students have everyday access to mathematics tasks

will appreciate the Chapter 5 focus, which includes, among many valuable instructional tools and activities, a strengths-based task discussion protocol, as well as attention to task personalization. I have often felt that feedback is far too often the missing element of a plan for and implementation of a lesson's classroom-based formative assessment. Chapter 6's attention to teacher-to-student feedback prior to, during, and within the close of a lesson, as well as student-to-student feedback, is important to the strengths-based perspective. In addition, the chapter's attention to classroom-based formative assessment presents, for many, a first-time consideration of connections to planning, instruction, and assessment from a strengths-based perspective. Teaching Turnaround Three: Design Instruction From a Strengths-Based Perspective is a professional development *must* for many schools and school districts.

Teaching Turnaround Four: Help Students Develop Their Points of Power presents, in Chapter 7, a thorough analysis of the importance of the emergence of student identity. And yes, the intent is for students to both develop and identify their Points of Power, to understand what they can do to essentially know and value their mathematical self. The activities provided in this chapter help teachers to not just consider but address, instructionally, student disposition. Students who recognize their Points of Power are independent and confident thinkers and collaborators. What we know is that children begin to dislike mathematics toward the end of their elementary school years. Consider such findings as yet another “what’s missing?”—in this case, a positive attitude. A strengths-based approach will use activities like those presented in this chapter (e.g., talent showcase, windows and mirrors, translation task) as a foundation for students developing their Points of Power—their mathematical me!

Teaching Turnaround Five: Promote Strengths in the School Community is the concluding teaching turnaround and provides strong recommendations with regard to the importance of professional learning opportunities and communities (Chapter 8) and family communication (Chapter 9). In essence, this turnaround is all about communication and the support needed to truly sustain a strengths-based approach to teaching and learning. Let's first consider professional learning. First, Chapter 8 begins with the premise that in promoting a strengths-based approach to teaching and learning, all teachers are leaders. The chapter then appropriately champions the potential of Appreciative Inquiry and Whole-School Agreement as paradigms for professional learning that not only engages teachers but also offers a focus for the development of collaborative school-based teams. What a welcome and appropriate change for many! Chapter 9 is all about thinking differently about developing and sustaining family connections. Recognizing that many family members are seemingly lifetime-attached to mathematics topics and the methods they used for learning them, it's imperative that a viable partnership among teachers, schools, and families be nurtured, supported, and sustained.

The chapter's suggestions and related multilingual activities will engage teachers, students, and families and expand and extend the access to strengths-based teaching to include families and the larger school community, thus providing the necessary support for both mathematics learning and developing and maintaining a positive and productive mathematical disposition.

You need this book right now! The NCTM states that “an excellent mathematics program requires that all students have access to a high-quality mathematics curriculum, effective teaching and learning high expectations, and the support and resources needed to maximize their learning potential” (2014, p. 59). Actually, every student's access to appropriate learning experiences in mathematics every single day is a right! Considering teaching and learning from the perspective of “what's missing?” is more than antiquated. Kobett and Karp not only recognize and discuss the importance of starting with and building on strengths instructionally, but this masterful effort has actually defined the teaching turnarounds that must be addressed as teachers truly embody a strengths-based approach to teaching and learning. In short, this book not only talks the talk, through the identification of the teaching turnarounds and activities to be used to support them, but, more important, truly walks the walk. It's your game plan.

—Francis (Skip) Fennell, PhD, DHL

*L. Stanley Bowlsbey Professor of Education and Graduate and Professional  
Studies Emeritus*

*Project Director, Elementary Mathematics Specialists and Teacher Leaders Project*

*Past President, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics*

*Past President, Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators*

*McDaniel College, Westminster, MD*