



Generating Zest and Blocking Zest Killers in the School Classroom

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Abstract

Zest is one of the virtues under the Character Strength of Courage, as it appears in the framework defined by Peterson and Seligman. Zest is about living your life with high vitality levels and participating in it as fully as possible. Dweck also emphasizes zest as a pivotal driver for cultivating a growth mindset in an educational context, applicable to teachers and learners. Despite its significance, Niemec notes that zest is globally perceived as "the least endorsed of the character strengths," susceptible to inhibition by various factors in personal and educational settings. Again, according to Niemec, "zest generation" looks like a binary unique process that requires spotting the tasks or activities that bring more enthusiasm to a person and also stopping any possible reasons that may be obstacles to maximizing zest. This paper aims to conceptualize the presence or absence of zest in a school setting, explore its impact on academic performance and enthusiasm for learning, and how this may affect school performance or even lack of enthusiasm for learning. The author will delineate several reasons students might lack zest during a class and propose positive interventions to create practical contexts conducive to fostering vitality for learning.

Keywords: *Zest, character strengths, positive education, love of learning*

In a purely semantic sense, we all understand the meaning of the word "zest", but it might become more complicated when we try to define the exact meaning of this very same word. One of the main reasons might be that "zest" has multiple meanings, dimensions and expressions. According to Niemec M. & McGrath E. zest is approaching a situation or life...with excitement and energy" (Niemec et al., p.121,2019). Other words used to describe zest are "a sense of aliveness", "enthusiasm", "vitality." The first severe and scientific attempt to describe zest appeared in the book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), where we find zest classified as a Character Strength under the Virtue of Courage, a categorization that may have engraved for the first-time zest as a "scientific term". Martin Seligman himself, in one of his latest talks, publicly admitted that he is very highly convinced and about to announce that zest can be one more element in his famous P.E.R.M.A. model serving as another path to wellbeing. Psychologist Ryan M. Niemiec in his book "Strengths- Based Workbook for Stress Relief" provides an overview of Seligman famous PERMA model, defining five areas of wellbeing that is positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. (Niemec, 2011).

Attempting to define how zest can influence students and teachers in a school environment, it is easy to realize that a zestful school environment can foster more conducive attitudes to learning and a more dynamic teaching attitude. Teachers want classes full of energetic and enthusiastic students because lessons can become more interactive, participative and lively. On the other hand, students want zestful teachers because learning becomes more approachable, personalized and engaging. Carol Dweck pinpoints zest for teaching and learning as the growth mindset embodiment for teachers (Dweck, 2006, p.143). Ryan M. Niemec correlates zest with the character strengths of Curiosity and Perseverance (Niemec et al., 2019., p 130), two strengths frequently found in school contexts with high academic performance. Zest also appears to sustain a "Love of Learning", another character strength needed for academic progress, expanding knowledge and developing a growth mindset.

It is remarkable that according to Niemec, one of the main remedies for building the strength of zest is to block the inhibitions and barriers that may prevent an individual from reaching his/her maximum potential. (Niemec, Ryan M, 2018, p 130) In other words, the generation of zest usually does not occur because of certain "zest blockers". This paper will try to identify what could block students from becoming more zestful in a school environment and recommend some educational practices/interventions that could stop the impact of "zest killers" and possibly generate more zest in a school environment.



In his book *Language Hungry*, Tim Murphey defined the concept of the "roller coaster of knowledge" (Murphey, 2006). Murphey claimed that humans do not have a linear way of thinking, which is why they cannot have the same mood every day. This "roller coaster of feelings" also appeals to positive feelings, as it is practically impossible for anyone to be zestful for learning every day. Murphey argues that having days of low performance during the learning process is an ideally expected feeling, as well as some more active ones. The "rollercoaster of knowledge" is something very normal and very personal. Some reasons and remedies that can activate students' roller coaster are:

- **Lack of understanding.** Students lose their energy and enthusiasm when they cannot grasp or understand the material taught. Remedial work or recycling exercises can help students understand and regain confidence.
- **Negative emotions.** Students may be reluctant to participate due to negative feelings imposed on them from external classroom factors or toxic feelings. A widespread situation is when students experience negative feelings when they do not feel that they have achieved some progress in their learning. As a precaution, teachers should always provide frequent "progress checks" that clearly help the students realize their academic development and sense of achievement.
- **Fatigue.** It is common in modern societies that students either feel tired because of busy schedules or find their energy insufficient to cover their busy schedules. In the case that a teacher detects a sense of tiredness in the class, it is highly recommended that the class takes a break or an activity that will help them re-focus
- **Information overload.** In many schools, the demands of the curricula are so high that they may exceed the students' capacity to cope with them. These demanding programs may cause information overload and, consequently, a lack of zest and energy to cope with everyday tasks. Breaking knowledge into chunks, attempting to re-teach it, and slowing down the pace of the curricula could be remedies for information overload.
- **Competition for attention.** Young students' brains, especially teenagers, get very easily distracted by various signals and stimuli inside and outside school. Weather conditions, video games, peer rivalry, first awakenings of romantic love, and even different topics compared to the ones taught in the classroom may distract a student's brain and make them lose focus. The energy used to regain this focus could result in less zestful students, who may feel drained from energy, trying to cope with so many distractions while regaining their focus. In cases like those mentioned above, protecting students from distractions or helping them focus on one particular area of learning or interest could remedy such a problem.

In their book *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz tried to give another perspective on the concept of "time gluttony" and the misconception that many individuals have that they become underachievers due to insufficient time. Loehr and Schwartz claim that when people cannot achieve goals or targets, it is not because of a lack of time but because of a lack of energy. (Loehr, Schwartz, 2003, p 4) Moreover, as we saw in the various definitions of zest, energy is closely connected to vitality and feeling zestful. It is safe to assume that people cannot feel zestful without energy. Lack of energy makes people feel sluggish, tired, and lack engagement in various things. Sometimes, we may get the same situation in school classes; students feel non-zestful because they lack energy.

Loehr and Schwarz define the four sources of energy in the human system. The sources they mention are the following (Loehr, Schwartz, 2003, p 13):

- **Physical** - The limits of our bodies' endurance.
- **Spiritual** - Anything related to "Transcendence" and "the great cause" we are doing things
- **Emotional** - How are we profoundly feeling when we perform any task
- **Mental**-The focus of our energy. It is very closely linked to the distractions we mentioned above, which might compete for our attention.

As Tony Schwarz mentions in one of his powerful YouTube talks; "It takes almost an entire internal village" for individuals to cater for their energy levels. Moreover, as these sources are interconnected, they may be inter-exchanging energy levels to cope with the daily demands. The



same high demand for energy may be happening within a classroom, which might be a frequent reason why students lack enthusiasm. Suppose students, when they come to class, feel tired after intense physical activity (physical source), do not find a meaningful reason to attend the lesson (spiritual source), are overwhelmed by negative feelings due to various reasons (emotional source) and suffer many distractions during a class (mental source,). In that case, they are running a high risk of squandering their energy, which could significantly lose vitality and zest.

A remedy to the maintenance and sustainability of energy systems, as Schwarz defines them, can be the idea of "periodization", a technique used by many professional athletes, which involves managing efficiently the work-rest ratios and taking sufficient breaks from work. Something similar could be practiced in a classroom when the teacher detects low energy levels alongside zest. The teacher can slow the pace of the syllabus or, for a certain period, assign activities lighter than usual to give some space to students to recharge their energy.

"Junk Thoughts", as defined by Jill Anderson (Anderson 1981, p.20), can be several other reasons which may block students' zest. According to Anderson, the following are the basic evil thoughts that may visit our students' minds.

- **Over-generalizing** - Taking one example as a rule for all possible occurrences is a usual false belief that many students may get. For example, "This teacher always gives the lowest grades" or "English Grammar is the most difficult part of the English lesson".
- **Catastrophising/Awfulizing (Boryshenko, 1987)** - Rick Hanson, in his book "Hardwiring Happiness", proves that people have a proclivity for negativity, called "negativity bias" (Hanson,2013,p.32) and that a human brain will most probably think more about the negative than the positive aspect of a situation. "Proclivity for negativity" may occur when students have an irrational sentiment that they will fail an exam, even though they studied very hard for it. Suppose students adopt this tendency and fossilize it as a habit. In that case, they risk giving up easily or being constantly overwhelmed by negative feelings, which cannot foster a zestful mood.
- **Copping-out** - Blaming always the others instead of assuming responsibilities ourselves. Avoiding facing the natural causes of a problem and always blaming someone or something else can create evasive students who may have no actual touch with reality, causing them to lose focus and consequently see their academic performance affected as well. It is more than evident that a student who is permanently "copping out" would find it very difficult to feel zestful, as he might be losing the proper focus to do so.
- **Demanding** - This negative feeling refers to the pressure we may exert on ourselves for everyday tasks when we demand from ourselves to perform them like there are no other options or any margin for failure or even the mere possibility of postponing them. For example, phrases like "I must attend that class at 8 am" or "I must get a good grade on this test" may create unnecessary pressure on students. Unnecessary pressure is not the best of conditions to create zest. An excellent way to avoid this is by avoiding using imperative language for all these tasks and instead using suggestive language that allows some space for alternative directions. For example, "It would be great if I can manage to be at tomorrow's class at 8 am" or "Receiving a high grade on this test can be a great boost for my confidence."

Murphy suggests that a great way to combat all these individual negative feelings is by strengthening the group dynamics within our classrooms (Murphey, 2006). A thought that may be causing anxiety or stress to a student could reach reduced levels or be eliminated if shared among a group of peers or classmates. Teachers who can encourage more collaborative tasks in the classroom are strengthening the bonds of classroom groups, which can create more confidence among students and increase the voluntary sharing of problematic situations or negative thoughts. Furthermore, collaborative activities can provide an excellent context for generating zest in language classrooms as the more enthusiastic team members can elevate the morale of the less enthusiastic team members. In addition, having students helping fellow weak students can create even more positive feelings and stronger bonds and develop more of the character strength of "Love of Learning". Some recommended activities that could foster collaboration and generate zest are group projects in the classroom, working together for a shared learning objective, speaking activities in pairs or groups with personalized content and group presentations.



In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck states that narrating motivational stories to students can boost their confidence and help them develop a strong growth mindset. One of the most common excuses teachers receive from students is "the lack of inspiration" or the "depletion of ideas". Students cling to this excuse to avoid becoming more creative or refraining from being consistent with their workflow, commitments, or homework. It might be helpful for students that they become aware that inspiration can be challenging to achieve. David Galenson, in his book *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity* (Galenson, 2006,p.4), defines two types of innovators

1. The "conceptual innovator" who can get inspired instantly by an idea and create it. Picasso, Sylvia Plath, and Orson Wells were such innovators and
2. The "experimental innovator" who may struggle for years before they get an idea that is worth it and creates something remarkable Robert Frost, Alfred Hitschok

Sharing a story from the lives of these creators, as Carol Dweck proposes, and explaining to students that it is normal for inspiration to face difficulty finding creative ideas could encourage students to be more zestful in pursuing creativity and inspiration and not give up that easily on their everyday tasks or creative time.

In my piloting sessions and training, I have integrated this inspiration awareness moment with an activity called "Are you a Cezanne or a Picasso?" By posing this exact question, every time students have comments of reluctancy or lack of zest or seem short of inspiration, teachers can attract their attention by narrating a story from a vital creator who struggled with his/her inspiration but eventually managed to find it and still create something big and memorable. Thus, the chances of generating more zest among students can increase.

Discussion and Conclusion

Zest is one of the pivotal character strengths closely linked to happiness and a mindset of approaching life with high vitality levels. Fostering and cultivating zest in our classrooms can generate more love and enthusiasm for learning, leading to more creative and thriving students. However, it is essential to remember that zest is not only a strength that teachers can generate through specific interventions or practices but also, through the inhibition, debunking and avoidance of certain mindsets, thoughts or situations that may block our student's enthusiasm. By respecting and discussing with students the "roller coaster" of their moods and feelings towards learning, we can help them embrace and understand better how to overcome a "day of bad learning" at school. By catering and procuring for their high energy levels, we automatically set up a fruitful context for their zest to thrive, as there is no zest without energy. Blocking their "junk thoughts" and channeling them through collaboration activities allows more space for the zest generation. Lastly, sharing inspirational stories of successful people with them could open the perspective that inspiration is only sometimes handy and that they may need to apply some extra effort to achieve it. Zest can become the key to unlocking our student's motivation and reframing their perspective on the joy of learning.

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