NANCY **FREY** | DOUGLAS **FISHER** | DOMINIQUE **SMITH**

THE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PLAYBOOK

A GUIDE TO STUDENT AND TEACHER WELL-BEING

CORWIN
Fisher & Frey

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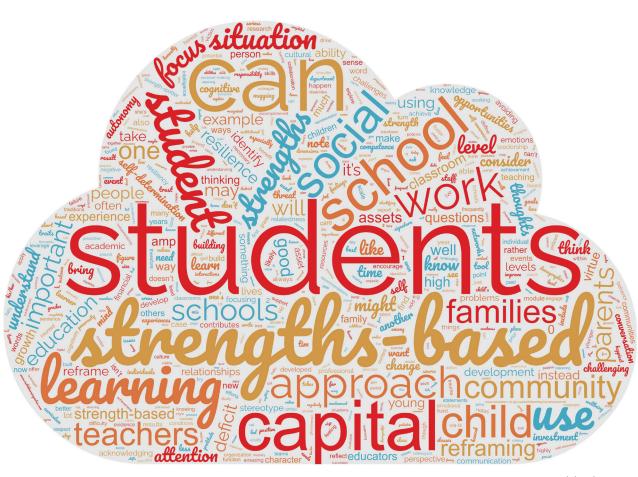
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BUILDING ON STRENGTHS FOR RESILIENCE

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BUILDING BACKGROUND

Many of us focus on what we cannot do well and decide if it is worth addressing that need or ignoring it because it will require too much effort to make a difference. This is a common approach in schools. We tend to identify what students cannot do and then focus their time on exactly that. Think about how many data teams and student study teams meetings you've been to that focused only on data about what the student could not do. The result for the student is frustration and can produce deficit thinking in students and teachers. As Waters (2017) notes, focusing on the traits that children and youth do not have can lead them to become disengaged.

As educators, we use a strengths-based approach when we frame what a young person can do, not solely focus on what they can't do.

There is another way: instead of focusing on what we, or our students, cannot do, we focus on assets. In education, this is known as a strengths-based approach. There is a simple rule in this approach: focus on what students do well. As we will see, that does not mean that we ignore areas of growth, but rather that we build on what students can already do. The evidence suggests that focusing on strengths produces greater levels of happiness and engagement at school and higher levels of academic achievement overall (Waters, 2017). Thus, starting with strengths is good for both academic and social-emotional learning (SEL).

A Strengths-Based Approach

As educators, we use a *strengths-based approach* when we frame what a young person can do, not solely focus on what they can't do. In the words of the Victoria (Australia) Department of Education (2012, p. 6), strengths-spotting teachers look for

- What a child can already do

- What a child can do when provided with educational support

- What a child will one day be able to do

A strengths-based approach is

- Valuing everyone equally and focusing on what the child can do rather than what the child cannot do

- Describing learning and development respectfully and honestly

- Building on a child's abilities within their zones of proximal and potential development

- Acknowledging that people experience difficulties and challenges that need attention and support

- Identifying what is taking place when learning and development are going well so that it may be reproduced, further developed and pedagogy strengthened (p. 7)

Importantly, this does not mean that we turn away from what is difficult, focusing only on the positive and avoiding the truth or minimizing concerns. We do

not do ourselves or our students any favors by avoiding discussion of problems and challenges. But we also don't do a young person any good if we focus on what they can't do to the exclusion of everything else. A strengths-based approach assumes that students grow and develop from their strengths and abilities (see Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1   SUMMARY OF A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH IS . . .	A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH IS *NOT* . . .
• Valuing everyone equally and focusing on what the child can do rather than what the child cannot do • Describing learning and development respectfully and honestly • Building on a child's abilities within their zones of proximal and potential development • Acknowledging that people experience difficulties and challenges that need attention and support • Identifying what is taking place when learning and development go well, so that it may be reproduced, further developed, and strengthened	• Only about "positive" things • A way of avoiding the truth • About accommodating bad behavior • Fixated on problems • About minimizing concerns • One-sided • A tool to label individuals

SOURCE: Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2012, p. 9)

Deficit thinking fills the void when a strengths-based approach is absent. This "blame the victim" view focuses attention on internal deficiencies which might be "cognitive, behavioral, motivational or contextual in nature" (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018, p. 12). Deficit thinking about students contributes to an "exoneration of educator responsibility" by instead saying, "We can't fix that" (p. 11). Deficit thinking is manifested in several ways, as Valencia (2010) described:

> *Deficit thinking about students contributes to an "exoneration of educator responsibility" by instead saying, "We can't fix that."*

1. **Victim blaming:** Considering the student's personal characteristics (race, ethnicity, language proficiency, socioeconomic status) as the cause

2. **Temporal changes:** Blaming the context, such as home or culture, for the problem

3. **Educability:** Believing that a student can't learn (e.g., "I tried all these different strategies, and nothing works")

4. **Pseudoscience:** Falsely attributing evidence obtained or interpreted using a deficit lens (e.g., using a behavior log to encourage punishment at home)

5. **Oppression:** Instituting policies that disadvantage some students, such as remedial classes and zero-tolerance suspension and expulsion policies

6. **Orthodoxy:** Preserving institutional policies because of a lack of will to try something new (e.g., "All misbehaving students go to the dean of students because that's the way we've always done it")

Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, unhoused children, and foster youth are placed at high risk in classrooms and schools that perpetuate deficit thinking as a way of doing business. The statistics on suspension and expulsion rates are disproportionate compared to their representation in schools, which in turn impacts their school attendance. And it's really difficult to improve the academic and social-emotional lives of young people when they're not there, don't you think? At a time when educators are reporting mounting concerns about the state of students' mental well-being, we cannot afford to have students needlessly spending more time away from us. It is imperative that we actively adopt a strengths-based approach for all students.

Self-Determination

A fundamental principle in the education sciences is that we teach by using a learner's prior knowledge to bridge to new knowledge. It doesn't make sense to have a child solve multiplication problems, for instance, when they don't have a good grounding in addition. Now imagine that the same child is told to do the multiplication problems but doesn't receive much in the way of teaching and scaffolding to solve them. It would be discouraging for the learner and frustrating for the teacher. In fact, it would likely result in *unproductive failure*, the term Kapur (2016) uses to describe unguided problem solving.

And yet, too often, we expect ourselves, our students, and our schools to tackle a situation for which there is little prior knowledge and not much of a guide for how to achieve a goal. A very wise adult with a disability described his experience as a student who spent years in segregated special education classrooms: "It's where you go all day long to do things you're not good at." His experience was that there was little interest in what his strengths were (he was an amazing mathematician and computer coder); instead, there was a narrow focus on what he couldn't do well (in his case, communication, social interactions, and managing his emotions were challenges).

> **Self-determination is expressed as a mindset that seeks to improve the lives of people, not just ease suffering.**

Such experiences have led to important shifts in approaches to special education, particularly in *self-determination theory*, which relies on three dimensions: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The authors note that "human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function" (p. 68). In other words, when these conditions are present, motivation increases. Consider what we know about what works for ourselves, our students, and our organization:

- **Autonomy** to make choices and decisions, which contributes to a sense of agency to achieve goals

- **Competence** to demonstrate skills and develop new ones

- **Relatedness** to others through social bonding such that one doesn't feel alone

Self-determination is expressed as a mindset, adopted by professionals, that seeks to improve the lives of people, not just ease suffering. It is a motivational

tool used in a wide array of fields outside of education, from smoking-cessation programs to athletic coaching efforts. One recent innovative application was a university's redesign of its financial advising (Angus, 2020). The counselors recognized that the effects of COVID-19 were threatening the financial well-being and mental health of their students and sought to use a strengths-based approach to assist students in "acknowledging past achievements and encourage and build greater self-determination and a sustainable financial future" (p. 96). By using this approach, counselors found that university students were more likely to utilize resources available to them and reported decreased levels of anxiety.

Self-determination is crucial for building resilience in the face of adversity. *Resiliency* is a measure of the ability to adapt to change, especially when that change is prompted by loss, unexpected problems, distress, trauma, and other adverse events. One's resilience is not a function of personality, which is very good news; it is a strength that can be cultivated. Your emotional intelligence is central, as is knowing about your strengths and being able to cognitively reframe situations to better understand them. Resilience is enhanced when there is a sense of belonging and affiliation to the group, which can be a source of comfort and guidance. Emotional regulation plays an equally important role, especially in recognizing feelings and using calming techniques to maintain equilibrium. Whether we are six years old or 36 years old, investment in these qualities is an investment in the resilience each of us needs.

We are better able to apply a strengths-based approach to our students and engage in self-determination if we are also doing so internally for ourselves.

We are better able to apply a strengths-based approach to our students and engage in self-determination if we are also doing so internally for ourselves and at the institutional level as schools.

In this module, we will explore three dimensions of a strengths-based approach, and you will learn

- How to find and cultivate your own strengths and recognize them in others

- Ways to promote student strengths by understanding their assets and leveraging their strengths for students you find challenging

- How to maximize a strengths-based approach at the school level to develop its social capital and resiliency as an organization

VOCABULARY SELF-AWARENESS

Directions: Consider the terms below.

- If it is new to you, write the date in the Level 1 column.
- If you have heard the word before but are not sure that you can use it in a sentence or define it, write the date in the Level 2 column.
- If this word is very familiar to you and you can define it and use it in a sentence, write the date in the Level 3 column.

Update your understanding of the terms as you engage in this module and in your work. Note that there are spaces for you to add terms that are new to you.

WORD	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	SENTENCE	DEFINITION
Strengths-based approach					
Self-determination theory					
Resilience					
Deficit thinking					
Cognitive reframing					
Character strengths					

WORD	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	SENTENCE	DEFINITION
Stereotype threat					
Asset mapping					
Social capital					

Level 1 = This word is new to me.

Level 2 = I have heard this word before.

Level 3 = I know the definition and I can use it in a sentence!

CASEL Connections for educators, students, and schools in this module:

SELF-AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP SKILLS	RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING
Knowledge of strengths	Resilience Cognitive reframing		Social capital	Self-determination

USING STRENGTHS BEGINS WITH SELF

"It's not me. I have amazing people around me."

We have likely heard or uttered a sentiment like the one above before. Someone is praised for an accomplishment, and they attribute their success to those around them. Is that a strength or a weakness? The answer is: It depends. It may be a weakness for that person if they go on to attribute their accomplishment to luck and have difficulty in accepting a compliment. But it may well be evidence of a character strength; in this case, humility. Couple that with a strength in teamwork, and that person may very well be a valuable colleague who contributes to the collective responsibility of a school.

A strengths-based approach begins with identifying one's own in order to leverage them and to work around other dimensions of oneself that are lesser strengths. There is good evidence that self-knowledge, which is to say knowing, naming, and leveraging one's strengths, contributes significantly to one's confidence, life satisfaction, and the quality of personal and professional relationships (Schutte & Malouff, 2019).

Character strengths research has been conducted for the last 20 years. Utilizing the positive psychology research pioneered by Martin Seligman, past president of the American Psychological Association, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, best known for his ground-breaking work on the flow state, several validated instruments have been developed to help people identify their strengths. The best known of these is the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; see Figure 1.2) that organizes 24 core human strengths into six virtues (Peterson et al., 2005). These are not emotions, which are situational and change frequently, but rather personality traits that persist over time. Validity and reliability studies have demonstrated that the instrument has a strong test-retest, meaning that results for an individual are stable over a period and that the items accurately assess the traits. You can learn more about each of these core human strengths by viewing brief descriptions of each at https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths.

FIGURE 1.2 VIA-IS CHARACTER TRAITS AND VIRTUES

	CHARACTER TRAITS				
VIRTUE 1: WISDOM	Creativity	Curiosity	Judgment	Love of Learning	Perspective
VIRTUE 2: COURAGE	Bravery	Perseverance	Honesty	Zest	
VIRTUE 3: HUMANITY	Love	Kindness	Social Intelligence		
VIRTUE 4: JUSTICE	Teamwork	Fairness	Leadership		
VIRTUE 5: TEMPERANCE	Forgiveness	Humility	Prudence	Self-Regulation	
VIRTUE 6: TRANSCENDENCE	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	Gratitude	Hope	Humor	Spirituality