

A STRENGTHS-BASED MODEL...

A STRENGTHS-BASED MODEL FOR FACULTY COLLABORATION

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Abstract

This paper discusses a framework applied at one independent study high school in Los Angeles, California to create a strengths-approach among faculty prior to a collaborative school self-review for re-accreditation. Teachers were provided with access codes to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder online strengths assessment. Each teacher received a report of his/her top five strengths, as well as coaching in interpreting the report. A 10-item survey assessed teachers' perceptions about a strengths-approach for initiating collaborative change processes. Results regarding the teachers' perceptions were inconclusive. Recommendations include a call for use of the strengths-approach at other schools, research of the strengths-approach in teacher collaboration, and the development of a valid and reliable survey.

Introduction

There has never been such a tremendous focus on change in American schools. Since the introduction of content standards, to which schools are recalibrating curriculum and instruction, instructional leaders have also been busily working toward a system of instructional collaboration. This paper investigates the application of a proposed strengths-based (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006) framework for initiating collaborative processes. The study of the implementation of this framework took place at an urban independent study high school with eight sites of operation in the Los Angeles area. Independent study high schools typically serve students who have fallen behind in their secondary school studies and who need to recover course credits toward graduation requirements. Rather than attending school on a daily basis, students attend individualized sessions with an instructor or small group instructional sessions one or more times per week. Most of the students' learning and study in each particular course is conducted away from the school site.

Literature Review

According to Leithwood et al. (1999), teachers' commitment to change is a key component in school reform efforts. Citing Kushmore (1992), Leithwood et al. describe commitment and engagement as two concepts that have broader implications for organizations. Developing this commitment and engagement is key to school improvement processes, including self-study investigation and reporting for purposes of accreditation.

Accreditation self-study processes allow school stakeholders to periodically analyze progress in relation to action steps from previous self-studies, review current practices, and plan for the future through the development of new action steps that will guide and direct the school in future years. Determining attainable action steps to which teachers become committed and

with which they become engaged requires careful and strategic planning on the part of school leaders. Teacher-perceived conditions in the school affect teachers' commitment to change, so it is necessary for principals to seriously and intentionally consider the culture of the school. If the culture of the school is not prepared for the level of change that must occur, the principal and other leaders must consider strategies or tools that will help facilitate change in the culture (Leithwood et al., 1994).

Leithwood et al. (1999) discusses four sources of teachers' commitment to change: personal goals, capacity beliefs, context beliefs, and emotional arousal. For the purposes of the present study, capacity beliefs are inherently important. Capacity beliefs, according to Leithwood et al. (1999) are also necessary elements for teachers' commitment to change. Capacity beliefs include "such psychological states as self-efficacy, self-confidence, academic self-concept, and self-esteem" (p. 139).

Clifton, Anderson, and Schreiner (2006) demonstrate an approach for individuals through the use of the well-established Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005). By learning one's own strengths, energies may be channeled toward activities in which the individual will become even more successful. The development of individuals' strengths requires identification of talent, integration of how one views herself/himself, and behavioral change (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The strengths approach suggests that awareness of one's own strengths creates a sense of self-efficacy. This sense of efficacy leads to greater success through the application and development of individual strengths, or talents (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005).

The assertion made by Clifton, Anderson, and Schreiner connects with the construct of capacity beliefs in the literature of Leithwood et al (1999). If the self-efficacy of teachers is

supported through a strengths approach, and the other three constructs (personal goals, context beliefs, and emotional arousal) are supported through other means, teachers' commitment to change will have a higher chance of being established. By establishing teachers' commitment to change at the start of a collaborative process, such as an accreditation self-study, the action steps that will evolve from the process will have a greater likelihood of success. Gradual approaches to systemic change are more likely to be successful than quick-fix approaches (Marzano, 2003), and the effort to introduce a strengths approach at the independent study school described in this paper follow that approach.

According to Witmer (2005), a strong correlation exists between teachers' commitment to change and effective schools characteristics. These factors positively impact student achievement, the ultimate goal of all education initiatives. By nurturing teachers' commitment to change factors through a strengths-based approach, a stronger chance exists for implementing collaborative change processes that may result in improved student learning.

Context for the Research

Research for this preliminary study took place in a Los Angeles area alternative education high school enrolling students ages 14-18, although students may remain enrolled until they are 21. The school serves students at eight sites in an urban setting. Most students transferred to the school because of credit deficiencies at their prior schools of attendance, while others had been transferred for behavioral issues that resulted in removal from a comprehensive high school. In some cases the students and their parents elected the school because the student had excelled in an area of performance or athletics and required schedule flexibility. Students were required to attend a session each week at one of the sites close to their homes.

The investigator is a graduate professor of educational leadership and works in a consultative manner with the school being investigated, providing training in strengths-based (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006) approaches prior to the start of an accreditation self-review process.

Purpose of the Study

The school being investigated operates at eight sites. Each site operates fairly autonomously, each averaging three or four faculty members. Instructional and operational practices vary from site to site, although school policies and required tracking systems for grading and attendance are consistent.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a strengths-based approach positively impacts initiation of collaborative processes at an urban independent study high school.

Proposed Model

The author of the study proposes that a series of steps for creating a collaborative environment prior to the initiation of a major collaborative endeavor will improve the likelihood for success (ultimately, the planning of future actions that will improve student learning). The steps for the proposed model under investigation include: 1. the introduction of research supporting a strengths-approach and the StrengthsFinder assessment to faculty of the school being investigated, 2. use of the StrengthsFinder online assessment by each individual faculty member, 3. a staff development session in which faculty members are coached as a group in the interpretation of assessment results and application of the findings, and 4. a survey of the faculty to determine if the use of a strengths-based approach positively impacts the initiation of collaborative processes at an urban independent study high school Research Question

The research question for the present study is: does the use of a strengths-based approach positively impact the initiation of collaborative processes at an urban independent study high school?

Research Methodology

The author of the present study and a colleague were introduced to the school faculty in a group setting during a scheduled session devoted to staff development. During the session, the investigator and the colleague led the faculty in developing notes relating to three areas: 1. steps taken by the faculty and administration to improve the school in recent years, 2. ideas for future improvements, 3. more narrowly defined proposals for improvements. This short session served as an introduction to the staff and as an opportunity for the investigator to observe faculty participation and interactions during the session.

During a second session each of the 23 faculty members and two administrators were given a copy of the book *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006). The session included an introduction to the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an established assessment of individual talents (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter, 2005). Each participant was instructed to use an individual access code included in the book to take the StrengthsFinder online and to print out his/her individualized report of five top strengths. Participants were asked by the investigator to bring their individual results to the next scheduled session.

During the third session, participants identified each of their five strengths, anonymously, by making marks on a white board next to the list of 34 themes that served as the reporting construct from the StrengthsFinder assessment. Results from the self-reporting are included in Table 1:

Table 1. *Faculty Self-Reported Strengths Themes*

Theme	Number	Theme	Number
Achiever	8	Futuristic	1
Activator	1	Harmony	1
Adaptability	3	Ideation	2
Analytical	3	Includer	3
Arranger	0	Individualization	2
Belief	3	Input	4
Command	4	Intellection	4
Communication	2	Learner	9
Competition	0	Maximizer	5
Connectedness	9	Positivity	5
Consistency	2	Relator	6
Context	2	Responsibility	5
Deliberative	3	Restorative	1
Developer	1	Self-Assurance	2
Discipline	1	Significance	0
Empathy	2	Strategic	5
Focus	6	Woo	2

Five themes with the highest self-reported frequency were described by the investigator: learner, connectedness, achiever, focus, and relator (see Appendix A for all 34 theme descriptions). The purpose of the description was to give the faculty a sense of the themes and to generate ideas for applying the strengths to the school's collaboration processes. The faculty was then asked to divide into groups of three to discuss their own strengths with the others and to describe how their own strengths may be applied during collaborative processes that would begin as the school started an accreditation self-study.

Data Collection

A 10-item online survey was created to collect perception data from the school's 23 teachers. The items were created using language that was similar to the language used during training sessions. In other words, it was decided by the investigator to use language that was not technical and disconnected, such as the teachers' commitment to change term "self-efficacy."

Rather, the intent was to develop a questionnaire that would provide descriptive data of the faculty members' perceptions relating to a strengths-approach and its potential impact on relationships among faculty, affirmation of individual strengths, and school collaborative processes.

Teachers responded to a Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 6=strongly agree.

The survey items were:

1. Identifying my 5 most prominent strengths affirmed what I have known about myself.
2. Understanding the strengths approach and knowing my own strengths will influence how I perceive students.
3. Knowing my 5 strengths will influence how I teach.
4. Our school will benefit from a focus on our individual and collective strengths.
5. Focusing on strengths can help our faculty determine steps for improving student learning, attendance, mentoring programs, and other areas.
6. I can contribute better to our school if I focus on using my areas of strength.
7. A strengths approach influences how I perceive my colleagues.
8. Strengths-awareness helps me communicate in a more tailored manner with individual colleagues.
9. Knowing my 5 strengths will influence what I will pursue in my professional life.
10. Knowing my 5 strengths will influence what I will pursue in my personal life.

A link to the survey was posted on a school intranet site. The site included important dates, memos, and announcements, and was checked on a regular basis by all staff. An email was sent from the assistant principal to faculty members, requesting that each respond to the survey.

Second and third emails were sent as follow-up requests. Fifteen of the twenty-three faculty members, or 65%, responded to the survey.

Findings and Discussion

Table 2. *Survey Data (n=15)*

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Dis- agree	3 Some- what Dis- Agree	4 Some- what Agree	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree	Average Of Responses
Item 1	1	0	5	4	3	2	3.93
Item 2	2	1	3	4	3	2	3.73
Item 3	1	2	4	5	2	1	3.53
Item 4	1	1	5	4	2	2	3.73
Item 5	2	0	5	3	3	2	3.73
Item 6	2	0	5	3	3	2	3.73
Item 7	0	4	6	1	3	1	3.40
Item 8	4	0	6	3	0	2	3.06
Item 9	4	1	5	4	0	1	2.87
Item 10	2	1	6	3	2	1	3.33

Since the sample size was only 23 teachers, of which 15 responded to the survey, it was not possible to derive meaningful statistical information. However, it was interesting to look at the data from a descriptive perspective. By analyzing the average response score for each item, it was possible to infer (to some extent) to what degree the strengths-reports and training influenced faculty perceptions.

The average response score for Item 1 (Identifying my 5 most prominent strengths affirmed what I have known about myself.) was 3.93, which indicated a slight lean toward somewhat agreeing with the statement in the item. The teachers were established in their career and were most likely aware of their strengths prior to the strengths report. Some teachers may have considered the strengths-report as having little effect on their self-perceptions.

The Item 2 (Understanding the strengths approach and knowing my own strengths will influence how I perceive students.) average response score was 3.73, which also indicated a slight lean toward somewhat agreeing with the statement. Relating to the school change process,

the investigator had anticipated a trickle-over effect from administering the StrengthsFinder to faculty, so that the strengths approach would bring about a realization that students had their own sets of strengths to which teaching could take place. The data from this item indicated that there was some recognition that student strengths may be instructionally important.

The average response score for Item 3 (Knowing my 5 strengths will influence how I teach.) was 3.52, which was almost an exact balance between somewhat disagreeing and somewhat agreeing with the statement. This data did not provide insight, and it may have been a poorly worded item.

The Item 4 (Our school will benefit from a focus on our individual and collective strengths.) average response score was 3.73. This data did not demonstrate a clear commitment to the change process through a strengths approach. The investigator anticipated a more positive indication, but it was possible that the concept of change through collective strengths (in a practical sense) was not clear to the teachers.

The average response score for Item 5 (Focusing on strengths can help our faculty determine steps for improving student learning, attendance, mentoring programs, and other areas.) was 3.73. It was possible that the idea of how a strengths-approach could be applied to the sample components embedded within the item was unclear to the respondent group.

The Item 6 (I can contribute better to our school if I focus on using my areas of strength.) average response score was 3.73. Item 3 responses were similar to responses to Item 6. It is possible that the application of one's strengths to teaching or to contributing to the success of the school in conjunction with others was unclear to the faculty.

The average response score for Item 7 (A strengths approach influences how I perceive my colleagues.) was 3.4. The faculty at the school had strong familiarity with one another due to

the smaller size of the school, even though they operated at eight different sites. It was possible that teachers believed that their perceptions of one another were already positive and the strengths approach would not make that perception any stronger.

The Item 8 (Strengths-awareness helps me communicate in a more tailored manner with individual colleagues.) average response score was 3.06. As in Item 7, it was possible the responses may have indicated that communication was already strong and that knowing one another's strengths, according to the StrengthsFinder, would not alter that communication in a more positive manner.

The average response score for Item 9 (Knowing my 5 strengths will influence what I will pursue in my professional life.) was 2.87. This was the lowest average response score for all items. Approximately 50% of the faculty members at the school are nearing retirement, and approximately 90% of the teachers transferred to the school from comprehensive schools in the same school district. It was possible that some of the teachers who responded to the survey were not intending to make further professional changes, reflected in the overall response range of "somewhat disagree" to "disagree."

The Item 10 (Knowing my 5 strengths will influence what I will pursue in my personal life.) average response score was 3.33. This was the second lowest average for all items. A discussion of tying the strengths approach to personal endeavors did not take place during the training/coaching sessions, and it was possible that many teachers did not see the StrengthsFinder reports as being meaningful in their personal lives.

Summary and Concluding Comments

Developing a strengths-approach prior to the initiation of a change process may support the establishment of a collaborative environment among faculty. However, a research-based link

between individual self-efficacy through recognition of strengths and development of teachers' commitment to change through collaborative processes has not yet been established.

The research question for this study was: does the use of a strengths-based approach positively impact the initiation of collaborative processes at an urban independent study high school? This study was preliminary in nature and reported on very recent activities at the school being investigated. Results from the survey did not clearly answer the research question.

It is the intent of the investigator to continue researching the faculty's perceptions regarding the impact of a strengths-approach on the collaborative processes of the school. Future faculty trainings may be designed that explicitly link strengths of faculty to collaborative processes, as well as instructional processes. For further data collection, an interview protocol may be developed to collect qualitative data. A future paper will report on the progress of the school and will summarize additional data that may provide a more clear answer to the research question posed in this study.

The author poses the following recommendations for further research: 1. a call for use of the strengths-approach at other schools to initiate collaborative processes, 2. research of the strengths-approach in teacher collaboration, and 3. research of the strengths-approach in instructional practices, and 4. the development of a valid and reliable survey to provide quantitative data from a larger sample size.

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Appendix A

Theme	Description (adapted from Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005)
Achiever	high level of stamina; hard worker
Activator	converts thoughts to action
Adaptability	nonchalant demeanor; lives in the present more than considering the future
Analytical	searches for reasons and causes
Arranger	organizes, allowing for flexibility
Belief	unchanging core values defines purpose
Command	strong in presence and decision-making
Communication	easily converts thoughts to words
Competition	measures progress in relation to others
Connectedness	approaches situations with belief that every circumstance and thing is connected
Consistency	clear rules; treats everyone the same
Context	thinks about past to understand present
Deliberative	careful decision-maker
Developer	identifies and cultivate others' potential
Discipline	enjoys routine and structure
Empathy	senses the feelings of others
Focus	prioritizes, then acts; follows-through
Futuristic	inspired by the future; visionary
Harmony	looks for consensus
Ideation	fascination with ideas
Includer	accepting of others; welcoming
Individualization	interested in the unique qualities of individuals
Input	has a strong desire to always know more
Intellection	characterized by intellectual activities
Learner	great desire to learn and improve
Maximizer	transforms something strong to superb
Positivity	characterized by contagious enthusiasm
Relator	enjoys close relationships with others
Responsibility	committed to stable values and ownership of self-commitments
Restorative	identifies and resolves problems
Self-Assurance	self-confident
Significance	searches for importance to others and recognition
Strategic	creates alternative means of moving forward; identifies patterns and issues
Woo	meets new people and wins them over