WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

"Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Dominique Smith believe that we must nurture ourselves first before we can nurture students and the school: if we do not nurture ourselves, we will have compassion fatigue. Each section of this book supports self-care so that we are prepared to develop a plan for students. This mantra remains true in every chapter. *The Social-Emotional Learning Playbook* will certainly engage teachers while discussing the challenging and important work of improving social-emotional learning within the classroom and community."

—Crystal Wash, Researcher, CERA, Chicago, IL

"Including the social and emotional component in schools is vital, and the relevance of the book is clear: it is designed to be incorporated into a school or district's SEL initiative. The topic is so very important, especially now, after and continuing the recovery after the pandemic."

—Lydia Bagley, Instructional Support Specialist
Cobb County School District, Marietta, GA

"This book is an excellent professional development resource, filled with examples that are culturally relevant and grounded in real-world contexts to help readers understand how SEL can be applied or practiced. I work closely with faculty and students in teacher education and early childhood education programs, and I would recommend this book to them."

—Jeffrey Liew, Professor, Texas A&M University, Bryan, TX

THE
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
PLAYBOOK

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PLAYBOOK

A GUIDE TO STUDENT AND TEACHER WELL-BEING

NANCY FREY
DOUGLAS FISHER
DOMINIQUE SMITH

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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	• Only about "positive" things
• Describing learning and development respectfully and honestly	• A way of avoiding the truth
• Building on a child's abilities within their zones of proximal and potential development	• About accommodating bad behavior
• Acknowledging that people experience difficulties and challenges that need attention and support	• Fixated on problems
• Identifying what is taking place when learning and development go well, so that it may be reproduced, further developed, and strengthened	• 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

SOURCE: © Copyright 2004–2022, VIA Institute on Character (n.d.). All rights reserved. Used with permission. www.viacharacter.org

We invite you to pause at this point in the playbook to learn about your own strengths. Go to https://www.viacharacter.org to take this free online version of the VIA-IS. Once you set up an account, you can take the 240-item assessment. We know that sounds daunting; it will take you less than 15 minutes. It consists of statements that you rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *This is very much unlike me* to 5 being *This is very much like me*. Examples of statements follow:

- I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself. (Hope)

- I always treat people fairly, whether I like them or not. (Fairness)

- At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings. (Gratitude)

Once completed, you will immediately receive a short report of your strengths in numerical order, beginning with your signature strengths, then your middle strengths, and finally, your lesser strengths. We promise that this is not a magazine-style quiz. This instrument is widely used and appears in the *Psychologists' Desk Reference*.

After you receive your results, reflect on what you have learned about yourself and your signature strengths.

What was surprising to you?	What was confirming for you?

INVEST IN YOUR STRENGTHS TO BUILD RESILIENCE

Knowing one's strengths and being intentional about using them contributes to your own ability to achieve your personal and professional goals. Once again, keep in mind that your lesser strengths are not deficits, but rather ones that you use less frequently. If there are some you want to cultivate, go for it. One of the important findings of character strengths research is that strengths and weaknesses are not fixed nor are they biologically based—they can be developed with intention. Keep in mind that your signature strengths also offer a pathway for you to grow and develop. They are key to your personal and professional resilience.

> *Character strengths research shows that strengths and weaknesses are not fixed. They can be developed with intention.*

Being knowledgeable about yourself contributes to your resilience, especially when it makes it possible to consciously draw on the strengths you have to navigate unsteady times. Misfortunes and setbacks happen, and being resilient will not prevent their occurrence. However, resiliency impacts your ability to handle adverse events and the changes that result. Change can also be the impetus for innovation. However, change is difficult and sometimes uninvited, although it can result in unexpected possibilities. Most of us don't crave change, even though we know it can be necessary. Our colleague Cathy Lassiter reminds us of this when she says, "Change is good. You go first." To be sure, pandemic teaching, as one example, has profoundly changed the ways schools function, from logistics and scheduling to the ways we interact with students, colleagues, and families. But as Aguilar wisely writes, "We know the key to resilience is learning how to get back to the surface when a ferocious wave knocks us over, how to ride those waves, and perhaps, even how to find joy when surfing the waves" (2018, p. 268).

CASE IN POINT

Hannah Pritchard-Jones teaches sixth-grade social studies at the same school she attended as a student. She regards this as her dream job, especially because this is her first year of full-time teaching. Her university preparation program occurred in another district during an extended period of full-time distance learning, so she didn't have the same experiences as other student teachers in previous years have had. She's a few months into her first experience teaching in a physical classroom, and, frankly, she's overwhelmed. There's a different level of classroom management required, and she's feeling unsure of how to ask for help, fearing that it might be seen as a sign of weakness. All her frustrations and anxieties reach a tipping point during a conversation with the induction coach: in tears, Ms. Pritchard-Jones confesses that she's feeling like she is not cut out for teaching. She does admit that the best part of her job is the relationships she has built with many of her students.

The instructional coach sees that this novice teacher is at a crossroads and wants to shape her perspective by building a sense of self-determination, as she knows this will contribute to Ms. Pritchard-Jones's resiliency. What recommendations would you give to the induction coach and the teacher in each of these areas?

AUTONOMY	COMPETENCE	RELATEDNESS

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH CONTINUES WITH STUDENTS

Learners who work from a position of strength are more likely to learn faster and more completely (Clifton & Harter, 2003). In addition to improved academic performance, students in this mode report having feelings of mastery and accomplishment and are motivated to take on new challenges. This is at the center of definitions of a visible learner. Of course, visible learners don't just happen by chance. They are built by educators who create the conditions such that the teacher is able to see learning through the eyes of their students (Hattie, 2012).

> *Learners who work from a position of strength are more likely to learn faster and more completely.*

Many of the conditions consistent with Visible Learning intersect with dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A strengths-based approach to learning enhances each of these: For instance,

- Creating opportunities for choice and decision making about consequential matters in the classroom is a strengths-based approach to autonomy.

- Student competence is enhanced through culturally sustaining curricula that allow students to draw on their cultural and linguistic knowledge (Paris & Alim, 2017).

- Social relatedness is developed more fully when students are provided lots of chances to work with one another and learn about themselves.

We find that it's of great importance to build the collective efficacy of student teams. Equipping teams with decision-making responsibilities about how they will work together and providing instruction about the social skills needed for collaboration can assist in this effort (Hattie et al., 2021).

INVEST IN YOUR STUDENTS AS ASSETS

Being a strength-spotter for your students requires that you know a lot about what they bring to the classroom. These assets, which include family, culture, and experiences, provide individuals with unique strengths. Caring educators will tell you that no two years are the same in their classrooms, even when they are teaching at the same grade level or subject. That's because each year students bring their distinctive selves and therefore shape the dynamic of the room. In the words of Style (2014), "half the curriculum walks in the room with the students, in the textbooks of their lives" (p. 67). She notes that for too many young people, the shelves don't reflect the lives of the students.

Now let's link this to a concept we will focus on more deeply in the next module—belonging. In classrooms and schools where a sense of belonging is diminished for some students, and where what is learned in the classroom doesn't fit into their lives, there is fertile ground for stereotype threat to take root. *Stereotype threat* is "the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype . . . about [a] group's intellectual ability and competence"

(Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). It is believed that stereotype threat has an unfavorable effect on memory and attention and therefore interferes with academic performance. Black students are particularly vulnerable to stereotype threat, yet it has been documented among Latinx, Asian-American students, female students in mathematics and science classes, and people with disabilities. With an effect size of –0.29, it is one of the negative influences on student learning (www.visiblelearningmetax.com).

An assets-based approach to curriculum development can serve as something of a counterbalance to stereotype threat. It may begin with seeking out ways to profile contributors to the discipline you teach beyond the conventional ones featured in the textbook. And of course, make sure that the narrative and informational texts in your classroom reflect the heritages of your students. But go beyond the general demographics of your classroom and ask yourself, "Do I really know my students as individuals?" If the answer is "Not as much as I should," take a look at asset mapping.

> *Being a strength-spotter for your students requires that you know a lot about what they bring to the classroom.*

Asset mapping is a student-generated visual representation of the cultural strengths and community resources they draw on (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017). It's likely that you have seen asset maps in other contexts, such as an illustrated map of a city that highlights attractions like museums, parks, and libraries. Think of your students' lives much like a city.

Students use inquiry to discover stories about their families, identify individual strengths, and draw on the values and ideals of the community in which they live. These asset maps are displayed and used for a classroom gallery walk. A second gallery walk is hosted to invite families and community members to see the assets their children have identified.

As one example, Samoan American high school students identified generosity, family responsibility, and respect as important cultural traditions that sustained them from one generation to the next in their efforts to combat the effects of systemic racism (Yeh et al., 2014). Now consider how these cultural assets could be leveraged by their teachers. *Generosity* is a necessary condition for high levels of collaborative learning to occur. Values of *family responsibility* can be utilized to empower young people to name and work toward college and career aspirations that benefit their families. And *respect* illuminates the importance of conveying unconditional positive regard for a student. Knowing your students' cultural assets (and using these assets) increases your effectiveness. Students' knowledge of their cultural assets helps them discover their power.

Younger students will likely respond well to questions that encourage them to find out more about their family's history, develop timelines of their own life, and identify places and traditions that are important to them. Useful questions might include the following:

- Who helps you?

- What do you know about your culture?

- Who can help you understand your culture?

- What traditions are important in your family?

- What traditions are important in your community?

Older students can add more about historical experiences that have shaped their ancestors' lives, identify local community leaders and institutions they value, and report on their own advocacy and service. For example, adolescents might want to share the struggles they have experienced, the issues that they care about in society, and the ways in which their ancestors have shaped their life.

NOTE TO SELF

Consider how you might use asset mapping in your classroom or across the school.

With whom might you use asset mapping?	
How might it enhance a unit of instruction?	
What are the benefits you could gain by doing so?	
What resources (e.g., community partnerships, family collaboration) do you have to do so?	
What resources do you need to do so?	

INVEST IN YOUR STUDENTS' ABILITY TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR STRENGTHS

An asset-mapping project can provide students with a window to see that what they bring to the classroom is valued and respected. Continue that conversation by ensuring that students are able to learn about their own strengths that they possess as individuals. As we discussed in the previous section, the VIA-IS is a tool grounded in the research about character strengths. There is also an online version for students ages 8 through 17 to use in order to identify their signature strengths. The online tool for young people consists of 103 questions and takes 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The questions are further adjusted by age to improve readability for younger students and can be accessed at https://www.viacharacter.org/surveys/takesurvey.

It is important for families to see the strengths their child possesses. Families with a child with a history of school failure may have lower expectations because they have not experienced their child's successes. Make sure that your interactions with families include highlights of their child's contributions. Far too often, families report that the only time they hear from the school is when their child is having a problem, often behavioral. Interrupt this cycle by committing to reaching out to the families of every child on your roster regularly to discuss a strength you see, and more often for students who have a history of difficulty. This may come in the form of a short note, phone call, or text. Most schools use a student management information system (MIS) to manage gradebooks, and these systems are accessible by parents. Add a field to the MIS that allows you to add strengths-based comments for families to read.

> *Students' knowledge of their cultural assets helps them discover their power.*

Family interactions often come in the form of parent-teacher conferences. We are fans of a series of questions that can be posed to the child and their family to focus attention on their strengths. We have used similar questions during summer home visits conducted by special educators for incoming ninth-grade students at the school where we work. These questions come from Your Therapy Source (2019), which profiles resources for pediatric therapists, educators, and parents:

1. This student is best at . . .
2. This student has an amazing ability to . . .
3. This student is frequently recognized for . . .
4. This student smiles when . . .
5. This student is happiest when . . .
6. This student participates the most when . . .
7. This student does this better than any other student . . .
8. This student is highly interested in . . .
9. This student is highly motivated by . . .
10. This student always takes pride in their work when . . .

Being a strength-spotter requires deliberate intention to do so. All of us have been caught up at one time or another with a script that seems more intent on

cataloging everything that is wrong without giving attention to what is working, and what strengths that young person possesses. Often, tapping into their strengths is key to changing their learning trajectory.

NOTE TO SELF

Now it's your turn. It's easy to talk about a strengths-based approach in a theoretical way, but more challenging when we're talking about *that kid.* You know, the one that keeps you awake at night as you struggle to make a breakthrough. That child who frustrates you. That young person who causes you to dread third period because you know they came to school today, and you wish they hadn't. Now that you've got that current student in your mind, respond to the following prompts.

1. This student is best at . . .

2. This student has an amazing ability to . . .

3. This student is frequently recognized for . . .

4. This student smiles when . . .

5. This student is happiest when . . .

6. This student participates the most when . . .

7. This student does this better than any other student . . .

8. This student is highly interested in . . .

9. This student is highly motivated by . . .

10. This student always takes pride in their work when . . .

If you are at a loss to answer any of these questions, then it's a signal that you need to learn more about the student. If you were successful in answering these questions as positives, consider how you are going to leverage these strengths.

CASE IN POINT

The preschool educators at Rockdale Community School are meeting to hone their skills at developing strengths-based plans for their young students. The preschool is inclusive of children with and without disabilities, a practice endorsed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Barton & Smith, 2015). They are working through three scenarios based on children in their charge to shift to a strengths-based approach. Help them rewrite these statements using your knowledge of strengths. To prepare you for this, reread the chart in Figure 1.1 on what a strengths-based approach is and is not.

(Continued)

(Continued)

DEFICIT-BASED STATEMENT	STRENGTHS-BASED TEACHING STATEMENT
Madison has difficulty transitioning to the classroom in the morning and it takes her a long time to settle down.	
Carlos is an English learner and can't communicate his needs in English to his teachers.	
Karina hits and grabs other children to get their attention.	

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH IS NURTURED BY SCHOOLS

Is your school currently leveraging its strengths? The organization of traditional schools often resembles silos, with adults working hard within a particular department or job assignment but with little contact across other sections. The result is that at times, the adults in the school are working at cross purposes from one another. This isn't intended but what can happen when the work of the school is subdivided and individual units take their place. It isn't necessarily a matter of the size of the school. We've seen large high schools that serve 2,000-plus students where there is a cohesive mission and small schools of 200 students that seem to operate in different zones within the building.

SOCIAL CAPITAL OF SCHOOL IS STRENGTH BASED

An untapped source of strength in schools is its social capital. *Social capital*, which is derived from economics, describes the ways that groups invest in each other. Instead of money, the investment is in the relationships with one another. Importantly, these networks extend to their relationships with the community. The social capital of a school is a product of a shared mission, its values, and its norms. It is an intangible that is deeply linked to the achievement of its students.

A well-known example of social capital at work was profiled by the Chicago Consortium of School Research. They studied 100 elementary schools in the district to determine what made some schools successful while others were less so, with controls for things like demographics and the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood. The results they reported were striking. They found that the relative social capital of a school, which is to say the network of relationships in the building and with the community, was predictive of the academic achievement of its students and in measures of school safety (Bryk, 2010). And it makes a lot of sense. A child in a school community with high levels of social capital sees allies and supporters in and out of school. In turn, that child is seen as an individual with strengths.

High schools run in large part on social capital, even though they might not be aware of it. It turns out that social capital is predictive of graduation rates, reading scores, and math scores. Salloum and colleagues (2017) examined social capital at 96 high schools. They found that four characteristics mattered:

- The normative behaviors of the school (how problems are resolved, and decisions are made)

- Relational networks (the triangle of interpersonal relationships between teachers, students, and their families)

- Trust in parents (the belief of school staff that parents and teachers work together effectively to achieve goals)

- Trust in students (the belief of school staff that students work together with teachers effectively to achieve goals)

Much like the elementary schools study, the socioeconomic status of these high schools was not predictive of social capital. In fact, there were well-resourced schools that had low social capital. The researchers reported that "in our study, schools with stronger reports of connecting teachers, parents, and students had higher average levels of achievement" (Salloum et al., 2017, p. 20).

Understanding the assets that families and communities possess makes it possible to trade on them for the benefit of students.

Schools with high social capital promote and leverage the strengths of their members. Students are viewed as individuals who each bring their own strength profile to school. Adults who work at the school understand their strengths and recognize them in others. Communities are viewed as assets, not problems to be fixed. It is the frequent interactions between these actors—teachers, students, and families—that foster the social capital of the school. Recognition of one's own strengths, as well as those our students possess, is foundational to meaningful relationships. And understanding the assets that families and communities possess makes it possible to trade on them for the benefit of students.

NOTE TO SELF

Do you know your school's social capital? Begin with a survey of school staff using the social capital scale in Figure 1.3 (of course, this can be translated or delivered using text-to-speech tools). After tabulating the results, look at the relative amount of social capital distributed among students, families, and the community. If you find that there are low levels, investment in a strengths-based view of learners and their communities may be a great way to raise the quality of the network of relationships at your school.

FIGURE 1.3 SOCIAL CAPITAL SCALE

SOCIAL CAPITAL SCALE ITEMS	STRONGLY DISAGREE					STRONGLY AGREE
Teachers in this school have frequent contact with parents.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parental involvement supports learning here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Community involvement facilitates learning here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school trust the parents.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school trust their students.	1	2	3	4	5	6

SOCIAL CAPITAL SCALE ITEMS	STRONGLY DISAGREE					STRONGLY AGREE
Students in this school can be counted on to do their work.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students are caring toward one another.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parents of students in this school encourage good habits of schooling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students respect others who get good grades.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The learning environment here is orderly and serious.	1	2	3	4	5	6

SOURCE: Goddard (2003, p. 71). Used with permission.

COGNITIVE REFRAMING BUILDS ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Care and compassion require that we feel the other person's needs and then take actions to help. A tool for doing so is called *cognitive reframing*. It is natural when an event occurs to consider it first through its impact on us; to put it another way, we frame the event through our own lens. One example is the well-known phenomenon of recalling exactly where we were and what we were doing when a traumatic event took place. You might recall what was happening the moment you heard about a space shuttle explosion or an assassination of a political leader. While we were not personally involved in the incident, we initially focus on the situation as something that happened to ourselves. The many events and situations that occur in our professional lives rarely, if ever, rise to the level of extreme trauma. We offer this as an example of the natural tendency to process events emotionally.

Now consider an event that occurs far more often at our professional levels, such as a simmering dispute with another colleague. It's fairly low level, but it troubles us. It is quite possible that it has led us to overgeneralize, like the examples that follow.

- It happened once before, so it will happen again.

- She told me that they didn't care about the last project, so they won't care about this one either.

- That person always does that.

- I've taught with people like him before. He will act just like them.

Our brains are pattern-detectors and sometimes those patterns serve us well. But at other times, the frame that we use to perceive the situation gets in the way of us resolving a lingering difficulty in communication. And over time, it depletes an

organization's ability to be able to use a strengths-based approach. (You'll recall that a core principle of a strengths-based approach is that we address challenges rather than bury them.) It may take a deliberate and intentional reframing of the situation to move us forward. Cognitive framing is a tool one can use as part of reflective thinking and investing in resilience (Pipas & Pepper, 2021). This technique is a conscious decision to identify and undo negative thinking patterns. In the context of schools, cognitive reframing can improve members' ability to resolve communication issues between educators and their students. Next, we'll lead you through a negative experience you've had at school and how to cognitively reframe it.

> *Cognitive framing is a tool one can use as part of reflective thinking and investing in resilience.*

NOTE TO SELF

Step 1 is to describe the situation. It helps to write things down so that you can clearly analyze the events as they occurred. Try to visualize the situation so that you can provide details.

1. DESCRIBE THE EVENT OR SITUATION.	
OUR EXAMPLE	**YOUR EXPERIENCE**
Tim is a member of your grade-level meetings. He often interrupts others with his own opinions about a topic and is regularly dismissive of other people's ideas. A regular refrain from him is "I've tried that before. It doesn't work."	

The second step is to identify your feelings. When this situation arises, what is or was your emotional response?

2. IDENTIFY YOUR EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS.	
OUR EXAMPLE	**YOUR EXPERIENCE**
I feel frustrated, angry, and resentful. I feel like my ideas are dismissed.	

Once you have identified your emotions, you'll want to examine your thoughts. Your thoughts might arise as you identify emotions, but you'll want to spend some time with these as it will help you reframe the situation. As you explore and explain your thoughts, consider what you believe the other person's intentions were. Ask yourself what you thought would happen or what might be the impact of these events. Consider the outcomes you expected.

3. EXPLORE AND EXPLAIN YOUR THOUGHTS.	
OUR EXAMPLE	YOUR EXPERIENCE
I think that Tim doesn't care about other people's efforts. It's disrespectful to me and I think it makes me look bad. I also think it's ruining my relationship with Tim.	

Once your thoughts have been explored and explained, you have the opportunity to reframe the situation or event. Consider if the intentions of the other person or people might be different from what you thought. Might there be other reasons for the behavior or actions? Could there be other outcomes or reasons that you could consider?

4. REFRAME THE EVENT OR SITUATION.	
OUR EXAMPLE	YOUR EXPERIENCE
Okay, maybe Tim is feeling ineffective. That might explain why he regularly says that something won't work. Or maybe he has an especially challenging class this year and it's bringing out his fears that he's not doing a good job.	

Once you have considered alternatives, you may want to test out your ideas and hypotheses. What if Tim is experiencing a really rough year, personally or professionally? Would that change how to feel about the situation? What if it is true that he's feeling ineffective because he has tried some things that haven't worked for him? What if there is no good reason for him dominating our discussions with such negativity—it's just a habit? Any of those situations

(Continued)

(Continued)

could be correct and it would be interesting to know. But, before you do your investigation and perhaps even make a change, consider your emotions following the reframing.

5. REVISIT YOUR FEELINGS.	
OUR EXAMPLE	**YOUR EXPERIENCE**
I need to have an honest conversation with Tim, with no one else present. But I actually feel a lot better thinking about this and realizing that it may not have anything to do with me. I want to find out about what he is experiencing. Maybe I could be of help to him. It's important that I have an honest and growth-producing conversation with him.	

CASE IN POINT

The leadership staff at Park High School are examining the results of the social capital survey they administered earlier in the month to learn about their own strengths as well as growth opportunities. It is important to note that the leadership team comprises administrators but also department chairs, a representation of classified staff, and the school's parent-teacher organization. As a school, they have been engaging in cultivating a strengths-based approach since last year and view social capital as one outcome of their efforts. Their quantitative analysis of their strengths and areas of growth is as follows:

STRENGTHS AT PHS	GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES AT PHS
• Teachers in this school have frequent contact with parents.	• Students respect others who get good grades.
• Parents of students in this school encourage good habits of schooling.	• Students in this school can be counted on to do their work.
• The learning environment here is orderly and serious.	• Community involvement facilitates learning here.

How would you advise the leadership team at the high school? Remember to keep a strengths-based approach in mind. You may want to revisit the opening section on what a strengths-based approach is and isn't, this time substituting the term *school* for *student* or *child*. In addition, you may have some thoughts on asset mapping.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS TO LEVERAGE STRENGTHS	MY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GROWTH

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rath and Conchie (2009), authors of *Strengths-Based Leadership*, wrote that "if you focus on people's weaknesses, they lose confidence. At a very basic level, it is hard for us to build self-confidence when we are focused on our weaknesses instead of our strengths" (p. 14). Use the self-assessment tool that follows to reflect on your strengths as an educator.

Menu of Practices on a Strengths-Based Approach

Use the traffic light scale to reflect on your current practices as they relate to strengths at the levels of self, students, and school. What areas do you want to strengthen?

INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITIES	
I am aware of my strengths.	
I understand that my strengths can be cultivated.	
I can apply my strengths to enhance my resiliency.	
STUDENT-LEVEL OPPORTUNITIES	
I understand the connection between culturally sustaining pedagogies and the strengths of my students.	
I understand the importance of principles of self-determination in fostering student strengths.	
I use or plan to use a technique for learning about the assets my students bring to the class.	
I am intentional about my students' learning about their strengths.	
I use a strengths-based approach with students who are challenging to me.	
SCHOOL-LEVEL APPROACHES	
I am seeking to learn about the social capital at my school or district.	
My school uses strategies to build and foster social capital among students, staff, and families.	
I understand the links between a strengths-based approach and social capital.	
I actively engage in and take action to foster cognitive reframing for myself.	
I actively engage in and take action to foster cognitive reframing to assist colleagues facing a dilemma.	

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

🔴 What do I need to do to change my reds to yellows?

🟡 Who can support me to turn my yellows into greens?

🟢 How am I using my greens to positively contribute to the good of the whole?

online resources 🖱️   Access resources, tools, and guides for this module at
resources.corwin.com/theselplaybook