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## Something Always Works: A Self-Study of Strengths-based Coaching in Supervision

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# Something Always Works: A Self-Study of Strengths- Based Coaching in Supervision

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## **Abstract**

Mentoring remains a major component of teacher education programs. Moving away from the traditional apprenticeship model, teacher educators have begun to adopt more affirming coaching practices that nurture the strengths and inner qualities of pre-service teachers. In this self-study, the researcher – an emerging teacher educator hoping to enhance his practice – investigated ways to help pre-service teachers discover and develop their individual strengths and how strength-based coaching might impact his beliefs and assumptions. Data were drawn from interviews, focus groups, lesson plans, and researcher journal reflections as well as participant-created written responses and illustrations. Themes were developed using content analysis. Findings involved the teacher educator realizing the need for a variety for strengths-based exploration tools, the practicality of including strengths discussion in observation conferences and lesson planning, and the gaining of a new, appreciative mindset. Implications suggest a pathway for other teacher educators to consider when implementing strengths-based coaching.

## **Keywords**

instructional supervision; pre-service teachers; strengths-based coaching; teacher education

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## **Introduction**

Mentoring has been considered a major component in teacher education programs, requiring collaboration between university teacher educators, school supervisors, and pre-service teachers (He, 2009). Considered a complex task, mentoring involves the modeling of effective teaching practices, the fostering of reflective practice, the providing of support and other components (Crasborn, Hennisson, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008; Geen, 2002; Uusimaki, 2013). Though the apprenticeship model has been traditionally used, various mentoring models have emerged to help teachers succeed and remain in the profession, including those aimed at emotional support and developing qualities such as resilience and self-efficacy (Hawkey, 2006; He, 2009; Schwille, 2008). As He (2009) notes, an increasing number of scholars have argued “more for a more affirming perspective” (p. 264) for teachers that moves away from deficit-based thinking. Emerging from positive and social cognitive psychology, strengths-based approaches have been positively applied in school settings (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014; Gustems & Calderon, 2014). These approaches emphasize the articulation of one’s strengths as identified by examining past positive experiences, encouragement of hope and optimism for the future, and development of emotional satisfaction with the present (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

While scholars have recommended strengths-based coaching within the context of teacher education (He, 2009; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008), the field could benefit from research aiding teacher educators (e.g. supervisors, mentor teachers) in applying specific approaches, strategies, and techniques in field-based experiences. As an emerging university supervisor, I played a critical role, as scholars argue (Burns and Badiali 2015; Uusimaki, 2013), in helping pre-service teachers (PSTs) develop identity and develop professionally. I sought to study ways in which I might enact strengths-based practices with PSTs in the field. I resonated with a more affirming approach (He, 2009) that turned from the traditional apprenticeship model and toward a model that nurtured and supported teachers in developing the inner qualities that could sustain them in the profession. I was fueled by Loughran’s (2010) assertion that teacher educators should progress beyond assumptions formed while working as classroom teachers and solely relying on those experiences to coach PSTs. Rather I wanted to develop newly acquired teacher educator skills and knowledge based on positivity, encouragement, and nurturing. Hence, the reason for this self-study was to research how to assist 12 PSTs in an undergraduate teacher program in identifying their own strengths as well as how this stance influenced my supervision practice and how I might incorporate specific methods of strengths-based coaching into daily practices and routines. The questions driving this study were:

## **Literature Review**

The strengths-based philosophy has been described as avoiding “a focus on deficits and recognize the importance of the multiple contexts that influence peoples’ lives, as well as the resilience, potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge, and capacities of individuals” (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014, p. 23). Strengths-based ideology emerged during the civil rights movement in the U.S. in the late 1960s and 1970s. References to strengths-based stances in the field of social work and psychology emerged in the literature in the late 1990s, arising in response to deficit-based models, where the practitioner was viewed as the “fixer” or “rescuer”

as opposed to strength approaches, where a collaborative approach is taken between stakeholders (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014). Positive psychologists insisted that the deficit-model failed to consider how individuals could build upon positive qualities. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The positive psychology movement, and its emphasis on strengths, can be traced to the earlier works of Maslow (1971), in his writings on humanistic education and self-actualization. Maslow stressed the need for education to embrace individuals as they are.

To accept the person and help him learn what kind of person he is already. What is his style, what are his aptitudes, what is he good for, not good for, what can we build upon, what are his good raw materials, his good potentialities?" (p. 182).

Critics of strengths-based practices claim they are time-consuming, merely positive thinking, inconsistently applied or defined, simplistic and inappropriate as they ignore the reality of complex issues and deny the existence of serious problems in people's lives (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014). Advocates and critics acknowledge a lack of formal studies in the area, which have relied largely on anecdotal stories (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014). In terms of specifics, McCashen (2005, p.47-48) identified stages for implementing a strengths approach as: 1) listening to peoples' stories and exploring the core issues 2) developing a picture of the future [visioning] and setting goals 3) recognizing and highlighting strengths and exceptions to problems 4) identifying additional resources needed to move towards a picture of the future 5) mobilizing strengths and resources through a plan of action, and 6) reviewing and evaluating progress and change. While strengths-based ideas can be applied to students, for instance, children, for the purposes of this article, the literature is informing how these concepts might assist pre-service teachers. Furthermore, while strengths-based approaches have been geared towards marginalized or oppressed groups, such as children in vulnerable situations (Park & Peterson, 2008), the approach has extended to other populations. For instance, managers realize the value of employing strengths-based approaches, such as when providing performance to employees, who can benefit from improved productivity and enhanced well-being and engagement (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Strengths-based methods have also been applied to general populations in other fields, including athletics (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011) and nursing (Cederbaum & Klusaritz, 2009). The idea that a strengths-based approach has application with non-marginalized populations was also explored within education, for instance, when Passarelli, Hall, and Anderson (2010) studied the impact on college students in an outdoor education program. While largely theoretical at this juncture, scholars have proposed teacher educators use a strengths-based stance in the field (He, 2009; Tschannen & Tschannen, 2011). He (2009) recommended three principles for strength-based teacher education: 1) start from the development of a strengths-based, appreciative mindset 2) focus on the social construction process of the approach, and 3) realize that the approach transcends individuals using it and could impact school culture and students. Tschannen and Tschannen (2011) encouraged teacher educators to coach by recognizing and respectfully acknowledging preservice teachers' current strengths and abilities and assisting them in capitalizing on these traits, shifting power dynamics and responsibility in the process:

*Strengths-based* is different from *deficit-based*. When conversations are deficit-based, the weaknesses of teachers have the upper hand. The focus is on problem areas that need

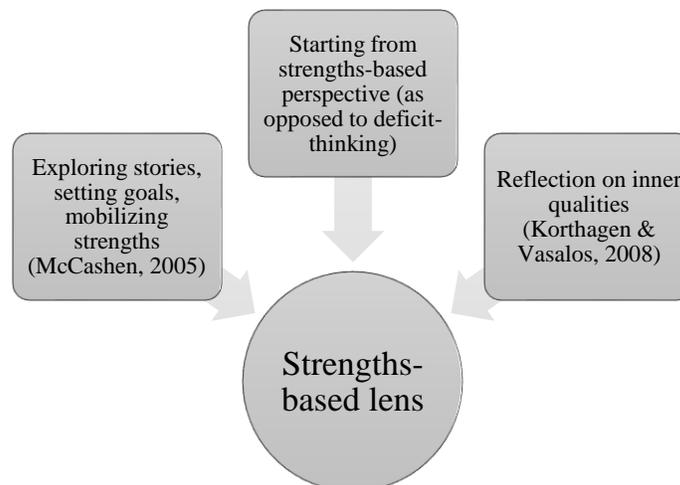
to be fixed. Focusing on deficits also shifts the responsibility for learning to the coach, who presumably knows how to do things better (p.15).

Korthagen and Vasalos (2008) developed the Quality from Within (QfW) model to make teachers aware of their core qualities and inspiration and support them in enacting these practices. QfW is professional development that focuses on growth, “starting from and building upon the inner potential” of teachers (Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2015, p. 580), with the rationale that professional behavior becomes more effective and satisfying when it connects to the inner qualities and values of an individual. Essential within QfW is reflection upon various layers of the model geared toward promoting awareness of ideals and core qualities, identifying obstacles, developing trust in the process, supporting inner potential, and developing autonomy in using core reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008; Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2015). QfW and other strengths-based coaching models such as McCashen’s (2005) undergirded this study as I interacted with the PSTs and labored to understand how this coaching approach might be used within supervision fieldwork.

## Conceptual Framework

I drew upon several works to conceptually guide this study. First, this research was informed by McCashen’s (2005) stages of strengths-based coaching. In particular, the idea of listening to other’s stories, helping them set goals, helping them discover their strengths and put them into a plan of action informed my framework. Secondly, He’s (2009) principles for strength-based education, for instance, beginning from a strengths-based perspective, being cognizant of the social construction process, further expanded my conceptual understandings. Furthermore, Korthagen and Vasalos’ (2008) QfW model, with its emphasis on core reflection, to assist teachers in identifying their inner qualities colored my conceptual framework in this research. Together, these conceptual understandings formed a strengths-based lens emphasizing the need to continuously identify and reaffirm the strengths of individuals as opposed to their shortcomings, which guided my actions, including data collection and analysis in this study. Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic:

**Figure 1. Strengths-based conceptual framework**



## Methods

Self-study is a methodology that concentrates on teaching and learning experiences and encourages teacher educators to reflect on their practices in new ways (Bullock, 2012). Drawing on traditions of reflections, action research, teacher research, and practitioner inquiry, self-study challenges individuals to reconsider their views, to “reframe their position and outlook” (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015, p. 256). Self-study methods can assist teacher educators in avoiding enactment and inadvertently falling back on knowledge and experience they accumulated as classroom teachers (Bullock, 2012). While there is no universal, agreed upon method, scholars have identified five characteristics of self-study: (1) the work is self-initiated and focused (2) aimed at improvement (3) interactive (4) includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods and (5) validity is based in trustworthiness (Laboskey, 2004; Laboskey & Richert, 2015;). While self-study focuses on the self and improvement of one’s practice, for the method to be truly beneficial, Loughran (2004) argues the method must push past the self, past the individual level, and connect to others. Thus, a “major expectation” of self-study research is that the work will “lead to valuable learning outcomes for both the teacher and the students” (Loughran, 2004, p. 154). Thus, while I intended the focus of this study to be on myself and supervision practice, it inevitably focuses, in part, on the PSTs, namely their strengths and how they might be developed within their teaching practice.

### Researcher Positionality

During the study, I was a novice teacher educator, possessing one-year experience working with PSTs at a research 1 university. Previously, I had worked as an elementary and middle school teacher. I struggled with notions of enactment and falling back on what I knew as a teacher when supervising (Bullock, 2012). During supervision trainings and fieldwork, despite all the literature presented on how to best teach teachers, I often questioned the best use of my limited time; I generally spent one day a week in the field. During my coursework, I read an article by Tschannen and Tschannen (2011) that advocated a strengths-based coaching approach. This orientation resonated as a way to maximize results of my face-to-face time with the PSTs. As Maslow (1971) observed, I didn’t necessarily have to start from scratch but could build upon what these aspiring teachers could already do well—even if it seemed minor at the time. Tschannen and Tschannen (2011) reminded me that “strengths-based coaching starts with a different assumption: In every situation, no matter how bleak, something always works” (p. 16). What I believed I was missing, however, were concrete, strength-based strategies to apply in my supervision practices. Engaging in self-study, I believed that, through a continual feedback loop of experience, learning and practice, I could improve my work (Schon, 1983).

### Context

The elementary education teacher program in this study was housed at a R-1 university in the southeast United States. The program served more than 300 PSTs. The program’s conceptual framework supported a clinically rich paradigm, placing a strong emphasis on theory-to-practice connections in the field (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). As part of coursework, the PSTs conducted fieldwork through internships within one of 20 different partnership schools, accumulating about 1,000 hours in the field before graduation. Data were collected while

working with PSTs at a school where I served as a field supervisor. About 70 percent of the students at the school qualified as English-Language Learners (ELL). The school was located in a rural part of the county, where many parents worked as migrant workers during the agricultural harvesting season.

### **Participants in the Study**

The twelve preservice teachers (N =12) participating in the study were in their junior year within the teacher program. The group consisted of females, ages 19-22 (this reflected the gender ratio in the program, which was 95 percent female). Eight of the PSTs identified their race as Caucasian, three Hispanic, and one African-American. The group possessed limited teaching experience in the classroom. The PSTs spent one day a week at the school under the guidance of a mentor teacher. In the case of this study, the participants spent an entire school day each week in the same classroom with a state-certified mentor teacher. As a Level 3 intern within the program, the participants mainly assisted with management duties (e.g. lining up students), delivered small-group instruction, and began taking the lead in planning and teaching one subject. I visited the school once per week and made contact with each participant during seminar (held prior to classroom duties each week) as well as during times when I observed the pre-service teachers in their classrooms and conferenced individually with them to plan or discuss results of observations.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data through several qualitative methods. In total, the data set included 12 interview transcriptions, 12 participant-created illustrations, 12 participant written reflections, 12 lesson plans, 12 online survey results, 12 questionnaire responses, and 8 researcher journal entries. This gave me a total of 80 data points to qualitatively analyze. Table 1 provides a timeline of data collection.

**Table 1. Timeline of data collection**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Point in the semester</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	Beginning of the semester (initial few weeks); mid-semester (during second round of observations)
<b>Visual-based</b>	Mid-semester
<b>Focus Groups</b>	Mid-to-late semester
<b>Participant Reflection/ Research Journal</b>	Concurrent with semester

**Interviews.** I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each PST. During the 45-minute interviews, I questioned them about their strengths, asked them to share their stories as educators, and had them highlight their strengths (McCashen, 2005) by recording them on an index card. All interviews were transcribed. I also discussed the topic of strengths during pre-observation conferences and took notation. For example, I asked “how will you use your strengths in this lesson?” Additionally, believing I should assist the PSTs in mobilizing their strengths through a plan of action (McCashen, 2005), I requested the participants to write down strategies and ideas for focusing on strengths in formal lesson plans, which were required to be drafted during the observation cycle. Some teachers grappled with this idea, so I told them I would capture notes during their observations on a specific strength and share my findings during post conferences.

**Visual-based data.** About half of the PSTs struggled with the idea of naming their strengths; some said they had never considered the concept. Based on the data, I turned to arts-based research, believing the method might serve as a heuristic in assisting the PSTs in better examining their beliefs (Richards, 2006). As Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008) posited, sometimes, visuals can offer “more than words can say” (p. 98). Thus, I asked the PSTs to create an illustration to represent their top strengths as educators. I provided each with an 8” x 11” inch paper and colored pencils and provided them with about 30 minutes to create the drawing (see Figure 2). I also asked them to write a one-to-two paragraph reflection on the back of the drawing to help better comprehend their thinking process when analyzing the illustrations.

**Focus group.** Using the drawings as a talking point, focusing on the social construction of the strengths-based practice (He, 2009), I engaged the preservice teachers in an informal discussion centered on the process of exploring one’s strengths, including using the arts as a medium for understanding. I kept the discussion informal, asking the PSTs to voluntarily share their idea conceptions of strengths and where they might have learned those concepts. I recorded and transcribed the discussion.

**Participant reflections/research journal.** Reflection is essential to helping teachers recognize their inner potential and strengths. As such, I asked participants to complete a written reflection based on questions adopted from the QfW model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008). Throughout the study, I also kept a researcher’s journal, reflecting and writing about the inquiry each week.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers studying varied forms of data must practice the challenging task of “bricolage,” an approach in qualitative research in which one employs different methodologies to identify connections and patterns across different modes of communication (Kress, 2003; Richards, 2013). I analyzed data after data collection, following the conclusion of the semester. I analyzed the various data sets using content analysis. A method for condensing large amount of words into fewer categories based on specific rules of coding, content analysis enables researchers to sift through considerable amounts of data and assists in discovering patterns and trends (Stemler, 2001). Content analysis is also considered an acceptable approach for examining visual data (Ball & Smith, 1992). In the case of the drawings, for example, I studied the PSTs’ drawings carefully, noting implied messages (e.g. smiling faces, inclusion or absence of students, imagery,

colors). I also compared these notes to jottings I made while reading and rereading the narrative data on the back of the pictures, in the process, searching for patterns and themes. Similarly, I perused my remaining narrative data (e.g. lesson plans, interview transcriptions, focus group transcriptions, researcher journal), analyzing every phrase or sentence as a piece of data. I underscored, highlighted, or circled data bits that appeared significant and repeated the process several times, eventually separating the data into categories. I assigned themes to categories that contained sufficient data.

### **Trustworthiness**

To establish credibility and trustworthiness, I used several strategies recommended by qualitative researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I triangulated the data through multiple data collection methods. Considered one of “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), I member-checked the research by sharing findings and the final report with participants. Several responded simply saying it was “accurate” and, therefore, no changes were made to the manuscript. I also engaged in a form of peer view (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by presenting my research to several colleagues, who served as Critical Friends, or acting as a “trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides critique, and takes the time to fully understand the context of the work and the outcomes desired by those involved” (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015, p. 257). During these sessions, I presented my data sources to several colleagues (Ph.D. students/university supervisors) and a course professor, who had experience with supervision, as well as shared initial findings. I asked colleagues to consider how they might approach a similar self-study and sought feedback on interpreting the data and findings, knowing I would benefit from other perspectives.

## **Findings**

The purpose of this self-study was to investigate the use of strengths-based coaching within supervision and this approach might impact my beliefs and perspectives as a supervisor. The research yielded three themes: The first theme involved creating dimension around the notion of strengths through a variety of tools and methods. The second theme was the realization that incorporating strengths-based coaching into supervisor observation cycles made the concept more practical. The third theme highlighted how strengths-based coaching positively impacted the program culture and my mindset. I discuss these themes in more detail below.

### **Providing a Variety of Tools to Explore Strengths Provided Dimension**

The first theme suggested the need to provide a variety of tools for PST to explore their strengths and deepen their own self-reflection capabilities. The data initially revealed that many preservice teachers struggled to articulate their strengths, and as a supervisor, I would need to carefully guide this exploration. For instance, providing the PSTs with various methods to discover, explore, and contemplate their strengths and inner qualities allowed them to make this abstract concept more concrete. Encouraging the PSTs to consider strengths using a multi-modal approach aided them in avoiding potentially surface-level answers and provided more dimension to the topic. For instance, the group originally defined their strengths as “something I’m good at” or “something I execute well” to specific qualities, more unique to their person. Creating

drawings to represent their strengths helped them explore the topic in new dimensions, as they used shapes, symbols, figures and other imagery (see Figure 2). Along with writing or talking about the topic, the PSTs engaged their imagination and sensory experience. As one PST stated during a focus group, “Drawing our strengths helped me see it in new ways. Rather than just use words, we had to use pictures and colors to represent what we are good at.”

**Figure 2. PST drawings representing strengths**



Creating illustrations prompted the PSTs to consider their strengths as multi-dimensional, as both teacher-related abilities and personal qualities. For instance, in some drawings, the teachers depicted their strengths as classroom management or the ability to engage students, but in other drawings, they portrayed their qualities as “loving,” and “caring.” A conversation with Critical Friends over the problem of helping the PSTs articulate strengths suggested that using visual arts would add the dimension I sought:

Me: It's difficult to get them to express their strengths. It's almost as if they lack the words at times.

Critical Friend 1: So what are you going to do?

Me: I started having them draw/illustrate their strengths.

Critical Friend 2: How is that going?

Me: It seems to be working. They are drawing items and things they might not normally factor in when talking with me, like representing their abilities with hearts or arrows or desks to show their relationships to students or how they communicate.

Critical Friend 1: Did this come out at all during interviews:

Me. No, not really – not as rich.

Lastly, the QfW questionnaire provided another layer of dimension prompting the PSTs to acknowledge what they could already do as student teachers and articulate their beliefs and what inspired them as educators—revealing inner qualities that might not be normally discussed during traditional coursework and internship experiences. For instance, in response to the italicized prompts, one PST wrote:

*What is your ideal/your mission as a teacher?*

My mission as a teacher is to create an environment for my students to thrive. I want them to be the best that they can be. This involves me allowing for each student to be exactly who they want to be. No dream is too big, and no idea is too crazy. Everyone is accepted, just as they are.

*What inspires you?*

Students, hands down. Without them, teaching wouldn't exist. Without their fun personalities, classrooms would be boring. Without the students who aspire to walk on the Moon, science would be pointless. Each student inspires me a little more each day. They're the reason I do what I do.

Another PST reflected as such:

*What do you believe in (regarding teaching, working with students)?*

Regarding teaching, I believe that that as a teacher one must be open to growth and be a continuous learner. Regarding students, I believe that those students who present you with the biggest challenges are the students who need the most support from you as the teacher.

*What do you believe about yourself (in the context of teaching/working as a teacher)?*

I believe that I am not perfect, as no one truly is, but that I have strengths that can be built upon and areas that I am willing to improve upon for both myself and my practice.

### **Incorporating Strengths into the Observation Cycle Created a Practical Component**

The second theme highlighted the practicality of infusing strengths within the observation cycle of PSTs. Fusing the strengths-based model through the supervision observation cycle provided me, as a supervisor, with a practical method to assist the PSTs in exploring their strengths. By asking the PSTs to consider their strengths when designing instruction, I could guide PSTs to set specific goals, consider resources, and take actions around those strengths. For instance, a PST who believed her strength was student engagement described specific methods, such as infusing different learning modalities into instruction. Below is what she included in her lesson plan:

I had previously stated that one of my strengths is creating engaging lessons. I like incorporating an activity that gets students moving whether it with fine motor skills, gross motor skills, or it's just something that extends from desk work. In this lesson, I will have students hold an image with the word of something the mouse asked for and their classmates will have to use what their knowledge of the sequences we've been going over, or use the poster paper with the sequences, to help put them in place from beginning to end.

Helping the PSTs to plan with strengths in mind also aided them in bridging what they considered weaknesses in their teaching abilities. The practice helped me keep their focus on what they could do in the classroom, as a PST wrote:

I am very good at getting students excited about things, so I will definitely use that to my advantage. Math is not my strong suit but I actually really like the lesson I created and am super proud of it so I feel that will be reflected onto my students. I scored very high in optimism as a strength and organization so I feel both of those will shine. I am really excited for this lesson which is strange because math has never been my subject per se, but I am ready to go. I have high expectations which I feel is another strength. I put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed in everything I do. My goal is to go up there and be myself and hope that my students love and understand the lesson.

Likewise, another PST wrote in her lesson plan how her strength of honesty might prepare her for the inevitable challenges of the classroom and how what might be perceived as a weakness (i.e. admitting mistakes) among teachers could serve as an advantage. She stated:

A way that I can implement my strengths into my lesson would be if something goes wrong to allow my students to see that I make mistakes too and that sometimes things happen that are beyond our control (such as technology not working). I can also tell them that the last question I am asking, which is what they thought they learned from the lesson, is for me so that I can see how I am doing as a teacher and improve myself.

Additionally, incorporating strengths into lesson planning served as platform, in which I could collect data during the observed lesson and provide detailed feedback to the PSTs during post conferences. The PSTs and I discussed how to further expand upon this strength, or based on the data, we reconsidered whether this was indeed the teacher's strength or should we select a new

focus. For instance, during an observation of a PST who stated her strength was the ability to communicate with her kindergarten students, I scripted:

Teacher spoke slowly, referred continuously to students by name, and used a warm, nurturing tone (e.g. “let’s try another one”; “look at you!” “One hundred percent perfect!”).

Such notes served as a talking point from which to build upon for future observations. The idea of strengths-based supervision was no longer ephemeral, a “wishy washy, feel-good idea” but rather a very focused facet of supervision and teaching (as my journal noted):

I think I found something here. Having the interns (pre-service teachers) write how they will use their strengths in their lesson plans provides me with a solid way to discuss the strengths, collect data, and provide back. As I told my critical friends, I’m excited about this finding. I think this is a major breakthrough for me in my supervision. I feel like I can help my teachers so much more. I can give them direct, specific feedback, which can allow them to capitalize on what they are already good at.

### **Exploring Strengths Positively Impacted the Program Culture**

The third theme reflects the positive impact a strength-based approach can have on building and promoting a PST program culture. Asking PSTs to reflect and act on their strengths helped me keep the focus positive during field experiences – which with the pressures of evaluative observations and course assignments – can inevitably invite negativity and stress. During focus groups and conferences, PSTs expressed support for the strengths-based approach, stating that it provided motivation and served as a confidence-builder. Said one PST:

I like it. I think it’s pretty helpful for us just because it’s nice to talk about something we’re good at it rather than things we need to fix or improve.

Focusing on strengths positively transformed the language and nature of observations from imposing a strictly critical eye to one of encouragement and support. The following is a portion of a conference held between myself and a PST:

Me: I see that you listed “connecting with students” as a strength in your lesson plan. Can you explain this strength more and tell me how you can use this in your upcoming lesson?

PST: Sure. I think I could always connect with kids. It just comes natural. I know how to talk with them. I think this will help me when I trying to get their attention, manage them. I can get them to listen.

Me: Excellent! Now, think about how you can expand on that strength. For example, can you develop greater rapport with students not only during instruction but during other times of the school day, such as when they first come in to the classroom and during

recess? Maybe make a list of things you can do each day to build on this ability and keep it somewhere you can see it.

Additionally, through activities such as the QfW questions, I could encourage the PSTs to further reflect upon what they could do as students in the program rather than concentrate on the skills and experiences they had yet to obtain. The following is a part of a PST journal entry:

*What are you able to do (currently, as a student teacher)?*

Currently I can put together lessons, teach, and collaborate with teachers and peers in an effective manner.

*What are you able to do (currently, as a student teacher)?*

I am able to see how a classroom is run day to day. By going to schools and helping lead a classroom, I am able to learn far more than I could from a textbook. I'm able to see the ins and outs of a class and seek advice from current teachers.

This positive influence seemed to extend past the field experience as PSTs also realized the value of a strengths-based approach in other areas, such as in other coursework in the program. One PST reflected "You can navigate through different paths. If I balance my strength, I can learn to use that to balance my coursework." With this type of paradigm evolution, my own mindset continued to shift, away from deficit-thinking and more towards a strengths-based approach. As my journal notes reflected:

I feel good about what I'm doing. I feel as a supervisor, I am building these teachers up. I am helping them take what works and expanding upon that. I'm no longer the "bad guy," who causes them to flinch when I enter a classroom to observe.

## **Discussion**

During this self-study, I examined how pre-service teachers considered their strengths and studied how a strengths-based orientation impacted my own supervision practice. Self-study demands openness and vulnerability (Samaras & Freese, 2009), as the researcher must present failures and fears along with success; I have attempted to portray my experiences in their entirety. Prior to commenting on my findings, I will address several limitations in the study. First, the small sample size prevented me from generalizing my findings to other groups of PSTs. Also, collecting data from those who you work closely with can prove challenging, as the researcher may wonder whether he or she is "too close" to the data or whether participants are forthcoming with someone in an authoritative position. I strove to counter these limitations through diligently journaling my experiences and sharing them with critical friends to gain outside perspective.

Through this work, I recognized several ways I could assist the PSTs in identifying and developing their strengths during the fieldwork experience. Providing them with a variety of methods to explore their individual strengths generated reflection—whether through surveys, writing or drawing-- shifted their attention to the inner qualities that can help them be successful (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008) and respectfully acknowledging their strengths (Tschannen &

Tschannen, 2011) and present areas of competence. As a teacher educator, I realized that I would need a strengths-based discovery tool box if were to successfully coach PSTs to determine and use their abilities in the practicum. One method would simply not suffice, meaning, like a teacher instructing a classroom of diverse learners, I would have to better educate myself on various, differentiated strategies. For example, debriefing about strengths in seminar classes and individual conferences served as the social construction process (He, 2009), as well as the listening to their stories (McCashen, 2005) needed for the strengths-based coaching approach.

While more work needs to be done within this practice, infusing strength-based coaching into the observation process lent a practical component to helping PSTs set goals, highlight and mobilize strengths through a step-by-step plan, and review progress (McCashen, 2005). I now possessed a concrete method to help PSTs actualize strengths within internship experiences. This is particularly pertinent as it addresses arguments that strengths-coaching is simply positive thinking, ignoring problems, and without application (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014). While not ignoring areas for enhancement with the PSTs' practice, I was armed with a technique for regularly enforcing strengths in teaching. Like asking a PST to write about his or her instructional steps, assessment, or resources in a given lesson, I had a way to encourage student teachers to plan out the use of strengths and implement them. In the process, this positioned me, as Maslow (1971) asserted, so I didn't have to start from scratch with these PSTs; I could latch onto an agreed-upon strength, such as the ability to bond with children, and run with it when helping the PST plan and deliver instruction. For instance, rather than assume a from-the-bottom approach to managing classroom behavior, I could take this ability, connect to the skill of classroom management, and help the PST harness this quality. In addition, this stream-lined approach might help me condense my supervisory efforts and goals, thus, addressing my concern about a constant lack of time. Of course, caution must be used whenever asking emerging teachers to identify their strengths and current abilities, for instance, through QfW journaling exercises. As their supervisor, I must guide this critical reflection through questioning of assumptions and inherent bias, guarding candidates against underestimating their current abilities well as over-inflating them.

Finally, strengths-based coaching positively changed my beliefs and philosophy as an emerging teacher educator. The mere act of asking PSTs to discover their strengths as educators sparked in me the strengths-based appreciative mindset described by He (2009), setting the tone for a positive mentoring experience. Searching for ways to empower PSTs, this approach caused me to focus on what student teachers could do, to remember that something always works (Tschannen & Tschannen, 2011); as a supervisor, I can always build upon some strength already possessed by a PST. This newly gained perspective more closely resembled Maslow's (1971) musings on humanistic education, as I no longer viewed teacher candidates as lacking or having to be fixed but more as individuals who already possessed host of abilities, potentialities, and "raw materials," (p. 183), which I could work if I took the time to coach candidates and nurture in ways that build upon these elements.

In addition, this approach altered my language and the tone of conversations held during observation cycles. I shifted from deficit-based thinking and language to a more empowering vernacular and stance. This did not negate the fact that, at times, I needed to provide direct,

constructive feedback to candidates – addressing an area that failed to meet minimum competence under the program’s standards. However, when addressing, for instance, a shortcoming of a PST in the area of classroom management, I felt more confident as I could frame it in a way that the PST could use their strength to bridge this challenge rather than strictly discuss the shortcoming. Ultimately, I gained a more appreciative-strengths-based mindset. Table 2 is an attempt to chronologically trace my shift in mindset and practices:

**Table 2. Impact of strengths-based coaching on supervision mindset**

Enactment of Strengths-Based Coaching	Impact on Mindset/Practices
Reading about strengths-based practices as a possibility in supervision	Questioning of my own practice: Can there be a better, more positive way?
Asking candidates to list and discuss strengths during pre-conferences/interviews	Beginning to appreciate their strengths, formation of a strengths-based mindset; seeing what they can already do.
Encouraging students to illustrate and, as a group, further discuss their strengths.	Strengths-based mindset further solidifies; professional development time (seminar) not partly focused on the candidates’ abilities/natural talents as opposed to “fixing” their inabilities.
Following up with candidates, observing/seeking out use of their strengths during observed lesson and providing feedback.	Strengths-based coaching assumes a more practical position in my supervision-begin to see more value – though, I realize that more investigation and practice is needed.
Daily conversations with candidates, reflecting on my overall thinking (e.g. journal entries) of the impact of this approach.	Notice that my language with candidates and my own thinking gains more positivity.

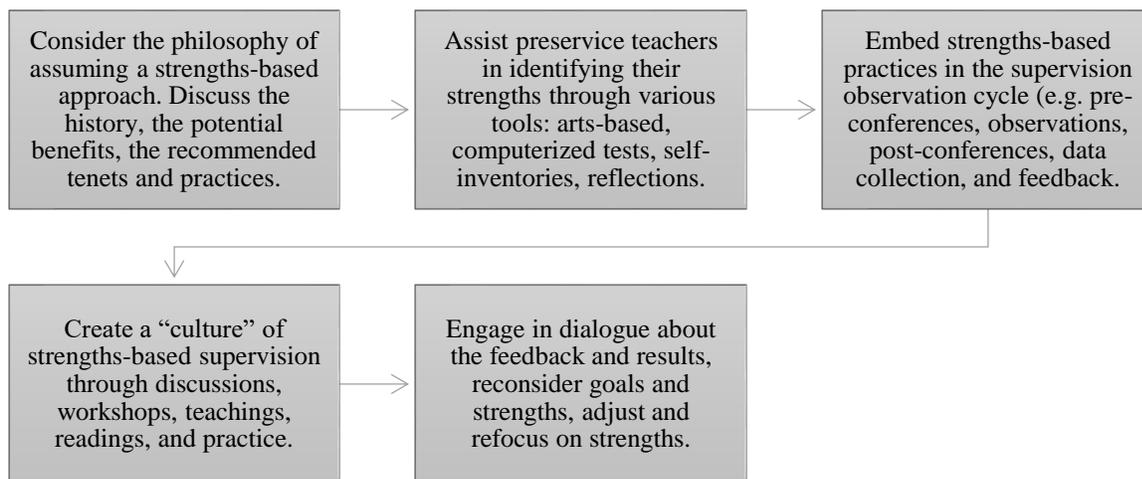
As the table above shows, each step in my enactment seemed to, at least on some level solidify my strengths-based mindset. It wasn’t always a straight path, as at times, I wondered if the strengths-based approach was practical enough or taking form in some way. However, the enactment, including simply collection data in various ways, appeared to have a cumulative effect on my psyche, at the least, creating more positivity towards my role.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Coupled with my renewed coaching stance, there must be a practical component. I worried about critics’ contentions about strength’s-based methods being time-consuming, or worse, merely positive thinking that ignores people’s problems (Fenton &McFarland-Piazza, 2014). By incorporating strengths as a viable categorical component in lesson plan development and the observation cycle, for instance, this orientation materialized. As a supervisor, I gained focus and

collected data and dispelled constructive feedback to teachers. For instance, I could say, “I noticed during the lesson you utilized your strength in the following ways; how can we expand upon this?” Embedding strengths within the observation cycle provided consistent, tangible discussion points and reflection, providing a practical vehicle to support McCashen’s (2005) stages of strengths-development, including listening and acting on strengths. At the request of my Critical Friend colleagues and hopes of contributing to the field of teacher education and supervision, I assembled my experiences into a series of steps or pathway that might be used by supervisors to guide preservice teachers in the development of strengths as noted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. A pathway to assuming a strengths-based stance in supervision**



The pathway outlines several suggestions for future research by teacher educators engaging in self-study and other scholars: 1) investigating additional tools, techniques and strategies to assist pre-service teachers in identifying and embracing their strengths 2) developing methods to create a “strengths-based” culture in practicum programs 3) examining ways to embed strength-based coaching in the observation cycle and regular practices of teacher educators 4) further exploring how embracing a strengths-based orientation influences teacher educators’ epistemological orientations.

This study informed my teacher educator practice and revealed how I might practically enact strengths-based coaching. Through problematizing my supervision practice I began to conceptualize how I might more effectively use my time. By having pre-service teachers explore strengths, establishing a strengths-based culture, and embedding field-based practices, my supervision can begin to “encourage language associated with strength, resiliency and success, thereby promoting positive expectations of the pupil concerned and encouraging her/him to assume a more positive view of herself/himself” (Wilding & Griffey, 2015, p.45). In this way, the shortcomings of the PST no longer dominated the discourse. Rather than play the role of the critical observer, who continuously chips away at teachers, like waves breaking down a large

stone in the ocean, I see myself as a builder, reminding these future educators that they already bring much to the classroom. Now, let's see how we can build upon that.

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