

Strengths-based Education Research and Resources

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Building on a Foundation of Strengths

by Donald B. Austin

Introduction

Students are faced with numerous challenges as they reach the high school level. Among these issues are declining levels of academic efficacy, expectancy, confidence, positive academic behaviors, and motivation. Intentionally developing existing strengths or talents may reverse these negative trends and equip students with the skills necessary to experience academic success. There is reason to believe that a strengths-based approach to education may provide the impetus to redirect self-belief systems in a positive and confident direction (Austin 2005), but more empirical scrutiny of strengths development is needed.

The staff of La Sierra High School in Riverside, California, identified freshman students as an area of focus due to a historic pattern of low achievement. Although initial conversations began with the typical attribution of poor academic achievement to poor foundation skills and a lack of parental involvement, the discussion transitioned into creative approaches to address the problem differently. It was clear that we might have been missing the opportunity to reinforce the “good” in students, while mistakenly directing the bulk of our efforts into remediating deficient skills. With this new point of emphasis in mind, we set out to create a program to help students soar with their strengths. We wanted to design a strengths-development program that positively affected the predictors of academic achievement. Further, we hoped to contribute quantitative and qualitative data that either supported or weakened the connection between strengths development and the predictors of academic achievement. This article is a description of a strengths-development program and the evaluation plan and results.

La Sierra High Freshman Seminar

The leadership at La Sierra High felt that there might be a different way to stimulate academic achievement. Perhaps, if students were able to attribute past successes to personal characteristics, such as strengths, they could make conscious decisions to approach future academic challenges through their talents. That would be a major shift from the self-handicapping behaviors high school students often display. Students equipped with confidence gained from the identification of character strengths might remain engaged longer in academic activities and deal better with the inevitable failures that are part of learning.

For the initial study, all incoming freshman students (N = 856) were enrolled in the new Freshman Seminar, which was divided into three six-week grading periods for each semester. Students were randomly assigned to one of three strands, although all students would eventually cycle through each component of the course. One strand would be devoted to meeting the requirements for the health standards. Another component would follow the study-skills strategies identified through the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. AVID was designed to help students make strides toward attending four-year universities. (La Sierra High School already was a National Demonstration School for AVID, so this strand allowed us the opportunity to expand the program to reach all students.) The final strand was designed to take advantage of the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder inventory. We referred to this strand as the StrengthsQuest component, named after the 2002 book written by Don Clifton and Chip Anderson. We hoped that the StrengthsQuest strand could help build a strong foundation with our freshman students and reverse the trend of declining expectancy, efficacy, motivation, self-perceptions, and confidence.

There was no high school curriculum for the StrengthsQuest strand, so we developed it around our purpose. We wanted students to feel more confident in their academic abilities as a result of developing their strengths. All activities were designed for students to identify, share, develop, and choose to use their five signature strength themes consciously in academic settings. We crossed our fingers and “jumped in.”

We initially needed to find two teachers to facilitate the StrengthsQuest strand. To run the program, we selected two on-campus teachers with outgoing personalities and the willingness to try something new. Both teachers went through the same steps we would later ask students to take, beginning with identifying their personal strengths through the StrengthsFinder inventory. As the process began, our teachers began to attach their previous successes to their identified strength themes (Onishi 2005). It became clear that it is energizing to realize good traits about yourself. We were on to something! Now it was just a

matter of making college-level StrengthsQuest activities developmentally appropriate for high schoolers. We began with outlines, maintaining our focus upon the purpose of the course.

The StrengthsQuest strand began with identifying strengths through the online StrengthsFinder inventory. The StrengthsFinder instrument was developed over thirty years of studying success in education and business. Themes are determined by calculating a mean of the intensity of self-reported descriptions of personal traits (Clifton and Anderson 2002).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder inventory (180 item pairs covering 34 themes) supplies respondents with insightful descriptions of strengths and talents. The descriptions are designed to explain characteristics that may contribute to successes in academic and social settings. For example, the signature strength theme of *Individualization* reads as follows:

Your Individualization theme leads you to be intrigued by the unique qualities of each person. You are impatient with generalizations or “types” because you don’t want to obscure what is special and distinct about each person. Instead, you focus on the differences between individuals. You instinctively observe each person’s style, each person’s motivation, how each thinks, and how each builds relationships. You hear the one-of-a-kind stories in each person’s life. This theme explains why you pick your friends just the right birthday gift, why you know that one person prefers praise in public and another detests it, and why you tailor your teaching style to accommodate one person’s need to be shown and another’s desire to “figure it out as I go.” Because you are such a keen observer of other people’s strengths, you can draw out the best in each person . . . you know instinctively that the secret to great teams is casting by individual strengths so that everyone can do a lot of what they do well. (Clifton and Anderson 2002, p. 58)

Students immediately became enamored of discovering positive traits about themselves. Most were almost giddy about the five paragraphs that shed light on their strengths and talents. The teachers quickly created notebooks for each student to store signature strength themes, and the discussion began. Students were asked to confirm their strengths by asking friends and family members if the five paragraphs were accurate.

Activities were designed to push students into using their strengths to accomplish academic tasks. Students were directed to approach academic tasks consciously through the lens of their strengths. Over time, students began coming to class with success stories from their most

challenging courses. The StrengthsQuest strand began moving in different, but appropriate, directions. The teachers and I communicated almost daily to monitor the progress of the course and to map out our next goals.

After only a couple of weeks several teachers with freshman classes began to ask questions about the StrengthsQuest class. They reported students having discussions about their strengths in their other courses. It was clear that students were interested in the concepts and sharing their strengths with others. More important, they were beginning to equate their academic successes with their strengths.

The Evaluation Plan and Results

All participants attended La Sierra High School in California. Participants were freshman students enrolled in a required Freshman Seminar course. The health strand acted as the control, or status quo, group since it represented the standard course a California student would typically have in the freshman year. Students were randomly assigned to sections of the control or StrengthsQuest groups. The StrengthsQuest group was reduced from 275 students to 255 after removing an English-Learner Sheltered Freshman Seminar class of 20 students due to substantial language barriers. The StrengthsQuest group consisted of 272 students. Chi-square tests were conducted to examine the equality of subgroup demographics between the StrengthsQuest and control groups, demonstrating no significant differences.

At the conclusion of the six-week course all students were given a survey designed to measure the key predictors of academic achievement identified through an extensive review of the literature. The students from the control group were measured against the StrengthsQuest group in academic expectancy, efficacy, motivation, positive academic behaviors, and self-perceptions of ability. The forty-four-question survey instrument, *Self-Perceptions of Academic Ability* (Austin 2005), utilized eight scales (Scale 1—Efficacy; Scale 2—Extrinsic Motivation; Scale 3—Self-Empowerment; Scale 4—Expectancy; Scale 5—Novelty; Scale 6—Personal Responsibility; Scale 7—Intrinsic Motivation; Scale 8—Self-Perception) designed to measure the degree to which students felt the statements described them individually. Questions were used with permission from the original Motivated Strategies for Learners Questionnaire (Pintrich et al. 1993) and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning instrument (Midgley et al. 2000). Scales were grouped through a factor analysis, with a mean score determined for each scale using a five-point Likert scale.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was used to compare the means between the control and treatment groups. Factorial ANOVA tests were used to compare the differences between the control and

StrengthsQuest groups through the moderator variables of ethnicity (White, Hispanic, and Other), gender, parental education level (high school graduate or more, less than high school graduate), and economic status (free or reduced lunch, not free or reduced lunch).

The results demonstrated that the six-week intervention produced increases in the self-perceptions of the strengths-intervention group in several areas at a statistically significant level. Students experienced benefits in academic efficacy, expectancy, positive academic behaviors, and extrinsic motivation. In fact, the StrengthsQuest group had statistically significant results in five of eight scales as shown in the following table.

| Title of Scale | StrengthsQuest Group | | | Control Group | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|
| | <u>M</u> | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u> | <u>SD</u> | <u>F</u> |
| Scale 1 - Efficacy | 4.35 | 0.55 | 4.00 | 0.91 | 27.515*** |
| Scale 2 - Extrinsic Motivation | 4.43 | 0.52 | 4.09 | 0.94 | 25.993*** |
| Scale 3 - Self-Empowerment | 3.71 | 0.98 | 3.45 | 0.96 | 9.021** |
| Scale 4 - Expectancy | 3.93 | 0.72 | 3.77 | 0.70 | 6.146* |
| Scale 5 - Novelty | 2.96 | 0.84 | 2.86 | 0.74 | 2.215 |
| Scale 6 - Personal Responsibility | 3.95 | 0.70 | 3.92 | 0.74 | 0.162 |
| Scale 7 - Intrinsic Motivation | 4.35 | 0.66 | 4.35 | 0.67 | 0.023 |
| Scale 8 - Self-Perception | 3.10 | 1.01 | 2.69 | 1.01 | 20.001*** |

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Discussion

Through comprehensive analysis of the data, we determined that a strengths-development intervention program may have a significant impact on the positive academic behavior of students. It is believed that as students gain understandings of their inherent talents, they better understand how previous successes were the result of strengths at play.

Students who are more willing to raise their hands and participate in activities are more likely to remain engaged and to experience academic successes. Students experiencing successes may feel more comfortable and may be less likely to quit an activity out of fear of failure. An increase in positive academic behavior is a reversal in the trend of declining confidence and engagement found in students as they transition into high school. Although the treatment period of six weeks is relatively short, there was a clear difference in self-reported positive academic behaviors in the strengths-development intervention program.

One clear finding from the study was the determination that academic-efficacy levels in the strengths-development intervention program were significantly higher than in the control group. The finding is especially encouraging for two reasons. First, the six-week intervention

produced significant results in a relatively short time. Next, academic-efficacy levels are usually set very early in life and remain the same or decline over time as students repeat failures (Covington 1984).

A post-study comparison of attendance rates for freshman students compared to the previous freshman class demonstrated a more impressive impact. The freshman class of 2003–2004 produced a positive average daily attendance rate of 93.79 percent for the first semester. The freshman class of 2004–2005 produced a positive attendance rate of 95.13 percent for the comparable time after all freshman students had experienced the strengths intervention. At current funding rates, a single day of positive attendance generates roughly \$26 for a school district. If the results are replicated, the trend would equate to an additional 7,236 days of school and \$188,136 in recovered money for a single year.

According to the administrative team at La Sierra High School, the 2004–2005 freshman students have demonstrated several beneficial effects of the strengths intervention. Conversations about strengths are now common. Discussions between troubled students and administrators often begin with the identification of strengths. Students have gained an increasingly powerful testimony of the power of positive psychology in every aspect of school life.

It is equally evident that the selection of teachers for the strengths-development intervention is crucial. The teachers must be positive, structured, and respected by their students. They must have a clear understanding of the ultimate goal and a focused plan to facilitate meaningful and insightful activities. The teachers should have a clear purpose for every activity planned for their students. They must be skilled communicators, and “safe” in the eyes of their students.

One story illustrates the power of a strengths-based program. La Sierra High School has a tradition of ending its schoolwide pep rallies with students in each section of the gym spelling out their respective class. A freshman cheerleader was hoisted by her peers to lead the cheer. She began, “Give me an F-R-E-H. . . .” There was a pause as she realized that she had left out a letter. Her face became flush and her head dropped. The crowd exploded with laughter and taunts as they noticed her mistake. She looked as if she wanted to crawl under a rock and hide forever.

Realizing this poor young lady was going to have a *very* bad day, I called her to my office. She walked in the door and burst into tears. After several minutes I was able to ask her what her strengths were. She said, “Woo” (shorthand for the “Winning Others Over” theme). I asked how her strength could help her get through the day. Her face lit up as she started putting together a plan to handle the situation through her strengths. She made it through the day because she realized there was something special about her that could trump her temporary blunder!

Further research should be conducted in the area of instructional strategies rooted in positive psychology. Future programs should be built upon the best practices of the pioneer teachers in the StrengthsQuest program. People in leadership positions may have to be taught how to look at common problems through the lens of a strengths-development program to address the changing needs of our students.

The long-term benefits of a strengths-development course are yet to be determined, although there is plenty of reason to be optimistic about the positive impact of a strengths approach with high school students. Quantitative data now support the belief that StrengthsQuest may affect the indicators of academic achievement. The next great idea is still out there, waiting to be discovered by someone with a great purpose and the confidence to take a chance. The possibilities are endless. We are at the beginning of a revolution . . . a strengths revolution!

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