Affective Teaching for Data Driven Learning: How Can Strengths-Based Training Support Urban Teacher Efficacy?

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The purpose of this study was to examine urban teachers' identified strengths in varied cognitive, affective, and psychological capacities, and their impact on self-efficacy and teacher practices. Clifton and Anderson in the Gallup Organization's StrengthsQuest (2004) presented compelling evidence suggesting a mind-set of 'what's right with me' and further 'what's right with others' can build excellence in future achievements, relationships, and other life experiences. This study compared the findings of Clifton and Anderson's research to that of P-12 inner city teachers' perceptions about the impact their top5 identified strengths had on improving the quality of education within their classrooms, using a mixed methods approach.

A unique challenge persists for teacher education programs in preparing committed, highly qualified teachers for high minority and high poverty inner-city urban schools. While maintaining the belief that all children can learn (Darling-Hammond, 1997) and that caring, competent, and qualified teachers should teach every child (NCATE, 2002), the vision for the preparation of the professional teacher of the 21st century is pivotal. As schools transition the workforce of yesterday into one that can apply knowledge, reason analytically, and solve problems, the primary objective of the full alignment of standards based teaching and learning is nearly accomplished. However, as teacher training focuses on student learning that includes basic skills along with the *cognitive* knowledge and skills necessary to succeed as responsible citizens and contributors of the new economy, components of teacher training must ensure teachers have gained clearly prescribed dispositions to *affectively* teach diverse communities of learners. A Strengths-Based approach can accomplish this well as, "Strengths are one of the most authentic aspects of personhood" (Clifton, and Anderson, 2004).

<h1 style="text-align:center">Theoretical Framework</h1>

In their book, *StrengthsQuest*, Clifton and Anderson (2004) describe a 'what's right with me' model and define a strength as the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity. The Gallup Organization's Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory was prescribed within this research as a personal lens through which P-12 urban school teachers within the greater Los Angeles area viewed their strengths and then determined the impact these have on their teaching practices and capacity to maximize student achievement as required by the California Standards of the Teaching Profession (CSTP). These six descriptive P-12 school teaching standards, to which every teacher aspires in the state, are measures of responsibility for formative and summative teacher observations and evaluations. The California Standards for the Teaching Profession are "based on current research and expert advice pertaining to best teaching practice" (CCTC, CDE, 1997, p. 3). The Standards are organized around six interrelated categories of teaching practice and are for:

- Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning
- Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning
- Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter for Student Learning
- Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students
- Assessing Student Learning
- Developing as a Professional Educator

Together these six standards represent a developmental, holistic view of teaching, and are intended to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students in California (CCTC, CDE, 1997).

<h2 style="text-align:center">The Language of Schools:
Teacher Practice</h2>

The application of methods of teaching students who are at different developmental stages, have different learning styles, and come from diverse backgrounds, is critical to student learning (Carroll, Fulton, Abercrombie, and Yoon, 2004). Through teacher standards, states provide a common language and a new vision of the scope and complexity of teaching that enables teachers to define and develop their practice. The challenge posed to teachers to achieve competency in each of the standards is unparalleled within the history of the American

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public educational system, particularly in the urban setting (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). As standards based teaching and learning address the needs of diverse communities in the nation's urban schools today, at no time in American schooling has the power of strengths-based urban teacher efficacy been more imperative.

Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy, defined by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (1998) is described as the judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated. Designated identities are those roles assumed positionally within an organizational structure usually cast within a job description. As the job descriptions of professional teachers have increased exponentially in the age of accountability, identity is a key component to the success of these educators, and there is no more effective model from which to understand their identity than one of strengths.

Teachers' strengths are imperative to their overall vision for educating children within urban settings. Carlos, a third grade English Language Learner (ELL) teacher shared:

> *...I am seeking out the strengths of my students and when appropriate, use this information to group students who have strengths that compliment each others. As a teacher, I know what areas that I teach well and areas I can call on for assistance. This is imperative to assist each student to be successful in my classroom.*

Strengths-based teacher efficacy brings about the desired outcome of student learning. Components of teacher training must ensure teachers have gained clearly prescribed dispositions to *affectively* teach diverse communities of learners, particularly as the unique challenge persists for the preparation of committed, highly qualified teachers for high minority and high poverty inner-city urban schools.

Method

Participants

This study examined the perceptions of urban P-12 public school teachers on the impact their top five identified strengths had on teacher efficacy within the school setting using a mixed method approach. One

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Hundred fifty-one P-12 urban public and/or private school teachers were randomly selected to respond to a questionnaire regarding their insights on the impact their top five identified strengths had on their teaching practices within the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area school learning environment. Seventy-eight male and seventy-three female urban school teachers responded, with levels of education ranging from one hundred twelve Master's plus degrees, twenty-one Masters, and eighteen Bachelors. Years served in urban teaching ranged from 3 – 12 with approximately fifty percent of respondents ranging in experience from 3-6 years. Data were quantitatively aggregated from the questionnaires and categories emerged from which focus group interview questions were designed. Subsequently, twenty-two respondents were randomly interviewed in six focus groups (Appendix A) of between three and six participants to determine their perceptions of the impact their strengths had on their own teacher efficacy within the urban P-12 public school setting.

Data collection procedures

Urban P-12 school teachers responded to the Gallup Organization's Clifton Strengths- Finder Inventory at www.gallup.org. The inventory required respondents to answer forty-five questions selecting from binary choices for each within 20 seconds. Upon completion of the inventory, Gallup returned the respondents top five identified strengths with an explanation for each.

Respondents to the StrengthsFinder Inventory were subsequently sampled by paper-pencil questionnaire, and/or within an online construct of the same, focusing on the impact their top five identified strengths had on their teaching capacity within the urban school learning environment. The questionnaire included the elements of: (1) a determination of gender, number of years and grade levels taught, number of years as an urban teacher, educational level, and identification of their top five strengths based on the Gallup StrengthsFinder Inventory; (2) a four element Likert scale to determine school teachers' perceptions regarding the frequency with which their strengths were evidenced within the classroom setting; (3) a four element Likert scale to determine school teachers' perceptions on the potential impact of strengths-based teaching in the educational setting; and (4) a qualitative section for additional comments about the influence of school teachers' Strengths within their teaching practices at their school.

Focus group interviews

Six focus group interviews were conducted averaging 1/2 hour in length. The focus groups consisted of three to six participants each. Interviews were taped and later transcribed by the author. From the data revealed through the surveys, respondents identified the following strengths-based areas of impact on teacher efficacy in urban P-12 schools: creating effective learning environments, communication with students, holistic vision of teaching, lesson planning, building community, valuing others' strengths, supporting all students in learning, assessing student learning, lesson delivery, developing as a professional, decision making, teacher efficacy, belief that all children can learn, class productivity, passion for teaching, professional relationships, teacher attitude, responsiveness to school community, adaptability, and motivating students. These data findings were categorized into three 'key findings' or primary effects of knowing one's strengths on teaching practice. They were:

1) a holistic vision of teaching was gained emphasizing the relationships between teaching and learning;
2) teachers' knowledge of students and valuing their strengths improved teachers' ability to engage and support all students in learning particularly by creating effective learning environments; and
3) the belief that all students can learn was strengthened. From these categories, three focus group interview questions (one for each finding) were designed to gather qualitative data within the guided interviews (Appendix A).

Data analysis

Calculations were initially summarized for 151 participants' top five identified strengths based on the StrengthsFinder Inventory and displayed within a frequency distribution as shown in Table 1. Achiever and Relator were identified as the top two strengths within the sample taken. Clifton and Anderson (2001) give the following definitions for these themes. "Achiever explains the drive and the power supply that causes your pace and defines the levels of productivity for your work group. You feel that everyday starts at zero. By the end of the day you must achieve something tangible in order to feel good about yourself. It is the theme that keeps you moving" (p.30). Relator is described

as, "You want to understand their feelings, their goals, their fears and their dreams" (p. 66). Clifton and Anderson (2001) state, "There is a direct connection between your strengths and your achievements. Your strengths empower you. They make it possible for you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential" (p. 6).

TABLE 1   *Frequency Distribution of Urban P-12 Teachers Identified Top Five Strengths*

Identified Strength	Total N	% of N = 151
Achiever	48	73
Relator	48	72
Learner	37	56
Communication	34	52
Harmony	33	50
Developer	28	48
Adaptability	25	43
Connectedness	24	36
Empathy	23	35
Includer	22	32
Input	19	29
Arranger	18	27
Individualization	15	22
Maximizer	14	21
Strategic	13	20
Belief	12	18
Competition	11	16
Deliberative	9	14
Focus	9	13
Ideation	7	11
Positivity	6	10
Activator	5	8
Analytical	5	7
Consistency	5	7
Context	4	6
Intellection	4	6
Responsibility	3	5
Restorative	3	4

Self-Assurance	2	3
Winning Others Over	2	3
Command	1	2
Discipline	1	2
Futuristic	0	0
Significance	0	0

Note. Identified Strengths represent 34 Strengths from StrengthsQuest, Gallup, 2004.

Data were then summarized by calculating descriptive statistics for each of the variables assessed in the survey recording the frequency (always, sometimes, rarely or never) with which P-12 urban teachers identified strengths-based areas of impact on teacher efficacy within their classroom settings. Focus group interviews followed to further interpret and analyze the three key findings which emerged from the surveys.

Twenty-two teachers participated in focus group interviews which were held in cluster locations designed to be geographically closest to the majority of interviewees. Each of the twenty-two was assigned a number on a schematic for each group. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and qualitative data were coded as themes emerged. These themes revealed congruence to the three primary questionnaire findings of knowing one's strengths on teaching practice, while deepening the researcher's understanding of the impact of knowing one's strengths on urban teacher efficacy.
Aligned to the belief that all children can learn theme, Elizabeth expressed:

> *I feel I have gained a deep level of self knowledge*
> *which transfers to the understanding of my students. I*
> *see their strengths now. Students come to us with all*
> *of their uniqueness and we temporarily place them in*
> *boxes of expected achievement. If we know how they*
> *learn, we can teach them where they are.*

Pat shared, regarding his increased holistic vision of teaching:
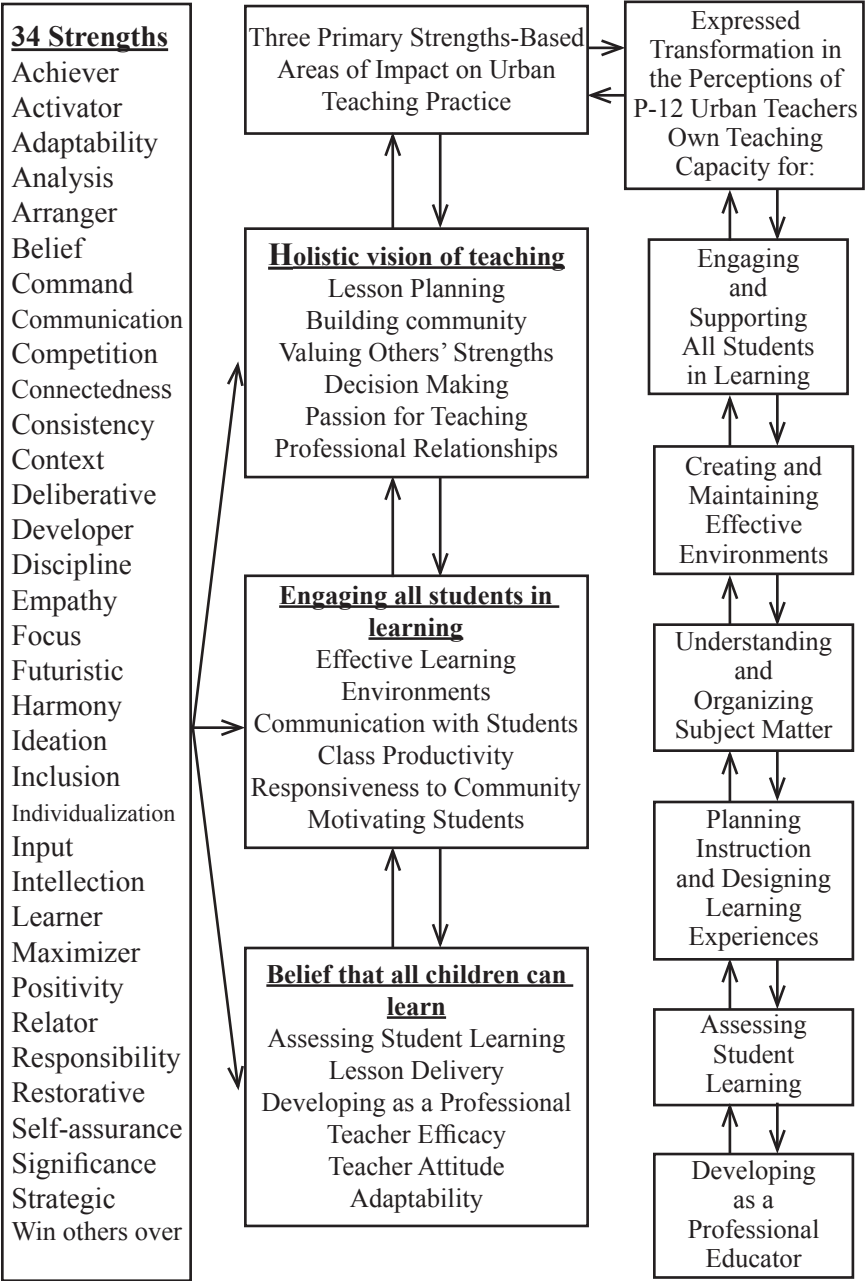
> *Before I became knowledgeable about my strengths,*
> *I always wondered why I taught the way I taught and*
> *interacted with people as I do. Now, I am so pleased to*
> *understand why I do the things the way I do, as well as*

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*why I tackle situations in certain ways. I understand
my purpose in education. I hope to continue to grow
in the knowledge of my strengths, as well as to affirm
my strengths to become a more efficient and stronger
leader at my school.*

Results

From the questionnaires and interview transcripts, three
primary areas of teaching practice were impacted by teachers
knowing their strengths as identified and displayed in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 *The Impact of Identified Strengths on Urban School Teaching Practice*

34 Strengths
Achiever
Activator
Adaptability
Analysis
Arranger
Belief
Command
Communication
Competition
Connectedness
Consistency
Context
Deliberative
Developer
Discipline
Empathy
Focus
Futuristic
Harmony
Ideation
Inclusion
Individualization
Input
Intellection
Learner
Maximizer
Positivity
Relator
Responsibility
Restorative
Self-assurance
Significance
Strategic
Win others over

Three Primary Strengths-Based Areas of Impact on Urban Teaching Practice

Expressed Transformation in the Perceptions of P-12 Urban Teachers Own Teaching Capacity for:

Holistic vision of teaching
Lesson Planning
Building community
Valuing Others' Strengths
Decision Making
Passion for Teaching
Professional Relationships

Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning

Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments

Engaging all students in learning
Effective Learning Environments
Communication with Students
Class Productivity
Responsiveness to Community
Motivating Students

Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter

Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences

Belief that all children can learn
Assessing Student Learning
Lesson Delivery
Developing as a Professional
Teacher Efficacy
Teacher Attitude
Adaptability

Assessing Student Learning

Developing as a Professional Educator

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Qualitative data from transcripts revealed the three primary findings with additional indicators as follows: 1) a holistic vision of teaching was gained emphasizing the relationships between the various aspects of teaching and learning to include lesson planning, building community, valuing others' strengths, decision making, passion for teaching and professional relationships; 2) teachers' knowledge of students and valuing their strengths improved teachers' ability to engage and support all students in learning particularly by creating effective learning environments through communication with students, class productivity, responsiveness to community, and motivating students; and 3) the belief that all students can learn was strengthened, particularly in the areas of assessing student learning, lesson delivery, developing as a professional, teacher efficacy, teacher attitude, and adaptability.

Qualitative data were initially gathered in the comment section of the questionnaire and revealed congruence with both the quantitative findings of the instrument in addition to the qualitative findings within six focus group interviews. Each of the six focus groups gleaned consistent response data across interviews for the three questions posed. Within focus group one, five teachers, three with Master's degrees (Carlos, Thomas, and Pat), and two with Bachelors degrees (Elizabeth and Kelli) reported that taking the StrengthsFinder inventory and learning their strengths helped to reinforce and define them as teachers. Aligned to the theme of engaging all students in learning, Carlos, a third grade English Language Learner (ELL) teacher, shared:

Completing the StrengthsFinder survey reinforced and
helped define what my strengths are. I did find that there's
a strong connection between my strengths and my teaching
style…especially regarding relationship building. I believe
that identifying my strengths helps me to better prepare
myself in working with students and staff.

When asked to describe the relationship between knowing their strengths and creating effective learning environments for students, respondents expressed enthusiasm for the connection they've gained particularly through differentiated instruction. Thomas, a 6th grade teacher said:

Strengths-based teaching helps teachers know their
areas of effectiveness and sheds light on what needs to be
improved particularly in the area of student achievement.

*We need to take this to our communities because knowing
what they're good at helps teachers, parents, and students
understand themselves. Students should know their
strengths so they can enhance them to become successful.*

Discussion

Holistic vision of teaching

The preparation of teachers for urban settings with diverse populations is complex in that it requires a transformation of traditional concepts of knowing and pedagogy (Dipietor and Walker, 2005; Freire, 1970; Haberman, 2004). Given the challenges of urban teacher preparation, scholars continue to question what it means to effectively prepare teachers for their work in urban schools (Leland & Harste 2004; Singer, 1996). Concerns regarding teacher quality stem from accountability measures which have increased pressure on schools and districts to increase student achievement. This pressure is particularly observable in low-performing schools, where low-income and minority students are those most likely to be taught by under qualified and inexperienced teachers (Costelloe, 2007).

Respondents to the Strengths questionnaire and focus group interviews hold that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions with which an educator approaches the teaching profession collectively create an overall vision of learning for students. Each was impacted significantly through the knowledge they gained from the StrengthsFinder Inventory. Allyson, a special education teacher described:

*I think Strengths-based teaching has helped me improve
how students learn because I'm able to focus on what
I'm good at as a teacher and then I'm able to deliver that
through my instruction so my students will have a clearer
or better understanding.*

Stephen, a program specialist for students with moderate to severe disabilities described:

*For me it's the philosophy of really focusing on people's
strengths and building upon those and using those in
the organization to further student learning. I think
sometimes, especially in an evaluation, we tend to look at
what the person isn't doing and we really focus in on that
and we develop a plan on how to improve that and they*

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may never be good at some of those things. Really focusing in on strengths and improving those makes for a more positive environment.

Engaging and supporting all students in learning

Affectively, urban teachers need "specialized knowledge of the lives and learning styles of the urban child, first-hand experiences in urban schools, and an understanding of the community from which the child comes" (Reed, & Simon, 1991, p.30-35). To effectively engage and support all students in learning, factors such as caring and connectedness to community, sensitivity to diversity, and commitment to teaching are imperative for their success (Root, 1997; Root, S., 1997).

Respondents identified engaging and supporting all students in learning (the first professional standard for California's public school teachers), as being significantly improved through knowing their strengths. Kaleb, a 6th grade English Language Development teacher noted:

> *I think we all come from some educational theory that defines multiple intelligences. The Strengthsfinder allows us to focus on what students can do. We can capitalize on what students are strong at already and in doing so this allows us to tie in curricular components that bring student success. How we employ these strengths and skills assists us in improving the quality of instruction in our classroom.*

Belief that all students can learn

A teacher's sense of efficacy has been defined as "the extent to which a teacher believes that he or she has the capacity to affect student learning" (Ashton, Buhr, & Crocker, 1984, p. 29-41). Teachers with a greater degree of efficacy believe that their efforts and expertise will have more impact on student learning than such external variables as parental support, class size, student motivation, and student socioeconomic background (Smylie, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989). These teachers (1) believe that student learning can be influenced by effective teaching, (2) exhibit greater confidence in their own teaching abilities, (3) tend to persist longer, (4) provide greater academic focus in the classroom, and (5) use different types of feedback than teachers with a

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low sense of efficacy (Peterson, 1994).

Bandura (1977) defines efficacy as an intellectual activity by which one forges one's beliefs about his or her ability to achieve a certain level of accomplishment. A teacher with high self-efficacy tends to exhibit greater levels of enthusiasm, be more open to new ideas, more willing to try a variety of methods to better meet the needs of their students, and more devoted to teaching. And they tend to be less judgmental of students and work longer with a student who is struggling (Saffold, 2005).

Implications and Conclusions

Six California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP) prescribed statewide, espouse the ideal behavioral practices for effective teaching. As schools are required to meet state and federal mandates of "academic performance indicators" (API) and "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for all subgroups of students (i.e., economically disadvantaged, English language learners, students in major racial and ethnic groups, and students with disabilities), standards-based teaching and learning are particularly critical to achieving these goals.

Through more than 2 million in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life, The Gallup Organization has made a finding that is simple but profound: top achievers in virtually every profession, career, and field all build their lives upon their talents (Clifton and Anderson, 2004). It is recommended university teacher preparation programs, urban districts, school leaders, designers of curriculum, and instructional experts empower urban school teachers within a Strengths-based model, to ensure school communities will be well on their way to the critical process of the pursuit of excellence.

While maintaining the belief that all children can learn (Darling-Hammond, 1997) and that caring, competent, and qualified teachers should teach every child (NCATE, 2002) the vision for the preparation of the professional teacher of the 21st century remains pivotal. A truly student-centered approach to schooling, which includes the *affective* domain, is critically called for as we teach the whole child. Through the identification and recognition of urban teachers' strengths, student learning is positively affected. For higher education, as the unique challenge persists for teacher education programs to prepare committed, highly qualified teachers for high minority and high poverty inner-city urban schools, a Strengths-based approach is recommended.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group Interview Protocol: Strengths-Based Training and Urban Teacher Efficacy (For this analysis, data were drawn from responses to the following focus group interview questions excerpted from data on the P-12 urban teacher questionnaire, Urban Teacher Strengths and Teacher Efficacy):

1. How has Strengths-Based teaching helped you improve how students learn?
2. Describe the relationship between knowing your strengths and creating effective learning environments for students.
3. The belief that all students can learn is an important disposition for teachers. How has knowing your Strengths assisted in the acquisition or refinement of this disposition for you?