

## **Creating Visionaries Through Positive Leadership: Shifting Educational Paradigms Toward Strengths**

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### **Abstract**

Elements of strength-based pedagogy are evident in current practices being implemented in Canadian schools as well as internationally. Classroom teachers appreciate the importance of creating a positive learning environment for students where the latter feel a sense of belonging, choice, and self-efficacy toward their learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Rickabaugh, 2016). While many educators apply such practices at the classroom level, strength-focused pedagogies can be organized through the conceptualization of a unifying framework. Building on research which proposed a dual-dimensional approach to student support services, this article explores the role of school leadership in shifting a school's culture toward one that values, identifies, and leverages the strengths of students and educators to promote flourishing within their schools. Employing an Appreciative Inquiry action research design (Cooperrider et al., 2000; Stowell, 2012) to engage research participants, this study used Keyes' (2002) dual-dimensional model as a lens through which to investigate the application of strength-based concepts and practices within school and classroom settings.

*Keywords:* strength-based, appreciative inquiry, school leadership, positive leadership, flourishing

### **Introduction**

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger study that was conducted in New Brunswick, Canada. The researcher investigated the application of strength-based practices within a dual-dimensional model to inclusionary student learning. Current educational practices, particularly approaches that provide support and intervention to students who experience difficulty in their academic or personal development, follow a deficit-oriented approach to viewing and remediating students' challenges. Recent perspectives of positive education research (Abawi, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Morrison & Peterson, 2013) identify the need to move beyond the more traditional and arguably deficit-based models of student learning. Such a move would emphasize students' existing strengths and abilities and take their lived experience into consideration (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). The strength-based perspective operates under the assumption that everyone has strengths, even if they do not fall under the scope of conventional knowledge, capacities, and resources more traditionally valued in education (Saleebey, 2006). The strengths approach also situates the perspective that by leveraging students' strengths, the students can experience a better learning program and quality of life that will support their achievement across multiple domains of their lives (Anderson, 2005; Saleebey, 2001).

Research has shown the various ways in which the application of students' strengths can assist their learning (Proyer et al., 2015; Quinlan et al., 2012; Shoshani & Slone, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2012), including improved student achievement and well-being (Seligman et al., 2009). However, the application of

strength-based practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings has been inconsistent due to a lack of clarity regarding the specific processes, strategies, and activities that can be used to promote the initial awareness and subsequent development of strengths in students (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Quinlan et al., 2015). The findings from this study identified the crucial role that school leaders play in developing a school's culture and adopting a school vision with practices that align themselves with the strength-based perspective. Such positive leadership methods are practices that can propel such initiatives into practice (Murphy & Louis, 2018). The literature reviewed in this article explores the emergent field of positive education and positive leadership as well as strength-based perspectives. Educators applying the principles of these approaches can promote the creation of positive learning environments, through shifts in mindsets that begin to value and leverage individuals' strengths, grounded in practices that support the autonomy of educators within the school system. Following the research phases of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) research design, the findings of this study will be shared and discussed as they relate to the importance of positive leadership in shifting a school's culture toward one that values and leverages the strengths of both its students and educators.

## Literature Review

Positive education is a relatively new movement that draws from research on positive psychology, where educators apply practices to enhance students' well-being and engagement to support their growth and learning in the context of their school setting (White & Murray, 2015). Adopting a whole-school approach to positive education can be extended to improve the well-being of all individuals within a school (Kern et al., 2015). Such an approach will require the adoption of positive leadership practices, which Cameron (2008) defined as "promoting outcomes such as thriving at work, interpersonal flourishing, virtuous behaviors, positive emotions, and energizing networks" (p. 4). Leaders within schools are in a position to nurture others' well-being, with the potential to develop a school culture that promotes the well-being of all members of the school community (Cherkowski, 2018). Positive leadership practices in schools have been shown to improve teachers' effectiveness, reduce stress, lead to more positive learning environments, and increase student and teacher learning (Murphy & Louis, 2018).

Research on strength-based perspectives has increased. This move from a primarily problem-focused approach to one that centres on student learning and school operations depicts a more strength-focused and empowering view of supporting students and educators, drawing on their strengths, interests, preferences, and motivations (Abawi, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Williamson & Gilham, 2017). Brownlee et al. (2012) asserted that the strength-based paradigm:

...is based on the idea that everyone has strengths and that everyone has the potential to use these strengths to achieve personal goals. The strengths perspective also includes the assumption that by using their strengths students can achieve a better quality of life. (p. 3)

Through the lens of positive school leadership, the intentional actions of school leaders can address concerns related to school management while honoring and supporting the work of all members of the school community (Murphy & Louis, 2018). Such practices include establishing positive learning environments, valuing and mobilizing individuals' strengths, and promoting flourishing through autonomy-supportive approaches to leadership.

## *Positive Learning Environments*

According to Calp (2020), "education engenders confidence; confidence generates hope, and hope brings peace" (p. 312). Positive relationships are at the core of flourishing schools (Cherkowski, 2018) and positive school leadership methods (Murphy & Louis, 2018). Calp (2020) described the process of establishing positive learning environments as facilitating happiness among students, educators, and support staff. Such environments speak to the quality and character of school life. A school's culture represents the school community members' values, beliefs, and attitudes that guide the interactions between students, teachers, and administrators. School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping a school culture that emphasizes strengths. For such change to be successful and sustained, positive teacher perception and buy-in is crucial. Educators will be engaged and motivated to implement an initiative if they have a clear

understanding and belief in its importance. Dove et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of school leadership in promoting such a paradigm or a shared vision among educators. They contend that this can be achieved through team-building processes and collaborative exchanges.

### *Valuing and Leveraging Individuals' Strengths*

Schaap (2019) found that school leaders operating within a strength-based leadership approach emphasize developing educators' potential by leveraging their strengths. School leaders should intentionally seek to recognize, promote, develop, and mobilize individual educator talents and craft understanding. Roffey (2012) found that when leaders recognize the inherent strengths of teachers in their schools, the teachers respond positively. Other studies have shown how the adoption of strength-based approaches in a school or a workplace can promote well-being among teachers and staff (Cherkowski, 2018; Hone et al., 2015; Murphy & Louis, 2018). Cherkowski (2018) described how a strength-based focus can facilitate collaboration and improve teaching practices for leaders within a positive leadership paradigm. Such results can have a positive impact on the teachers' efficacy, the students' learning, and a school's culture.

### *Autonomy-Supportive Leadership Practices*

A key dimension of school leadership is guiding teachers' learning and development (Robinson, 2011). This leads to increased teacher support and engagement (Cameron et al., 2007; Leithwood, 2006) as well as improved student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). Support is another feature of positive leadership that both educators and students can experience. Educators need to feel that school administrators and other educators on staff support them. Harris and Muijs (2005) asserted that when teachers operate within a school climate that supports their autonomy, they develop a greater sense of agency and the confidence to undertake new or innovative instructional practices. Kaur et al. (2020) contended that within an autonomy-supportive school culture, a school leader must be willing to reassess their level of power and authority within the school and adopt practices that allow *freedom, choice, and innovation* among the educators in their school. Educators should have the autonomy to implement new approaches and processes in their classroom, knowing that their school administrators and colleagues fully support them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study as it explored how cultures and environments can support and hinder individuals' motivation. Deci et al. (1985) theorized that an individual's proper motivation is influenced by the fulfillment of three psychological well-being needs: relatedness, competency, and autonomy support. Relatedness refers to an individual's sense of belonging and connection with others in social organizational contexts. Competence describes an individual's sense of accomplishment and self-worth over one's personal contributions when their gifts, abilities, strengths, achievements, and contributions are recognized (Deci & Moller, 2005). Autonomy support refers to an individual's sense of control and agency over decision-making processes that provide space for voice, choice, and collaboration. SDT defines these needs as universal and essential for optimal human development and flourishing (Morrison & Peterson, 2013). To that end, this theory presupposes that if any or all of these three factors are not supported within an individual's environment, the individual's sense of well-being and motivation will be adversely affected.

## **Methodology**

This study employed an AI research design. AI serves to facilitate positive change in an organization and inform practice through research. The research design of AI is one where collaboration is crucial to success. The AI model consists of four phases that guide the research toward the development of practices and processes to enact positive and sustainable change within the organization being studied: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In the Discovery phase, the processes and practices that are working well in a system are described. Shuayb (2014) noted that the Discovery phase is the exploration of *what is* within an organization. In the Dream phase, the participants envision *what could be* if current practices were refined without considering financial or systemic restraints. In the Design phase, the participants, guided by the researchers, collaboratively decide which of the elements

identified in the Dream phase should be prioritized in designing a plan to enact positive change within their organization. According to Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2014), the Design phase is when the participants, or members of an organization, identify elements that *should be*. In the Destiny phase, the participants determine a plan to implement change based on the practices and processes developed during the Design phase.

The researcher purposively sampled educators from school, district, and departmental levels as they have been identified as leaders and influencers in developing and applying strength-based concepts and practices within school and classroom settings. The first three AI phases guided data collection. In the Discovery phase, data were collected through individual interviews with 10 educators. Building on the Discovery phase, data collection in the Dream phase and the Design phase involved focus groups with eight of the participants from the previous phase. These focus groups were conducted to reframe identified challenges and explore potential applications related to strength-based approaches as well as to determine potential directions for the adoption of a more integrated strength-based paradigm in schools.

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data collected during the first three phases. Following an in-depth reading of all transcribed data from the individual interviews and focus groups, “meaningful units” of text were identified and assigned a code (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). In qualitative research, a *code* is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” for a portion of data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). The codes were then clustered into emerging categories, allowing for the identification and construction of common themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2016).

## Results

### *Discovery*

In the Discovery phase interviews, the participants described the important role that school leadership and administration play in establishing the proposed strength-based culture throughout a school. School leadership that prioritizes students’ learning, development, and well-being provides the conditions that are conducive for a more strength-based approach to take root. This begins by clearly presenting and modelling strength-based perspectives and practices, which can help others develop a more strength-based mindset.

The participants who had been, or continue to be, in leadership roles within the school system shared many of the approaches they had taken to ensure a strength-based approach in the daily operations of their respective schools. Participants expressed the need for all educators at all levels of the system to shift their mindset to one that considers and applies a more strength-based approach to student learning. According to them, this would ensure that the students’ holistic needs are being met. For this to occur, the participants shared that there must be an indisputable belief that every individual has strengths and that through integrating these strengths and interests, regardless of their challenges, students will become more engaged in the learning process. This notion can be extended to include identifying and amplifying the strengths of educators and other support staff within schools. As one participant stated, “If you find great teachers, great schools, it’s up to the leadership to elevate them.”

According to one participant, school leaders should prioritize promoting strengths among students and staff, adding, “We have to learn to scale up good teaching.” Educators who hold leadership roles within schools have a privileged vantage point through their position to first identify, then develop, and finally promote the diverse strengths of the individuals who make up their educational staff. This type of strength-based environment will only enhance the learning that occurs within the school. As one participant articulated in their statement, “If you have a school full of unicorns, can you imagine what you could do? Why don’t we have a whole herd of them?”

The schools that participants identified as having exemplary strength-based practices already in place had one crucial element in common: the mindset and priorities of each school’s administrative team. For any new approach to be accepted, integrated, and embedded in everyday practice within a learning environment, educators and other stakeholders within an educational community need to have a clear understanding of these principles. Hence, those in leadership positions must promote such concepts as identified priorities of the school. One participant explained that such culture can be established

and sustained by developing a *shared vision* for the school. Another participant described such vision as clarifying that it is “the way we do business.” Once this vision is firmly established, further efforts can then be put in place to encourage similar shifts in practice.

The participants collectively stated the need for leaders to model autonomy-supportive practices among their staff. Shifting a school’s culture, by pursuing a consistent school vision, requires support and buy-in of the entire staff. Moreover, the participants believe that school leaders need to model the expected strength-based language, behaviours, and practices that they are promoting among the educators within their buildings. One participant noted:

That means as a principal you do that with your teachers as well. You have to model it. You can’t want that for the kids and when a teacher tries something new and wants to talk to you about it have another behaviour.

School administrators who model strength-based language and practices within the halls of their schools promote the proposed shift throughout their school’s culture, validating its effect on learner and educator engagement, motivation, and well-being.

### *Dream*

At the onset of the Dream phase, the participants noted that leadership in the context of schools often limits the scope to include only those who are members of school administration teams. The focus group discussions highlighted the need to redefine the term *leadership* to broaden its scope, distinguishing between the title of leaders and visionaries. Several participants indicated that the notion of *leader* should be broader in the context of this research and in addressing the promotion of strength-based practices within inclusionary educational environments. School leaders can encompass a range of staff members, including educators, student services personnel, and even students who might play a pivotal role in promoting a strength-based paradigm or mindset within their respective educational settings.

The idea of waiting for administrators to take action related to promoting strength-based approaches was challenged through questions such as “Do we have to wait for a leader?”, “If there’s no leader does that mean change can’t be accomplished?”, “Am I a leader?”, and “Are you ready to be a leader?” Another participant, a school principal, spoke of the importance of prioritizing a collective school vision. This entails, in part, fostering a school culture which supports its members to emerge as visionaries. Hence, creating a *culture of visionaries* involves fostering the capacities and confidence of all its community members and stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, and students alike can be visionary leaders within their school, sharing their stories of success in terms of their experiences and practices and collaboratively co-constructing a way forward for their school’s culture.

In defining the role of a school leader, the participants highlighted the importance of creating a culture that enables all stakeholders to take on a leadership role within their areas of strength and expertise. Principals, classroom teachers, and students all have the capacity to be leaders within their school. Collectively, the participants asserted that the term *visionary* was more accurate and impactful than *leaders* in describing potential agents of change related to promoting strength-based perspectives and practices within inclusionary educational settings.

The participants urged for a more collaborative relationship between school administrators and educators that was less *controlling* and that reflected a more structured approach to providing *autonomy support*. Collectively, the participants agreed that school administrators and educators need to work collaboratively. According to them, educators need to know that they have the autonomy to implement new strength-based approaches and processes in their classroom without fearing reproach and that their school administrators and colleagues fully support them.

### *Design*

Shifts in roles were viewed as largely coinciding with individual shifts in thinking related to the relevance and importance of strength-based practices and perspectives in daily educational practices and routines. The participants shared that strengthening a paradigm requires educators within the system to navigate their own preconceived beliefs and traditional practices toward an understanding of the strength-based

paradigm that is being presented. One participant highlighted that simply implementing new practices or strategies within individual classroom or school contexts is not enough, adding that educators need to fully embrace the strength-based mindset and recognize its role in enhancing students' learning and personal development. Collaborating with educators in shifting a paradigm was viewed as beneficial in terms of *teachers developing their own strengths* and *shared vision* in lieu of driving people to make changes based solely on empirical evidence, departmental mandates, or convincing arguments.

The development of a shared vision includes having a clear understanding of students' strengths and requires the belief that placing value on individuals' strengths can positively impact the lives of students and the shaping of their learning experiences. The participants emphasized the need for clear and consistent messages associated with sharing a strength-based vision for a school. Such messages will foster understanding of strength-based perspectives as well as the expected and non-negotiable nature of student strengths and strength-focused practices in learning. Committing to this kind of vision facilitates a unified approach among stakeholders and a dedicated professional practice focus for pursuing systemic change. The participants also articulated that beyond having a clearly communicated vision of change, time for professional collaboration and dialogue needs to be prioritized in daily school scheduling. Together, through communication and the negotiation of various perspectives, educators are better able to co-create meaning and understanding of the suggested strength-based paradigm, successfully shifting toward a mindset conducive to implementing and integrating such concepts and approaches.

## Discussion

### *Discovery*

When strengths are introduced into educational conversations and planning activities, key conditions for fostering learning are clarified. This provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of instructional techniques and support practices being applied within a school because other relevant features of learning, such as students' sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation and engagement, and well-being, are taken into account (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Seligman, 2011). The individual interviews emphasized administrative teams and their role in mobilizing and adopting a strength-based mindset and applying associated practices within schools.

According to the participants, creating both a shared vision for strengths and leveraging educators' strength experiences and successes are the initial efforts needed to promptly raise awareness on the relevance of strengths and of promoting the gradual application of strength-based perspectives in schools. Dove et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of school leadership in promoting a common vision or paradigm among educators by implementing team-building processes and collaborative exchanges. The participants viewed collaborative co-construction of a clear vision for the school staff as pivotal for introducing, promoting, and embedding strength-based perspectives and practices within their respective school cultures. A school's culture is enhanced when:

...teachers collaborate in maintaining continuous school improvement activities, build an organisational structure that can help to support each other, can talk in detail about the problems in education and work as a group to improve the performance of the individuals and school. (Yusof et al., 2016, p. 275)

In pursuing a greater emphasis on strengths, the participants also asserted the viability of leveraging the experiences and successes of educators who are already immersed in strength-focused perspectives and practices. The promotion of strengths across a school's culture can be enhanced by bringing together and engaging the potential of "an amazing team of teachers," as shared by one of the participants, or collective with a common passion and expertise in applying strengths (Neumann et al., 2012).

### *Dream*

There is a clear need to reframe the perceived role and title of leaders in schools, moving away from the traditional notions of leadership to creating a *culture of visionaries* who feel empowered to enact change within their inclusionary education settings. This mindset of creating a culture of visionaries who are

motivated by applying their own strengths aligns directly with the principles of the strength-based approach. Yusof et al. (2016) noted that teacher leadership can potentially transform a school's culture and its approach to student learning. Through a transformational lens of leadership, leaders are identified for their commitment to working toward the achievement of a goal, leading their entire organization toward excellence (Leithwood, 2006). Such efforts provide a degree of autonomy support within the work environment, motivating colleagues to be confident in trying something new.

Lynch (2014) highlighted school leaders' *pivotal responsibility* in prioritizing time and providing the necessary conditions for the development of professional learning communities in which coaching and mentoring can occur. One participant in the role of school administrator emphasized the importance of "understanding your role in supporting, facilitating, and mentoring your teachers." Modelling and mentoring strategies within schools are often structured and sustained processes between colleagues. They are implemented to support professional learning as well as to promote the collaborative development of new practices and approaches in professional practice. Lynch (2014) argued that mentoring should entail a more holistic approach in which learning considers "the whole of an individual's relationship to work and their ability to thrive within it rather than the transmission of a limited set of skills, important as these may be in some circumstances" (p. 142).

Harris and Muijs (2005) asserted that when teachers are provided with autonomy support, they embrace a greater sense of agency. This gives them the confidence they need to undertake new or innovative instructional practices that have the potential to positively shape their students' learning experiences (Harris and Muijs, 2005). When administrators provide educators with autonomy support, they are in essence walking alongside educators, accompanying them on their journey of learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As professional accompaniment is modelled in professional relationships, educators also accompany their students on their own learning journeys—exploring, drawing out, and engaging the students' strengths through autonomy-supportive methods (Haerens, n.d.). The participants' description of the process of deep change underscored the importance of a participatory process. In this process, the educators' time and effort will be dedicated to envisioning, expanding actions, and experiencing the realization of strength-based methods within classrooms and schools.

## Design

The participants shared that such a shift in paradigm will change how different stakeholders in the field of education will approach their roles. While educators are traditionally viewed as *instructors*, *experts*, and *authorities* within classroom settings, the participants noted that in a strength-based approach to learning, such roles will shift. This shift will allow educators to take on the roles of *collaborator*, *coach*, and *guide*. While the traditional roles of school leadership highlight the imposed hierarchy in schools, denoting principals as the *authority* and *power*, such shift in mindset will emphasize school leaders' ability to recognize and value individual strengths. According to Schaap (2019), school leadership roles operating within a strength-based approach emphasize developing the potential of educators by leveraging their strengths. Rather than taking a managerial approach aimed at changing or fixing instructional practices and structures, a strength-based approach to school leadership will focus on promoting the educators' growth, development, and flourishing through the use of autonomy-supportive methods (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Schaap (2019) asserted that school leaders should intentionally seek to recognize, promote, develop, and deploy educator talents, gifts, and strengths. Former leadership practices such as *managing* will shift toward *coaching* and *mentoring*.

Five aspects in the study were highlighted as essential in developing a clear and shared strength-based vision: (a) an awareness of student and educator strengths, (b) an understanding of the relevance of strengths in relation to learning and engagement, (c) an emphasis on relatedness (connection) in classroom and school interactions, (d) a recognition that when strengths are mobilized learners feel more connected and motivated to learn, and (e) a commitment to autonomy-supportive educational methods that foster creativity and innovation in learning and developing learning strategies.

Individuals need to possess a sense of strength awareness, knowing what their strengths are and how to apply them to their daily lives. Within a school community, educators must not only believe in the strengths of their students but also intentionally guide the exploration and development of their strengths and interests. Once a student's interest has been identified, that is the *hook* needed to engage them more

authentically in their learning. When students are taught in consideration of their strengths, growth and change will inevitably occur (Alberta Mentoring Partnership, 2013; McCashen, 2005; Province of New Brunswick, 2016). Within a strength-based school vision, time must be properly invested in building respectful relationships of trust and understanding with students to enhance their sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Such positive connections provide the basis for exploring and gaining greater understanding of students' respective areas of interest, passion, and strength. These *relationship-centered* strategies were viewed as essential for engaging and supporting a strength-based school culture aimed at engaging and empowering its students and educators in authentic and meaningful learning and exchanges. The use of autonomy-supportive methods in learning environments support the intrinsic motivation and personalized development of individuals (Stone, 2020). These autonomy-supportive practices need to be modelled by school leadership, adopting the mindset of accompanying one another in the journey of learning, exploring, drawing out and engaging individuals' strengths (Haerens, n.d.).

The participants perceived promoting educator readiness as moving beyond individual educator perspectives to engaging the wider educational community in reflections and deliberations related to their current practices and visioning for the integration of strength-based methods. As Buchanan and Greig (2021) asserted, affecting and sustaining changes in perspectives and practices is a collective process that requires sufficient time and participation among all key stakeholders. Walker and Musti-Rao (2016) indicated that *flourishing schools* prioritize these needs, providing the necessary time for educators to collaborate in meaningful ways. Kaplan et al. (2014) asserted that *innovative leaders* in schools, similar to the role of visionaries proposed by the participants in the present study, should prioritize and allocate time for educators' professional and collaborative planning, given that it directly relates to their role in enhancing and enriching students' learning experiences. In their investigation, Kaplan et al. (2014) noted that dedicated time allowed educators to grow professionally and collaborate with colleagues in reflecting on educational practices and planning innovative strategies for student learning.

## Conclusion

When embarking on a journey to strengthen a paradigm and create a school culture grounded in the strength-based perspective, the important role of school leaders cannot be diminished. While traditional authoritarian approaches to leadership are not conducive to such an undertaking, positive leadership methods help create a positive school culture that values what each individual can bring to their learning community. For students and educators to shift to a strength-based mindset, they need to see their school leaders model strength-based practices. Similarly, school leaders can mentor educators within their school. By doing so, the latter will experience continued professional development and realize that their individual strengths and gifts are appreciated.

What is clear from this study is that such changes must be undertaken with flexibility and openness. Educators must be given ample time to reflect, communicate, and co-construct processes that are needed to build a collective school vision. That is the very heart of creating and establishing visionary leadership within schools. At the core of this process is recognizing that everyone possesses inherent strengths and that these strengths are valued and can be leveraged to bring out the best in everyone.

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