REFLECTING ON THE IMPACTS OF STRENGTHS-BASED TEACHING ON STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

In this manuscript, two professors sought to reflect on personal discoveries from their recent research collaboration examining the relationship between strengths-based teaching and students' self-efficacy. The findings of their study indicated that educators in higher education institutions who employ a strengths-based teaching approach that focuses on students' capabilities, opportunities, and possibilities while creating a growth mindset, resiliency, and agency can improve students' self-efficacy. As educators, we regularly engage in reflective practice to enhance and improve our teaching strategies. Through reflection, we were able to examine the revelations from our research and explore how we could effectively implement these practices in our teaching to highlight our students' strengths and help them build a foundation for lifelong learning and improved self-efficacy.

Keywords: *strengths-based teaching, self-efficacy, higher education, research collaboration, reflective practice*

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Historically, some educators have exhibited a deficit mindset in higher education classrooms, where instructors held students responsible when they could not meet specific academic and social standards instead of acknowledging the systemic barriers in place (Krutkowski, 2017; Reyes & Duran, 2021). A deficit framework focuses on what students are doing wrong and what they are missing (Hipolito-Delgado, 2010; Krutkowski, 2017; Montalto et al., 2019; Morris & Turnbull, 2007). This deficit-based approach fails to consider how societal and institutional circumstances contribute to the inequalities students encounter (Anderson et al., in peer review).

In contrast, when teachers employ a strengths-based approach in the classroom, they "help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2). In other words, teachers can help students focus on what they are capable of while guiding them as they change their perspectives of problems from obstacles to opportunities for growth (Anderson et al., in peer review). Strengths-based teaching is beneficial in higher education because it can help educators foster rapport with students, improve students' self-awareness, promote non-traditional college students' academic engagement and success, expand students' awareness of their strengths, and enhance their confidence to make decisions about their future careers (Pang et al., 2018; Soria et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2012).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this reflective practice was to expore the revelation that educators in higher education institutions who employ a strengths-based teaching approach that focuses on students' capabilities, opportunities, and possibilities while

creating a growth mindset, resiliency, and agency can improve students' self-efficacy. This discovery was made while researching the impact of strengths-based teaching on students' general, academic, and strengths self-efficacy. The results of our empirical study indicated that strengths-based teaching positively impacts college and university students' self-efficacy (Anderson et al., in peer review). Although we, as educators, have always tried to give positive feedback to students to highlight areas of their work where they excel, hoping to increase their confidence and belief in themselves, we were unaware that this focus on students' strengths could also enhance their self-efficacy, which is the belief in their ability to successfully perform a task or achieve a goal (Bandura, 1977, 2010). After reflecting on this research, we had a new understanding of how crucial strengths-based teaching was for students' self-efficacy, and we discovered tangible ways to incorporate this practice into our teaching.

REFLECTIVE READINESS

Dewey (1997), a seminal author on reflective practice, posited that reflection helps individuals consider why things are as they are and how one might act and behave, considering experience and theory. However, reflection does not necessarily occur just because one participates in structured reflection (Greenberger & Or, 2022). For reflection to be effective, one must exhibit characteristics of reflective readiness, such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility (Anderson et al., 2023; Dewey, 1997; Greenberger & Or, 2022).

The objective for this reflective practice manuscript was to process the discovery that strengths-based teaching positively impacts students' self-efficacy in hopes of better understanding how our teaching practice affects students in our courses. To do this, we utilized Greenberger's (2023) revised Guide for Reflective Practice (GRP) to analyze our readiness to reflect and walk us through the reflective process. The following section will detail how our open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility indicated our readiness to reflect and helped us achieve this learning goal.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS

The first indicator of reflective readiness is open-mindedness, which is a willingness to con-

sider multiple perspectives and options while acknowledging the potential for fallibility, even with the closest-held beliefs (Dewey, 1997). We experienced open-mindedness as we created a hypothesis that teachers who utilize strengths-based teaching in their classes could increase students' belief in themselves and their ability to accomplish their goals. Instead of merely settling for anecdotal evidence, we worked with a research partner to design and implement an empirical study examining how strengths-based teaching impacted post-secondary students' self-efficacy. Throughout the research process, we were open to the possibility that our hypothesis could be wrong, even though our experience in the classroom indicated otherwise. Despite the possibility of error, this desire to learn more shows open-mindedness, which aids in effective reflection (Anderson et al., 2023; Greenberger & Or, 2022).

WHOLEHEARTEDNESS

The second indicator of reflective readiness is one's wholeheartedness, which occurs when someone throws themselves into something *heartily* or with a whole heart (Dewey, 1997). Wholeheartedness is often found when individuals are deeply engrossed in a particular purpose and exhibit sincere enthusiasm for a specific topic (Dewey, 1997). Serving students in our courses is our shared passion, and we approach this work wholeheartedly, which is demonstrated in our continual search for ways to improve our practice, such as through personal and professional development. For instance, we naturally highlight our students' strengths in our interactions with them. Nevertheless, we wanted to improve our practice by focusing on students' capabilities, opportunities, and possibilities while fostering their growth mindset, resiliency, and agency. Our genuine excitement for teaching and learning indicates wholeheartedness, which aids in effective reflection (Anderson et al., 2023; Greenberger & Or, 2022).

RESPONSIBILITY

The third indicator of reflective readiness is one's responsibility, which occurs when individuals follow through and successfully complete tasks (Greenberger & Or, 2022). Responsibility plays a pivotal role in achieving successful outcomes. We demonstrated responsibility by working together to design and implement an empirical research

project to examine how teachers' strengths-based practice impacts college and university students' self-efficacy. Our project was extensive, taking nearly six months from conception to conclusion. Dedication to carrying through with a project from start to end demonstrates our responsibility, which aids in effective reflection (Anderson et al., 2023; Greenberger & Or, 2022).

WORKING IDEAS

Practitioners who engage in reflective practice should consider why they have had a revelation or discovery (Greenberger, 2023). This step in the process can be accomplished by determining the potential causes for this uncertainty or problem and then analyzing these working ideas using professional experience and personal intuition (Greenberger, 2023). The following section will highlight three working ideas that might have contributed to this uncertainty about the impact of strengths-based teaching on postsecondary students' self-efficacy. Furthermore, the differences between these working ideas will be discussed.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING APPROACHES

Postsecondary educators, especially those trained in traditional teaching methods, might hold misconceptions about strengths-based teaching. Since the deficit approach is prevalent in higher education (Krutkowski, 2017), instructors may believe this mindset is more effective in motivating students to improve. For example, a student might contact their teacher to let them know they cannot attend class because they are sick. The educator might try to motivate their students to improve their attendance by highlighting how much class they have missed and noting their absences' impact on this student's academic success. The deficit approach may elicit fear in students who want their teacher's approval and need to succeed. As a result, those educators who utilize this tactic may see changed student behavior, which further supports this misconception. For instance, in the example of the student whose grades were threatened for missing class, this student may neglect their health in the future and attend class despite feeling ill. Such beliefs and misconceptions about the deficit model might lead educators to overlook or underestimate the possible benefits of a strengths-based approach in their classes.

LIMITED ACCESS TO DISSEMINATED RESEARCH

Despite the existing literature on the benefits of strengths-based practices, dissemination of this knowledge might be limited within some educational contexts. For example, not all educators engage in research or regularly practice professional development (Warren, 2019), so they may not have access to the latest research findings. Furthermore, instructors may not be actively engaged in communities where professional development or research is discussed. Without exposure to the available research on this topic, educators may remain unaware of the potential advantages of this strengths-based approach.

MINIMAL EXPOSURE TO STRENGTHS-BASED TEACHING

Along with misconceptions about the benefits of the strengths-based teaching approach and limited access to disseminated research on this topic, educators in higher education institutions may not have been exposed to or trained in strengths-based teaching methods. As a result, they might not be aware of the benefits of this practice. If they have not had the opportunity to witness or experience the advantages firsthand, they may not consider implementing this teaching approach in their classrooms. For instance, many postsecondary educators are experts in their field but are not trained in teaching (Anderson, 2021). As a result, they often teach the way they were taught as students. If the deficit approach was modeled instead of the strengths-based approach, educators might continue this practice in their classrooms.

DIFFERENTIATING THE WORKING IDEAS

An educator might be surprised that strengths-based teaching can positively impact students' self-efficacy if they have misconceptions about this teaching approach, have limited access to disseminated research on this topic, or are not exposed to

Figure 1

| Misconceptions about Teaching Approaches | Limited Access to Disseminated Research on the Topic | Minimal Exposure to Strengths-Based Teaching |

this teaching style. The main difference between these working ideas is the background and experience of the educator. Since teachers have various levels of experience, exposure, and knowledge, there is a potential that educators may be unaware of the benefits of strengths-based teaching for students in higher education settings.

REFLECTIVE-NARRATIVE

After discovering that educators in higher education institutions who employ a strengths-based teaching approach that focuses on students' assets, abilities, and prospects while creating a growth mindset and resilient attitude can improve students' self-efficacy, we began reflecting on how we could make changes in our courses. The research we conducted, also known as an event or activity, is an essential component of reflection (Greenberger, 2023). Using a reflective-narrative format to describe this event, we can share details, context, and personal thoughts (Greenberger et al., 2021).

TEMPORALITY

The reflective-narrative process starts by identifying the prologue, which introduces the backstory of the activity (Greenberger et al., 2021). This story began when the lead author attended a regional communications conference where she first learned about strengths-based communication, which emphasizes an individual's strengths and elaborates on how those strengths can benefit them in the future. A strengths-based style of communication is rooted in positive psychology and has the potential to empower those involved (Dewaele et al., 2019).

Prior to this conference, she knew that positive feedback was valuable for her students, and she incorporated it into her classes. For example, she highlighted things that her students excelled at, such as creative approaches to assignments or when they demonstrated leadership skills. However, after the conference, she knew that strengths-based communication had unrealized benefits and that positive feedback could be expanded by identifying students' strengths and highlighting how these assets would benefit them in their future endeavors.

Teachers interact with students, often impacting their sense of belonging in the classroom and self-esteem (Osterman, 2010). For instance, a student might tell a teacher they cannot attend class because they need to translate for their parents, who must attend a doctor's appointment. A teacher who utilizes strengths-based communication in their interaction with this student might say, "Thank you for letting me know that you will miss class." The teacher could continue the conversation, using a strengths-based comment such as, "The fact that you contacted me in advance shows that you are responsible, which is a quality that will benefit you in your future career, as employers will insist on knowing when you are unable to attend work." Finally, the teacher could culminate the conversation with encouragement, such as, "I am also proud of you for prioritizing your family, and I think it is great that you can help your folks when they need you." In this example, the teacher highlights the students' character strength of responsibility and points out how that strength would benefit them in the future. Educators have regular opportunities to build up their students using this strengths-based approach in the classroom.

SOCIALITY

When using a reflective-narrative format to process an activity, it is valuable to first detail the sociality. Sociality highlights the participants or characters that were part of the event (Greenberger et al., 2021). Two groups were involved in this story—the researchers who designed and implemented the study and the students who participated.

The Researchers

Once the lead author saw positive results with strengths-based communication in the classroom, she wanted to examine if these results were generalizable. So, she contacted two of her research partners to see if they wanted to collaborate on a study to examine the impacts of strengths-based teaching on students' self-efficacy. All three researchers are educators in higher education institutions and scholars who enjoy studying various topics, such as applied positive psychology, teaching, and reflective practice. We were all excited to participate in a study that had the potential to improve teachers' positive impact on students in their classes.

The Student Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at four schools, we recruited 250 student participants for this study. The sample was predominantly female and had students aged 18 to over 50 years old (Anderson et al., in peer review). Participants were primarily Caucasian, but

there were representatives from five other races, including Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, Native/Indigenous, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and several students identified as biracial (Anderson et al., in peer review). Each participant was enrolled in a two-year or four-year higher education institution in the Northwest, Southwest, or Midwest United States.

SITUATION

In the reflective-narrative section of the GRP, it is also beneficial to establish the situation or setting of the event (Greenberger et al., 2021). The researchers lived and worked in different states, so our work was conducted online, and communication took place through text messaging, Zoom meetings, and writing on a shared document. The research involved students from four different institutions across the United States, and their participation was solely online.

Plot

The final component of the reflective-narrative section is the plot, which refers to the sequence of events that make up the story (Greenberger et al., 2021). In reflective practice writing, the structure of the plot is similar to that of literature, where the plot encompasses the main storyline. The development of the plot includes the cause-and-effect relationships between events, leading to an outcome.

Once the research topic was chosen, we created research questions to guide the study. Then, we chose valid and reliable instruments to collect data to answer the research questions. We found four instruments that could assess students' perception of their teachers' level of strengths-based practices as well as students' levels of general, academic, and strengths self-efficacy. The instruments were put onto an online form so the students could participate anonymously.

Before recruiting participants for the study, we submitted proposals to the institutions' IRB. After approval, we recruited students from four institutions across the United States to participate. After 250 student participants completed the study, we analyzed the data and started to write up the findings.

As our strengths-based research study neared the end, our communication became more frequent with progress updates. We had built trust throughout the research process and became comfortable asking one another to review the writing or edit as needed. Like a good story, our research collaboration culminated with an ending. The lead author took over, cleaned up the shared document, and submitted the manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal for publication.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

We discovered three possible working ideas for why we were surprised about the beneficial impact of teachers' strength-based practice on students' self-efficacy. First, there was a chance we had misconceptions about the strengths-based approach. Second, we determined that our surprise may have been due to limited access to disseminated research on strengths-based teaching practices. Finally, our discovery could have been due to limited exposure to strengths-based teaching. The following section will identify the strengths and weaknesses of these ideas and compare them to scholarly literature.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING APPROACHES

Today, it is common practice for people to focus on what is broken and devise ways to fix it. This mentality is also seen in higher education institutions, which is one reason people are comfortable working in a deficit model system (Renkly & Bertolini, 2018). For example, administrators see lower student enrollment trends and create marketing plans to reach prospective students. Although beneficial in specific contexts, this approach may not be helpful in the classroom setting as students are not problems to be fixed (Brown et al., 2020).

Amy Anderson

I was never comfortable with the deficit mindset in a classroom setting, especially while working with community college students. Many of these students face tremendous educational obstacles, yet they show up and do challenging work. Pointing out deficits or blaming students seems counterintuitive to supporting their success in and out of the classroom. Instead, I put the impetus on the institutions to make teaching equitable for students. Therefore, incorporating strengths-based teaching into my student interactions felt natural to me. I was already utilizing components of this teaching style in my classes, and the more I learned about the benefits to students, the more open I was to the idea of making additional changes to my practice.

Kelly Maguire

I was not as familiar with strengths-based teaching practice as Amy, but I was intrigued

enough to explore the concept more. I learned that the importance of strengths lies in appreciating "positives, qualities, and resources" (Bozic et al., 2018, p. 27) when interacting with my students. All the same, I wondered if my students would take advantage of the situation if I engaged in strengths-based practice. This was one of the misconceptions that I wrestled with.

LIMITED ACCESS TO DISSEMINATED RESEARCH

Educators might not be familiar with the benefits of strengths-based teaching because they may not have been exposed to research on this topic. Limited exposure to research might stem from educators' lack of involvement in professional development communities where research is discussed, possibly due to technical, political, or cultural challenges (Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, not all educators continually participate in research, as it is often only required for those in full-time or tenured positions (Warren, 2019). Therefore, if one was not exposed to the research on the advantages of this approach, one might be surprised to discover that strengths-based teaching can improve students' self-efficacy.

Amy Anderson

I continually participate in personal and professional development opportunities to improve my practice. I also participate in research projects regularly that enhance my understanding of best practices for teaching. Although this working idea has merit for many educators who may have less exposure to professional development, this working idea was not as applicable to me since I am actively studying these topics.

Kelly Maguire

As I reflected on my professional experience as an educator and researcher, I realized that I had not read any literature on strengths-based teaching practices. I also concluded that I had not attended professional development on strengths-based teaching strategies because none had been offered. It became clear that I lacked access to research on this topic, which merited further reflection.

MINIMAL EXPOSURE TO STRENGTHS-BASED TEACHING

Many educators in higher education institutions receive very little training in teaching (Anderson, 2021). Often, the only expectation is that they are experts in their discipline. As a result, educators often teach how they were taught (Anderson, 2021; Patrick et al., 2021). Therefore, if college or university instructors lack pedagogical or andragogical training, they may rely on their previous exposure to various teaching styles, which could negatively affect how they interact with their students, particularly if the deficit model was the norm (Biku et al., 2018; Burke, 2021). Moreover, if the deficit approach continues to be modeled, future teachers may continue this pattern.

Amy Anderson

In my educational background, I learned about diverse topics related to communication studies. However, I did not learn how to share this knowledge with my students effectively. Prior to my first teaching assignment, I also had not been taught how to support students in positive ways. Even with a doctoral degree in teaching and learning, I lacked practical teacher training. Furthermore, most of the teachers I was exposed to in my many years as a student practiced the deficit approach, which seemed to be an acceptable practice.

Kelly Maguire

Like the lack of access to research on strengths-based teaching, I also had limited exposure to this teaching strategy. It was not until Amy approached me with the collaborative research project that I had a name to give this teaching approach. Due to my lack of exposure to strengths-based teaching, I wondered if I defaulted to a deficit approach when interacting with my students. This concerned me, so I began the reflective process to explore my pedagogical practices.

SUMMARY OF WORKING IDEAS

We considered three working ideas when analyzing our discovery that strengths-based teaching benefits students' self-efficacy. First, we explored misconceptions about teaching approaches. Second, we delved into the topic of limited research dissemination and how that might impact teachers' familiarity with these topics. Third, we examined how minimal exposure to strengths-based teaching could add to teachers' lack of knowledge on the benefits of this approach. The following section uncovers our decision regarding what working idea was most plausible for our revelations on the importance of this teaching style in higher education classrooms.

DECISION

According to Dewey (1997), reflective practice has multiple steps. First, we identified something surprising in our practice. Then, we analyzed three reasons this discovery might have occurred: possible misconceptions about teaching approaches, lack of access to research that has been disseminated on this topic, or minimal exposure to strengths-based teaching. The next step in the reflective process was to decide what working idea was the most plausible explanation for this revelation (Greenberger, 2023).

MOST PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION

Throughout the reflective process, we carefully examined our teaching methods, strategies, and approaches. We also attempted to identify potential factors that might have contributed to our gaps in knowledge on the effects of strengths-based teaching and its ties to students' self-efficacy. We gradually eliminated two possible working ideas by evaluating the reasons for our surprise, and we concluded that minimal exposure to strengths-based teaching was the most plausible explanation for this discovery. While misconceptions about strengths-based teaching and limited research dissemination were important reasons and held value to us, they were not found to be the overarching factors in our knowledge gap.

Throughout our experience as students and educators, we did not have the strengths-based approach modeled for us, which significantly impacted our practice. Since teachers often learn how to teach from their former instructors and experiences in the classroom (Flores & Day, 2006), this lack of exposure to a strengths-based teaching style meant that we could not predict that this approach would benefit students in so many ways. Furthermore, while discussing and reflecting on our evaluation of ideas, we recognized that teachers are often isolated in their teaching practice and rarely have opportunities to observe our colleagues in the classroom. Therefore, if other educators use strengths-based teaching strategies, we would not be exposed to them.

As educators, we do not want to continue to miss valuable opportunities to fully understand and leverage our students' strengths and promote their self-efficacy. The decision to identify and incorporate strengths-based approaches into our teaching practice will enhance our students' learning experiences and expand our professional knowledge. Moreover, it will help future teachers in our classes decide what teaching strategies they should employ in their own classrooms.

Figure 2
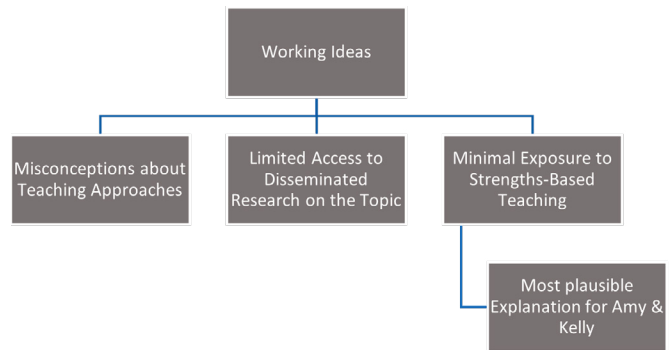
REFLECTIVE-CRITIQUE

The final section of the GRP, the reflective critique, requires that practitioners describe how reflection transforms their beliefs about the nature of the problem. Additionally, this section of the GRP challenges the authors to speculate on how they might make current and future decisions regarding this topic. Finally, this part of the guide encourages us to consider how other practitioners and researchers might use our personal experiences in similar activities and projects.

TRANSFORMATIVE BELIEFS AND DECISIONS

Our reflective approach was based on Dewey's (1997) model of reflective thinking, as he is regarded as the founder of reflection. Dewey (1997) posited that reflection is an "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 8). In an educational context, Dewey (1997) noted that reflection could lead to personal growth and knowledge and help educators make sense of activities or events that surprise them. Using this model, we identified something surprising, analyzed why we were surprised, and devised ways to use what we learned in our future teaching experiences (Dewey, 1997). The goals were to learn more about the benefits of strengths-based teaching to improve our practice and to share what we learned with other educators.

Several benefits can emerge when critiquing one's reflective practice. One thing that we noticed

was improved self-awareness. In conducting this reflective practice, we became more conscientious of our thoughts and actions through inward self-examination. As long-time educators, reflecting on past experiences can be painful because we may need to acknowledge our shortcomings, such as feeling vulnerable or inadequate. Be that as it may, by diving into an honest appraisal, we were able to extract valuable insights and transformative professional lessons. This, in turn, allowed us to identify areas of needed improvement and develop strategies we could apply in our teaching practice.

Along with deepening our self-awareness, this practice also encouraged us to improve interactions with our students. During conversations, we were more mindful of using strengths-based language with them. For example, we could consider the lived experiences of our students and communicate in ways that align with what they value both educationally and personally.

As educators, reflective practice has also helped us increase our empathy and understanding of our students. By considering the perspectives of others, we can validate their experiences, which can foster reciprocal interactions among ourselves, our students, and between our students and their peers. For example, one of the outcomes of increased empathy is improved trust, making our classrooms feel more inclusive.

Finally, by critiquing our reflective practice, we discovered that not only was students' self-efficacy improved, but our personal well-being was also enhanced. When we became outwardly focused, taking into consideration the experiences of our students, we also became more aware of how we could take care of ourselves. When we prioritized our students' work-life balance, it also positively affected our willingness to practice self-care and maintain balance in our own lives. As a result, we could take steps to prioritize stress management and mitigate the potential for burnout, which would help us be more effective in our roles as educators.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As reflective practitioners and researchers, we encourage our colleagues in higher education to become familiar with strengths-based strategies as our research has shown that the strengths-based approach can improve students' self-efficacy

(Anderson et al., in peer review). Like us, we believe other educators will also discover that employing a strengths mindset in the classroom will help their students feel valued and empowered. Likewise, we believe our colleagues will also experience personal satisfaction seeing their students build connections between their strengths and the content taught in their classrooms.

Future research could be conducted using the reflective practice model to assess how students describe their feelings when teachers use a strengths-based approach in the classroom setting. Specifically, students could utilize the GRP or an adapted version to process their discoveries and insights. Furthermore, additional research is warranted on the impact of strengths-based teaching in the classroom setting on students' academic success, motivation, and desire to continue their education.

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