

## **SCHOOL MANAGEMENT**

### **Utilising Signature Strengths to Build Teaching and Leadership Skills**

Parents are discerning, and from a variety of sources they ascertain which schools best suit their children's particular needs. Every school is evaluated and compared by the parents, and the schools' particular signature strengths are pitted against parents' views of their children's needs. So, the question for us as teachers is: "Are our teaching strengths recognised in the school community?" And, as leaders - "Are our leadership strengths recognised in the school community?"

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The leadership and teaching strengths a school holds should be made known to its surrounding community.

The beauty of human development is that, as unique individuals, we all develop different characterisation profiles. It is this combination of diverse strengths that makes us all different, and there is now a developing interest in what is known as *signature strengths* that explore this in finer detail. In restaurants reviews the well-known, key dishes are called *signature dishes* and are always on the menu because they develop a following. The Sydney Morning Herald's food writer, Myffy Rigby (2019), examined the issue of signature dishes, as she asked the question:

So, is a signature dish a help or a hindrance when it comes to running a successful restaurant business? *Good Food* senior critic and *Good Food Guide* panel member Terry Durack says signature dishes will never die because restaurants need them as part of their brand. "They give their identity a consistent visual and a consistent voice.

They stand for something." He also argues that the dish gives a diner something to come back for it becomes a status symbol, something you want to show your friends, colleagues, loved ones. So perhaps, in a way, it's a restaurant's responsibility to keep those popular dishes on the menu. They become a part of a larger conversation, more than a sum of the restaurant's parts and a chef's ego.

In the educational literature, aspects of schools' pedagogic successes have become known as *signature pedagogies*. Coincidentally, it was this very term that Lee Shulman (2005) used in relation to the deep, ideological view of pedagogy. He stated:

Signature pedagogies are important precisely because they are pervasive. They implicitly define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analyzed, criticized, accepted, or discarded. They define the functions of expertise in a field, the locus of authority, and the privileges of rank and standing. As we have seen, these pedagogies even determine the architectural design of educational institutions, which in turn serves to perpetuate these approaches (p. 54).

Shulman's specific use of the term signature pedagogies draws attention to the attractive qualities of the teaching processes that appear to be taken for granted. And, school advertise such attractive qualities on glossy brochures: "In our schools you will find that all of the teachers have a commitment to High Impact Learning and Teaching, which is our signature pedagogy, and that grows high performing students."

### **Signature Character Strengths**

Positive psychology that has impacted on school operations, especially during this post-COVID period, and there is now a growing interest in signature strengths. Sherri Gordon (2022) noted that the character strengths highlight people's assets rather than faults, an approach developed by Martin Seligman and Neal Mayerson who created the Values in Action (VIA) Institute on Character. From this original research, six virtues were identified and from that, 24 character strengths:

- Wisdom: Creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
- Courage: Honesty, bravery, persistence, zest
- Humanity: Kindness, love, social intelligence
- Justice: Fairness, leadership, teamwork
- Temperance: Forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation
- Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, religiousness

While the signature strengths are useful for personal development, they also are invaluable for professional development. Taking *Courage* as an example, Gordon (2022) illustrated the character traits that constitute this virtue:

People who score high in *courage* have emotional character strengths that allow them to accomplish goals despite any opposition they face—whether internal or external. The character strengths associated with courage are:

- Honesty: Speaking the truth; being authentic and genuine
- Bravery: Embracing challenges, difficulties, or pain; not shrinking from threat
- Persistence: Finishing things once they are started
- Zest: Approaching all things in life with energy and excitement

This listing is a great starting point for professional development and coaching.

### **Building Schools' Organisational Strengths**

Within any organisation or group there is always a vast array of leadership skills, and these skills are not lodged in one officially designated leader/boss. The really strong teams recognise this, and their operations disregard the strong organisational hierarchical overlays. For example, the Australian SAS patrols are usually commanded by a sergeant, and officers in the group take orders from him. In schools while there are positional leaders (principals, deputy principals etc) there are also staff members who lead aspects of the schools' operations. In every case staff the staff members' personal strengths are recognised by their colleagues who then give them leadership recognition.

The research of Hannah Moore et al. (2021) found at work:

(1) strengths use and thriving go hand in hand, (2) colleague recognition of personal strengths boosts the positive relationship between employee strengths use and levels of vitality, but not learning, and (3) employees use their strengths and thrive more when they experience more support for strengths use and more opportunities for professional development (p. 267).

In schools it is important that the constellation of staff members' strengths is recognised, and this recognition is used as a basis for professional learning programs for future leaders.

### **Signature Strengths and Coaching Teachers**

Jim Thompson, who is a coaching expert in New York state, observed: Starting on a positive note, Dr Ilene Winokur in her book "Finding Your Pathway to Belonging in Education", stated "We often hear about people who either believe the glass is half empty or half full. Have you ever heard that a glass can be refilled? How does changing our perception to an asset-based mindset improve how we perceive our students and how they perceive themselves?" Dismissing the confusing glass half full- glass half empty false dichotomy, Winokur paints a more positive mindset.

Martin Seligman in *Flourish* (2011) proposed the idea of finding your *Signature Strengths*, utilising hallmarks that included:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity;
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first;
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced;
- A sense of yearning to find new ways to use it;
- A sense of inevitability in using the strengths;
- Investigation rather than exhaustion while using the strengths;
- The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it;
- Joy, zest, enthusiasm, even extasy while using it (pp. 38-39).

In the case story of Emma, Seligman (2011, pp. 36-37) used the Values in Action (ViA) Signature Strengths test, which started Emma on the road to recovery.

Translating this research into a coaching experience, Jim Thomson noted:

Our impact coaching model first asks teachers to video their practice and identify a goal important to them to advance student learning. What if we added these three questions to the coaching conference with the teacher?

- What would you identify as the Signature Strengths of your practice, and what would the parents' and the students' voices say?

- How can I help you affirm, extend, build on, and celebrate these Signature Strengths?
- How did your Signature Strengths work to advance student learning?

After years in the coaching arena, Jim said, “I believe teachers actually seeing their practice on video may will bring to light pedagogical signature strengths of which the teacher was never aware.” In this post pandemic period teachers continually speak of not being heard, not having opportunities to share their voice. Incorporating the idea of “Signature Strengths” through video reflection and partnership coaching bring to life an “asset-based to teaching” which would advance teacher self-worth and self-esteem, and perhaps more importantly advance student learning.

So, good, reflective coaching will help to “refill” the glass of each teacher we partner with in our impact coaching and featuring signature strengths. We think that using video reflection may well be that all important first step in strengthening teachers’ performances, and improving students’ learning outcomes.

### **Building on Your Teaching and Leadership Strengths: Leadership Development Plan**

For school leaders, there is little point in identifying your leadership signature strengths without using this data to improve your leadership skills. Elif Suner, Forbes Coaches Council (2020), observed:

Gallup found that employees feel more confident, self-aware and productive when focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. In turn, this leads to higher employee engagement, increased performance and significantly lower attrition rates. The research results make more sense when we analyze the outcomes of our relationship with strengths. Our strengths are great resources for increasing our energy and making us feel dynamic.

This identification of personal strengths needs to be developed into a Leadership Development Plan.

The Harvard Business School offers one model for developing a Leadership Development Plan and Matt Gavin (2019) noted: “PACE is employed by learners to select leadership development goals and chart a course of action for achieving them.”

**Figure 1**

### **The Harvard Business School PACE Leadership Development Plan**



This model of leadership development is easy to use, and for school leaders (principals, deputies and aspirant teachers) this specific exercise provides a good learning experience and evidence for performance management processes.

Another advantage of using this tool in identifying signature strengths is that by identifying strengths, you are able to identify areas that need strengthening. This encourages school leaders to build teams that, as a collective, combine to and embody the notion of Ubuntu (“I am because we are”- Boyd & MacNeill, 2023), which enables a school community to be highly inclusive.

### **Discussion**

From the authors’ experiences, parents are discerning, and from a variety of sources they ascertain which schools best suit their children’s particular needs. Every school is evaluated and compared by the parents, and the schools’ particular signature strengths are pitted against parents’ views of their children’s needs. So, the question for us as teachers is: “Are our teaching strengths recognised in the school community?” And, as leaders- “Are our leadership strengths recognised in the school community?” Then in a comparative sense do our teaching and leadership skills attract wide-support and recognition, to the extent that parents want their children in your class, or in your school?

Signature strengths constantly need to be identified and built on, and then displayed to parents and other adult decision makers. This proffered array allows informed parental choices, and schools become places of best-fit for students.

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