



*...know your* **Strengths**

*"The ability to provide consistent, near perfect performance in a given activity" (Clifton and Harter, 2003)*

**We study divorce to learn about marriage,**

**We study unhappy employees to improve employee engagement,**

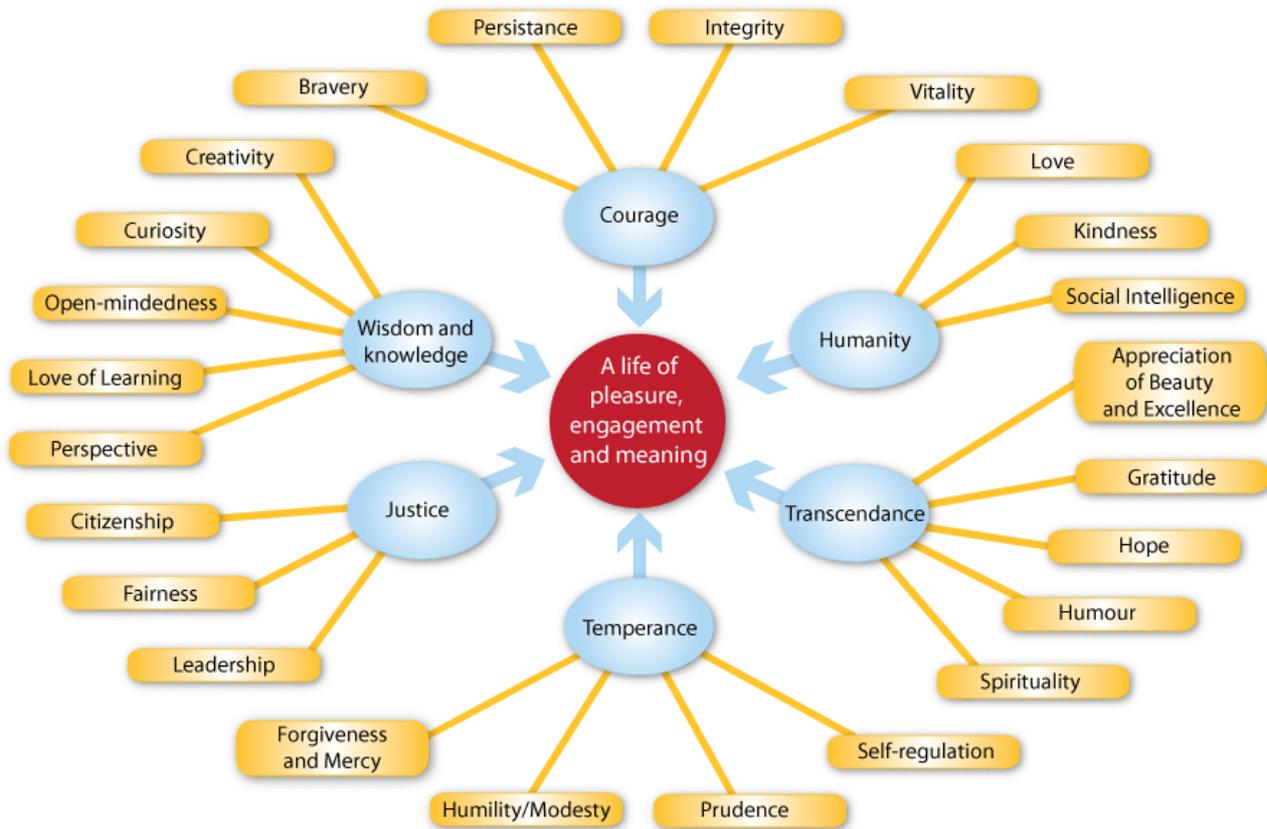
**We study depression and neurosis to learn about joy.**

**Society is focussed on teaching people skills we *don't* have, instead of improving the skills we *do* have, but is this the right approach...**

**...The strength approach offers a new perspective.**

# VIA Character Strengths & Virtues

(Peterson and Seligman, 2004)



(NOTES) Positive psychology in general and the strengths approach in particular are comparatively new areas of interest and research in Psychology, therefore research is somewhat limited and there is a lack of longitudinal findings. Positive psychology takes a very different perspective from more traditional approaches, examining the notion of looking at ways of developing happiness, positivity, growth and fulfillment in people as opposed to trying to fix the negative situations and conditions people face. This new perspective, taking the example of 'strengths' allows us to look at the positive impact of developing our strengths, instead of trying to develop our weaknesses.

## 1 Key Paper:

### **Strengths gym: the impact of a character strengths-based intervention on the life satisfaction and well-being of adolescents**

This is a good paper to start with because it provides empirical support for the benefits of strengths-based exercises in schools. It discusses the impact of "Strength's Gym" on life satisfaction for adolescents. It compares adolescents who participated in the intervention program, which involves **character strengths-based exercises within the school curriculum**, with those who did not participate in the program. The paper supports the application of character strengths-based exercises within the school curriculum, in order to improve adolescent **life satisfaction and well-being**.

If you want to go more in depth, you can read the article here

(<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2011.594079#.UvOOZHC60Xw>)

## If you want to read 3 things...:

1. Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *American psychologist*, 60(5), 410.

This article addresses the question: can psychologists create a practice of making people lastingly happier? The article looks at multiple facets of positive psychology to answer this question, but focuses on Character Strengths. The paper explains the six character virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence and their underlying character strengths in detail and shows empirical support for the universality of these character strengths. Also included is evidence that actively using character strengths in new ways can increase happiness and decrease depression. If you are interested, the electronic version also includes access to the questionnaires and activities used in the study.

(click here to view the article) ([http://bfeild.typepad.com/transcending\\_leadership/Positive%20Psychology%20Progress.pdf](http://bfeild.typepad.com/transcending_leadership/Positive%20Psychology%20Progress.pdf))

2. Proctor, C., Maltby, J., & Linley, P. A. (2011). Strengths use as a predictor of well-being and health-related quality of life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12(1), 153-169.

For those interested in going more in depth about how strengths use influences physical and psychological well-being. This study builds on and extends current knowledge about happiness and strengths use. In addition, the article's introduction offers a good overview of theory and research about the field of strength-approach and the VIA strength classification. Empirical evidence is given about the relationship between the top five strengths of heart – as conceptualised by the VIA strengths classification – and subjective well-being (SWB), health-related quality of life (HRQOL) and life satisfaction. Interestingly, one of the results from the study shows that strengths use is a unique predictor of SWB and HRQOL only when self-esteem and self-efficacy is not controlled for. When these factors are controlled for strengths use is a unique predictor for SWB only.

(click here to view the article) ([http://www.academia.edu/1431474/Strengths\\_use\\_as\\_a\\_predictor\\_of\\_well-being\\_and\\_health-related\\_quality\\_of\\_life](http://www.academia.edu/1431474/Strengths_use_as_a_predictor_of_well-being_and_health-related_quality_of_life))

3. Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Investing in strengths. *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline*, 111-121.

(click here to view the article) (<http://media.gallup.com/DOCUMENTS/whitePaper--InvestingInStrengths.pdf>)

## **History & Old Cultural Connections:**

Philosophers as old as Aristotle (c. 330 BC) have been searching for the route of the “good” life, a life of happiness and well-being. In his *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle named the pursuit of this end, *eudaimonia*; exercising of good character (Proctor, Maltby & Linley, 2011). Later on, Kant formulated in his Kantianism that one should always do the right thing, regardless of the consequences. However, an opposing view was adopted by supporters of Utilitarianism. This view does not supply one with rules for doing the right thing in a situation, but rather provides a formula for computing the right thing to do. This rule-like and mechanical formula should be used to calculate costs and benefits (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

Nowadays, the continuous interest in finding the key to *eudaimonia* still exists. Grounded in this Aristotelian concept, the field of positive psychology has reformulated and modernised ancient philosophising and applied it to present-day life (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). Founders Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) claim that western psychology focuses only on repairing psychological damage. By focussing solely on abnormal psychology, they neglect the healthy way of human functioning. Therefore, positive psychology is about valued subjective experiences, such as well-being, flow, gratitude, satisfaction.



(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)

“It is through the habituation and exercising of good character that we can achieve the ‘good life’.”

‘Good character’ is subjective of differences in valued virtues. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a theoretical framework and classification system, the Values-In-Action - Inventory of Strengths(VIA-IS), in which they identified 24 positive virtues (See top page; Proctor, Maltby & Linley, 2011). This inventory measures strengths of character, or so called signature strengths by ranking them from 1 to 24. Later on, Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman performed a cross-cultural study to extract the core values shared between south-east Asian and Western cultures. They compared values from the most broadly influential traditions. Although they differed in ranking within each tradition, six values were derived (**courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom and transcendence**), as seen in the table below

Most philosophers consider virtues to be corrective. They counteract some difficulties inherent in the human nature; some temptation that needs to be resisted and channeled into something good (Yearley, 1990, p.16). The virtue of temperance would not need to exist if people were not sometimes reckless. The innate possession of certain virtues kept our ancestors’ social groups from dying out. Therefore Dahlsgaard et al (2005) argue that ubiquitous virtues allow humans to struggle against and to triumph over what is darkest in us.

In addition to the fact that these signature strengths has helped us survive, it is also found that some of them are related to life satisfaction. For instance, Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) concluded from their internet study with 5299 adults that hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity are robustly and consequently related to life satisfaction and well-being. These results are at heart of a applicational method from positive psychology: The Strength-Based Approach. This approach is based on the believe that focusing on strengths rather than improving weaknesses leads to more positive outcomes.

Several theories from well-known scientists are based on the Strength-Based Approach:

**Maria Montessori** (<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/montessori/method/method.html>)

**Abraham**

**Maslow** ([http://interpersonaabpri.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/05\\_morgan1.pdf](http://interpersonaabpri.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/05_morgan1.pdf))

**Carl Rogers**

([http://f3.tiera.ru/2/Cs\\_Computer%20science/CsLn\\_Lecture%20notes/M/Modeling%20and%20Using%20Context\(LNCS2116,%20Springer,%202001\)\(ISBN%203540423796\)\(483s\)\\_CsLn\\_.pdf#page=287](http://f3.tiera.ru/2/Cs_Computer%20science/CsLn_Lecture%20notes/M/Modeling%20and%20Using%20Context(LNCS2116,%20Springer,%202001)(ISBN%203540423796)(483s)_CsLn_.pdf#page=287))



Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) believed in nature's wisdom. She focussed on children's education. According to Montessori, children's development is guided by nature and therefore different for every child. To increase the potential to succeed, children should be educated in a stimulating environment which allows them to develop and investigate their personal interests. By developing strengths from an early age, Montessori stated children will find fulfilment in life



Abraham Maslow (1908 - 1970) supported the Humanistic Psychology Approach and believed every person to have a strong desire to fulfil their own potential by self-actualisation. People develop themselves more positively in an environment where discovering one's own strengths is encouraged. Maslow described the Maslow Pyramid for self-actualisation However highly critical of his work Maslow saw his theories as vital to that of Freud: *"It is as if Freud supplies us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it wout with the healthy half"* (Maslow, 1963).



Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987) was a follower of the humanistic approach, just as Maslow and emphasised the importance of self-actualisation. Rogers believes that developing strengths fulfils personal potentials and together with self-actualisation results in psychological well-being, or happiness. People should embrace their strengths and use them to encourage other people to do so as well. He developed the Theory of Personality and Behaviour as well as the Person-Centred Approach. The latter focusses on a humanistic approach in clinical psychology.

## **Practical Exercises:**

**BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.**

You can find your own strengths by using a number of free questionnaires, such as

- viame.org/www (<http://www.viame.org/www>) (<https://www.viame.org/www/>)
- [authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx) (<http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>) (this website has a number of different questionnaires)

**Interviews** can also be used to identify strengths, either within a workplace setting or an educational setting.

### **Thought exercises:**

Think of a situation which was challenging, in which something bad happened. For example, a child running into the middle of the road when you had to quickly slam on our breaks. How did you react? Did you clam up and retreat? Or did you meet the challenge head on? If you took control, you are likely to think of handling these kind of situations as a strength. If you reacted by feeling helpless or lashing out at others, you may feel that staying in control during a challenging situation is a weakness.

Think of a less challenging situation that is still hard, but not so life or death. For example, how do you react when you walk into a crowded room at a party? Do you want to chat to everyone or would you rather talk to just one person? The person connecting with everyone is strong at socialising while the quieter person is strong at connecting individually.

As well as considering how we would react in certain situations, we can assess and identify our strengths by considering our desires and hobbies. Our desires or goals in life are likely to be passions and dreams, i.e. areas of great strength. Activities or hobbies that make us happy and provide pleasure are also likely to be areas of strength.

Identifying your strengths can in fact be counterproductive, if you only use them to develop a performance-orientated mindset (Louis, 2008). **Strengths based exercises** should be used only once you have identified your individual strengths:

- Discussing your strengths with friends or family is often helpful. They can give you some feedback on whether the strengths you have come up with after these practical exercises are true to yourself. (Clifton, Anderson and Scheiner (2002)
- Think about how you can apply your strengths to your daily life. How can your strengths improve your life or help you obtain your goals?

These will in turn allow you to focus on your strengths, develop them further and use them in the best possible way.

## **Clinical Applications:**

Identification of strengths is important to increase and sustain well-being, and as such it should be used by a wide variety of individuals, not only those with mental disorders. Counselors, therapists, coaches, psychological professionals, business strategists, HR departments and many others are using these techniques to identify and build upon individuals' strengths.

Focussing on strengths leads to increasing success. For example, if Usain Bolt focussed on marathons rather than sprints he may not have been so successful. This analogy is applicable to strengths within a psychological sense.

Some psychologists use a clinical application of strengths; they focus on the strengths that the individual has, rather than focusing on trying to 'fix' the problem.

*Harris et al (2012)* interviewed adolescents in a strengths based substance abuse programme. Most were not aware of their own strengths or the fact that they could contribute and give back to society; this increased their chances of relapse. They felt however that the strengths approach helped them stay involved and engaged in treatment. They were able to focus on their strengths rather than their addictions. This intervention was shown to be more effective in preventing relapse than other relapse prevention therapies or cognitive behavioural therapy.

There are different strength based approaches within clinical psychology:

- *solution focused therapy* - focuses on what people want to achieve rather than on the problems that made them seek help
- *strength based case management* - combines a focus on individual's strengths with informal support networks, community involvement and emphasis of the relationship between the client and case manager.
- *narrative* - helps interpret strengths of both individuals and communities
- *family support services* - a strength based practice benefits families by influencing their engagement within the program.

Practitioners using a strengths-based approach have to collaborate. This means that they have to help people do things for themselves. People then become co-producers of their own support, not passive consumers (*Pattoni, 2012*)

Anything that assists an individual in dealing with the challenges of life should be regarded as a strength (*Pattoni 2012*). They will vary and so it's difficult to draw up an exhaustive list. There are many tools to help practitioners establish an individuals strengths, such as the ROPES model (*Graybeal, 2001*).

The experience of working in a strengths-based way may be difficult for the practitioner - they need to re-examine the way they work to being more focussed on the future than the past, to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and from thinking about problems to considering solutions. Their role changes from being less of a 'fixer' to more of a co-facilitator of solutions.

### **Strength-centred therapy (SCT):**

This is a relatively new therapeutic model closely based on the strengths and virtues based approach of positive psychology, as well as social constructionist perspectives (the idea that knowledge is a product of social consensus) (*Wong 2006*). The subjective views of clients about their own pathology and well-being are seen to be more important than the expert's opinions. The therapist serves as a facilitator, who works with the client to make meaning of the client's experiences (*Magyar-Moe, 2009*).

SCT is broken down into 4 stages - *explicating, envisioning, empowering and evolving*.

This therapy may be required in conjunction with other therapies - it may not be sufficient alone, especially when individuals are suffering from other problems e.g depression

The application of strengths is a key part of positive psychotherapy. Clients are encouraged to identify their top 5 strengths and try to use them in a new way, every day.

## **Practical Applications: Education**

### **What is Strengths-Based Education?**

A quick video introduction!

In the simplest terms, a strengths-based approach to learning focuses on student's strengths in the classroom instead of their weaknesses. So, instead of pointing out the flaws in a student's learning style or character strengths, a strengths-based approach attempts to identify and cultivate individual strengths. In theory, enabling students to identify and understand their own talents will lead to success in learning because it boosts confidence, enjoyment, and engagement in the classroom (Shushock, 2006).

Another important aspect of the strengths-based approach in education is individualism. Students should be recognized as individuals with individual strengths, and taught that while everyone may not have the same strengths, all strengths are important (Knoop, 2011).

The strengths-based approach to education is appropriate for all levels of learning, and has been implemented in preschool, elementary, high school, and university level programs (citations).

Beyond the classroom, proponents of a strengths-based approach to learning claim that identifying and cultivating individual strengths at school creates citizens who are more successful and engaged in the local community (Shushock, 2006)

### **Is it beneficial?**

*"The focus on what is right with learners and educators creates classroom discussions and teaching and learning strategies that lead to academic success"* (Gallup Student Poll, 2011)

Is there empirical evidence to back this statement up?

Gallup itself claims that their poll revealed that a school's commitment to strengths education is associated with higher student engagement (Gallup Student Poll, 2011). The key word here is associated, as the poll was not a controlled study, but a correlational post hoc analysis. So, the findings of Gallup should be considered with caution.

However, there have been many controlled, empirical studies that look at the benefits of character strengths education.

- Spreitzer, Stephens, and Sweetman found that adolescents who received strengths based feedback from a combination of professional and personal sources was associated with more positive emotional, agentic, and relation resources (Spreitzer et al, 2009) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760902992340#.UvJqinC3sXw>). Beyond simply identifying an adolescent's strengths, it is important to support these strengths both at home and at school.
- Seligman et al. found that adolescents who scored high on the VIA for other-directed strengths such as kindness and teamwork predicted fewer symptoms of depression. Furthermore, adolescents who scored high on transcendence strengths had greater life satisfaction in the future (Seligman et al, 2011) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2010.536773#.UvJq4nC3sXw>).
- Ouwenel, Le Blanc, and Schaufeli found that the combination of positive emotions and personal resources (self-efficacy, hope, and optimism) can be considered predictors of study engagement (Ouwenel et al, 2011) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2011.558847#.UvJpgHC3sXw>).
- Linley et al found that adolescents who participated in character strengths-based exercises in school curriculum experienced significantly increased life satisfaction compared to adolescents who did not participate in the exercises (Linley et al, 2011) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2011.594079#.UvJp2nC3sXw>).
- Shoshani and Aviv found that preschool children's intellectual, interpersonal, group-interaction, temperance, and transcendence strengths were positively related to broad aspects of first grade adjustment (Shoshani & Aviv 2012) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2012.691981#.UvJqMnC3sXw>)
- However, Louis found that simply identifying personal strengths in school can lead children to believe that their strengths are fixed and not fluid, which can have negative effects on their self-esteem. Thus, it is important to spend time in the classroom learning how to develop strengths so children understand that strengths are "natural tendencies that can be developed with effort" and not innate qualities (Louis, 2011) (<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2011.570366#.UvJqYXC3sXw>)

These studies suggest that identifying, encouraging and cultivating individual character strengths in the classroom would lead to a more positive and engaging learning environment and help students become more well adjusted individuals

### **How can it be implemented?**

“although we believe that much additional research needs to be done, we also believe that the research to date provides a reasonable scientific foundation for enhanced professional knowledge and practice with children and youth” (Huebner & Hills, 2011)

### Preschool

Preschool programs should not only focus on academic skills, but also on a motivation for learning, openness to experience, and positive feelings about learning new things (Shoshani & Aviv, 2012).

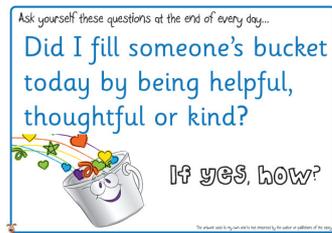
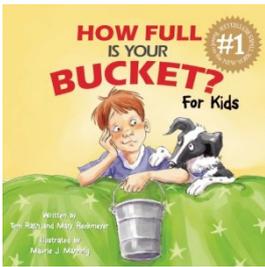
Preschools should also foster social-emotional strengths, because these are strengths that are best emphasized in early stages of development (Shoshani & Aviv, 2012).

Proponents of the strengths approach to learning claim that fostering these skills in preschool will create students who are excited and curious about learning and are ready for school.

#### *Donald O. Clifton Child Development Centre*

The Donald O. Clifton Child Development Centre, a preschool in the United States, has implemented strengths-based learning. The school aims to help children “build their lives around their strengths.” The centre is a model for strengths-based learning and is a training centre for teacher development and education (Sheehan, 2014).

The CEO of the school, Mary Reckmeyer, has also written a book for children, “How Full is Your Bucket? For Kids” which teaches children the importance of good character and is used as a teaching tool in elementary and preschools (Sheehan, 2014).



### Elementary School

Many of the applications of strengths based learning in elementary school in the United States incorporate character strengths into lesson plans for other subjects such as social studies and language arts. It is up to teachers to encourage each child's individual strengths.

#### *Making it Better: Engage*

One example of such a program is the “Making it Better: Engage” program that is used in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, USA.

The goal of the program is to “unite students, teachers, parents, and community leaders to work together to create a culture in each and every school that promotes acceptance, achievement, and accomplishment (2013).”

The program offers lesson plans and videos for teachers to use in their classrooms that address bullying prevention, resilience, and character. These resources aim to support positive changes in the school climate.

Here is an example of a classroom activity at the elementary school level for the character strength of kindness

#### **Kindness Discussion Questions, Vocabulary and Activity** For Grades 3-5

##### **Segment Summary**

**Russell Mayhew's first-hand experience taught him how it feels when people behave unkindly.** Russell Mayhew's old classmates ridiculed him because he was one of the smartest kids in his class. He didn't tell anyone, not even his mother, about the teasing he suffered at school. In time, the cruelty toward Russell escalated to violence when students began beating him up at school and on the bus. When Russell's mother eventually found out about the bullying, she took immediate action by transferring him to a different school where his new classmates are kind and accept Russell's intelligence. Now happy at his new school, Russell has learned that it is important to seek help from adults in order to prevent an unkind situation from developing into a dangerous one.

##### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How does Russell's story demonstrate kind or unkind behavior?
2. How are the kids at Russell's new school different from the kids at his old school? How are they the same?
3. Russell's old classmates ridiculed him because he is smart. What are some other reasons why kids tease and bully each other?
4. Russell and his mother solved his problem by finding a new school. What are some other ways they could have handled the situation?
5. Do you think you would choose to be friends with Russell? Why or why not?

##### **Related Vocabulary Words**

bullying    dedicated    helpfulness    kindness    loyalty

#### *VIA Positive Education Program*

This is a more direct application of positive psychology in the classroom influenced by the VIA institute; a major proponent of strengths based education. Watch the video to see how this plays out in the classroom!

### Middle School/High School

For adolescents, strengths-based feedback and identification has been shown to be associated with greater life satisfaction, more studying behavior and less depression (Ouweneel et al, 2011. Linley et al, 2011. Spreitzer et al, 2009).

#### *The Purnell School*

The Purnell School is a strengths-based high school for girls who struggle in the traditional school system. The school claims to help students “discover their unique strengths in preparation for college and the world.” They also claim that students who were failing in the traditional school system flourish in a school that recognizes and builds on their strengths (2011).

→ keep in mind that this is a private school that makes a profit from student matriculation

Learn more about the school here!

### Higher Education

Gallup's Steps for Colleges and Universities to achieve a strengths-based environment (Shushock, 2006)

1. Study and understand successful students on campus
2. Be intentional about providing mechanisms through which students can identify their strengths
3. Focus on strengths in the context of human differences to establish a sense of community
4. Teach students that strength development is a lifelong process that stems from hard work
5. Assist students in finding groups, organizations, or communities that serve their personal strengths

#### *The Noel Academy*

The Noel Academy at Azusa Pacific University has taken these recommendations to heart. Its goal is to create a positive university atmosphere based on strengths-based leadership and education. They offer strengths-based resources for students and private consultation, certification, and leadership development for education professionals (2014).

You can explore their website here (<http://www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy/>)

Here is a video about the goals and history of The Noel Academy

## **Questions to ask when researching:**

### **(Announced Theory vs Empirical Result: Wild Uncritical Claims)**

#### **Are these Commercial Theories or Empirical Findings?**

It is very easy to find books, websites and articles containing 'recent findings' from 'professionals' in the area of positive psychology, and the strengths approach more specifically. There is a lot of money to be made in 'psychological findings' that can 'change your life', 'make you rich' and 'help you find the key to success'. Being aware of this while researching will help us to separate the significant research developments from the commercially motivated ideas.

Taking this into account, consider the Pareto Principle (also known as the 80:20 rule): Pareto as an early sociologist found that approximately 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. From this he related the ratio to a number of other significant findings, and the principle now has thousands of applications in economics, business and sociology, for example:

80% of the health care resources are used by 20% of the population

80% of a business' production is made by 20% of its sales employees

This principle suggests that in order for an organisation to be successful, it is better off developing its strengths than its weaknesses, i.e. developing the top 20% of sales people than developing the other 80%. (Clifton and Harter, 2003) This correlates with recent research on strength development that suggests that in order to improve services such as education and healthcare, and in order to become more satisfied with our lives as individuals, we should focus on developing our strengths (the top 20%). Here, we should consider that the Pareto Principle is a theory that has a scientific basis, and may offer ideas on positive development in strengths, however it has also become commercialized and sold as a method to improve success in areas such as leadership, sales and relationships (e.g. Johnson, 2002; Maxwell, 2002).

#### **Is the Research Established Enough to make Significant Claims?**

The Strengths Approach is very theory-based, with high volumes of literature of how to apply the strengths theory to different aspects of our individual lives, business, education, clinical settings, societal situations and many more, however there is comparatively little empirical research to provide adequate justification. One area where more extensive research has been carried out is in the social work environment. There are more empirical findings and practical applications that look towards developing the approach to social work in the future (e.g. Saleebey, 1996 and Oko, 2006).

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### **Practical Applications**

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