

# A renewed focus on strengths-based assessment in schools

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School-based practitioners are often called upon to provide assessment and recommendations for struggling students. These assessments often open doors to specialised services or interventions and provide opportunities for students to build competencies in areas of need. However, these assessments often fail to highlight the abilities of these students and instead focus on areas in need of remediation. The use of a more positive, or strengths-based, approach to working with students is needed. Although strengths-based assessment (SBA) is not a new concept, it is not routinely incorporated into school-based assessment services. This article provides an overview of SBA and its benefits, along with empirically-driven models that support the implementation of SBA in schools, and calls for a renewed focus on understanding students from a strengths-based model. Examples of SBA measures and techniques are included, along with implications for practice for both students and psychologists.

**Key words:** strengths-based assessment, school psychology, school-based practice

Psychology is typically viewed as a pathology-focused profession. Individuals seek psychological support when something is wrong or when there is an issue that needs to be 'solved.' Graduate-level psychology programmes emphasise courses in child and adolescent disorders, child psychopathology and clinically-based interventions for psychological disorders. Much research effort and focus is devoted to understanding how and why individuals experience distress and what can be done to ameliorate these concerns.

But why are psychologists so focused on the negative aspects of individual lives? It is acknowledged that it is necessary to support those who are encountering challenges, but this focus is often at the expense of recognising what is going well in individuals' lives. Many people are successful in their personal and professional lives. They are healthy, optimistic and mentally stable. What is it about these individuals that allows them to be successful and how are we, as psychologists, able to support their progress?

The purpose of this article is to advocate for a greater focus on the identification of strengths in children. Although many children have difficulty in one aspect of their lives (such as academic achievement, or social-emotional well-being), they often display areas of competence that are not identified, acknowledged or strengthened. This article will provide a detailed overview of strengths-based assessment (SBA), identification of the benefits of this approach to working with students, suggestions for implementation of strength-based techniques, and implications for both students and practitioners.

### **Psychoeducational assessment**

Psychoeducational assessments are examinations conducted by psychologists as a way to gain a clearer understanding of a child who may be having difficulties at school (Fagan & Wise, 2007). These assessments may incorporate classroom observation, school file review, standardised or non-standardised test administration, and consultation with parents and teachers (Fagan & Wise, 2007). Typically, such assessments focus on identifying areas in need of remediation and provide less information on student capabilities. Indeed, graduate programmes in school psychology provide comprehensive training in standardised test administration and assessment techniques, with the goal of discovering what underlying issues may be impacting student learning and well-being in the classroom.

However, psychoeducational assessments also contribute to the feelings children have about themselves, the feelings parents have towards their children, and how teachers are able to help. Parents are often discouraged by reports that portray their children negatively, and some teachers feel that these same reports do not contain enough recommendations for how to help their students (Buckley & Epstein, 2004; Lebeer et al., 2012). This negativity appears to inhibit, rather than promote, learning and development (Lebeer et al., 2012). In this regard, when compared to problem-focused assessments, SBA has been found to lead to higher parent satisfaction, lower rates of missed appointments, and better functioning outcomes for students (Cox, 2006). The type of assessment used by psychologists, whether strength-based or deficit-based, impacts the way in which students'

behaviours are characterised and, subsequently, how students and parents feel (Buckley & Epstein, 2004). It is therefore critical to find ways in which psychologists are able to integrate SBA within their assessment protocol and convey these results in their reports to teachers and parents.

### **Strengths-based approaches to assessment**

Use of a strengths-based approach to working with students is not a new concept (see Epstein, 1998; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Over the past two decades, there has been a movement towards bringing a more person-focused positive view to working with individuals, yet this call has, for the most part, remained unanswered (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). However, without a continual push for a greater focus on a strengths-based approach to understanding individuals, the emphasis on problem-centred methods to identification and intervention will remain and student strengths will continue to be overlooked.

SBA is a paradigm which is guided by the notion that all students, regardless of their current state or functioning, have inherent strengths and skills that may be drawn upon to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the student (Epstein, 1999; Provence et al., 1995). This paradigm is based on several core beliefs: (1) all students have strengths and skills that, if identified, will lead to heightened motivation; (2) all students have the capacity to learn and demonstrate strengths; failure to demonstrate a particular skill does not indicate deficit, rather it suggests that they require further experience, instruction or opportunity for mastery; and (3) focusing on students' strengths and resources will probably lead them to use these skills; thus, individual education plans (IEPs) should be based upon the strengths or resources of the child (Epstein, 1998; Terjesen et al., 2004).

In contrast to SBA, traditional deficit-focused models of assessment place emphasis on identifying children's problems or weaknesses (Jimerson et al., 2004). The focus is on the behaviours or skills that are lacking and therefore require remediation or intervention, with little consideration of the abilities of the child. A deficit-focused assessment seldom takes into consideration a child's assets, such as a supportive family, social skills or individual characteristics such as motivation or perseverance (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Terjesen et al., 2004).

The primary focus of assessment practices in schools involves identifying student deficits, especially when determining eligibility or fit for special education services (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013). Other than the occasional listing of strengths on an IEP, student competencies are not typically considered as a way to improve understanding or support for the student (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013). However,

focusing on deficits does not necessarily lead to better outcomes for a student and may actually produce inadvertent negative effects. These unintended effects may be to: (1) demoralise youth or diminish self-confidence; (2) reduce motivation; (3) place a focus on past failures; (4) stigmatise and stereotype youth; and (5) alienate youth from feeling a sense of belonging in the community (Laursen, 2003). While it is important properly to identify the needs of students who require specialised support, a failure to consider student abilities limits the holistic understanding of each unique individual.

Empirical evidence supporting SBA continues to build and psychologists are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of its use in providing a more comprehensive understanding of a student. Cox (2006) noted that children who were assessed using strengths-based measures, such as the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (Buckley & Epstein, 2004), showed significantly better outcomes than children whose therapist used only a traditional assessment. It is acknowledged that some psychologists identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses in children during assessment and suggest the use of strengths to support areas of deficit, but this approach is not consistently applied. Despite compelling evidence, there has been a delay of the use of strengths-based measures in school-based psychological practice.

### **Benefits of SBA**

There are a number of benefits to using a strengths-based approach in psychological assessment with school-aged children. First, this approach allows for a more well-rounded representation of an individual child, capturing his or her unique abilities (Jimerson et al., 2004; Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013; Nickerson, 2007; Rashid & Ostermann 2009; Rhee et al., 2001; Wilder et al., 2006). SBA provides a more balanced view of the child, highlighting the competencies and areas of strengths that are both internal and external to the child (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Jimerson et al., 2004). Specifically, SBA acknowledges the importance of the ecological and contextual variables a child brings forth and how these factors may contribute to a child's strengths and limitations (Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee et al., 2001). Wilder and colleagues (2006) also noted that the holistic nature of SBA informs the creation of IEPs and behavioural intervention plans (BIPs), aiding school psychologists in providing more relevant recommendations and interventions for parents and teachers. A broad awareness of a child's strengths and the contextual factors that he or she may bring forth (for example, strong family support, living arrangements, individual intelligence, neighbourhood resources) provides a more representative picture that can inform recommendations and may help remedy areas of difficulty (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009).

A second benefit of SBA is that it provides a more preventative focus. While deficit-focused assessments often wait for the emergence of problematic symptoms or behaviours (or wait for them to reach a critical level), SBA takes a more proactive approach by assessing the absence of a necessary skill that may be crucial for healthy development. This positive approach may, in turn, help prevent or reduce the severity of symptomatic behaviours (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004). For example, in a classroom-based intervention programme, Rawana et al. (2011) examined a strength-based bullying prevention programme. The programme focused on implementing students' individual strengths within classrooms as a way of reducing school-based bullying, with results revealing a significant decrease in bullying victimisation and an improvement in classroom climate. As such, SBA may have important implications for school-based professionals as it may help identify skills that are relative weaknesses for a student and nurture them in a more preventative manner. Given the preventative and wellness-focused approach, SBA has the ability to identify and potentially remedy the emergence of problematic behaviour.

Finally, utilisation of SBA provides teachers and parents with a more optimistic and positive view of a child (Wilder et al., 2006). This positive approach is a significant asset of SBA, especially given that parents often feel discouraged by the negative reports regarding their children (Lebeer et al., 2012). By highlighting the competencies of a child, SBA fosters optimism, hope and motivation for change for children, parents and teachers (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Jimerson et al., 2004). This empowerment has important implications with regard to both IEPs and BIPs. For example, when parents and teachers see the strengths of their child in reports, they may be more receptive to recommendations made by psychologists and, subsequently, be more likely to follow through on the implementation of recommended interventions (Mastoras et al., 2011; Rhee et al., 2001).

Overall, SBA provides a more holistic picture of a child which, by nature, implies recognition of strengths in light of weaknesses. However, the use of a strengths-based approach in schools remains a challenge to many professionals and is often under-utilised in psychoeducational assessment. The following section outlines some techniques for integrating SBA into traditional assessment to ensure that student abilities are not overlooked.

### **Implementation of SBA in schools**

Although many practitioners and professionals recognise the importance and benefits of SBA, they often struggle with knowing how to implement these principles within the school environment. This problem with implementation may be due to a lack of a comprehensive model or framework in which to work, as well

as the difficulty with integrating strengths-based results into a deficit-focused referral (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013; Nickerson & Fishman, 2013). In addition, university training programmes in psychology and education often do not incorporate an understanding of SBA into training programmes and coursework, leaving a practitioner to seek out resources and professional development in his or her own time. As such, in recognition of the paucity of research regarding how professionals can practically implement SBA in psychological assessment, researchers have offered several strategies for use in school-based assessments. Specifically, SBA may be used in school-wide, classroom-based and individual assessment through a variety of models and approaches.

SBA can be implemented at all three levels of response to intervention in schools, providing an opportunity for both universal and targeted use (Nickerson & Fishman, 2013). At the primary, or universal, level, SBA may be used as a screening tool to identify how well a school is meeting its students' social and emotional needs. The information collected from this type of implementation can help to inform intervention planning. For example, the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA; LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999) is a standardised SBA that evaluates protective factors present within preschool children. When administered within the preschool environment, Lamb-Parker et al. (2008) found that the DECA helped to inform schools in the development of strategies for more supportive classroom environments, such as through the implementation of staff training, class-wide social-emotional intervention and individual self-reflection.

At the secondary level (within an individual classroom), SBA can be utilised in a preventative manner to identify students who are at risk for developing social or emotional problems (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Nickerson & Fishman, 2013). Lamb-Parker and colleagues (2008) suggest that schools can use the results from a classroom-wide SBA to identify students who may require additional support and may build on identified strengths to increase social and emotional resources. Finally, at the tertiary, or individual, level, information from the SBAs can be utilised to guide interventions and IEPs (Nickerson & Fishman, 2013; Nickerson, 2007). Here, individual student needs can be identified and remediated through targeted one-on-one intervention, individual psychoeducational assessment or other personalised supports as needed.

Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013) also provide recommendations for the strategic implementation of SBA in schools. Specifically, they provide a theoretical SBA model that draws from a broad scientific and psychological theory, informed by neurodevelopment, positive psychology, ecological, and resilience

research perspectives, to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of cognitive, academic, social and emotional well-being in children. This model, the Leveraging Strengths and Intervention Model, or LeStAIM, incorporates the use of both strengths and weaknesses as a way to facilitate growth and student development through both school-wide and individually-focused interventions (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013).

Although many researchers agree that it is important to integrate SBA information into psychological, educational or behavioural reports (for example, Cox, 2006; Mastoras et al., 2011; Nickerson, 2007; Nickerson & Fishman, 2013; Rashid & Ostermann, 2009), it is often difficult to do so within the context of a deficit-focused referral. To aid with this difficulty, LeStAIM uses the results from SBAs and leverages the identified strengths as a way to remedy weaknesses. LeStAIM uses a similar approach to traditional deficit-focused assessments, but instead focuses on using the identified strengths as a way to assist them in developing their weaknesses. This model is in congruence with previous research which suggests that an assessment approach that identifies and combines both strengths and limitations is most effective in supporting students (Cox, 2006; Nickerson, 2007).

A final model in which to implement SBA within schools is through a sequential process (Nickerson & Fishman, 2013). Using this method, Nickerson and Fishman describe six steps that psychologists may use to put SBA into action: (1) select; (2) advocate; (3) plan; (4) communicate; (5) execute; and (6) share/re-evaluate. The first step involves selecting a SBA that is suitable for the school and/or student needs and may include formal psychological measures, interviews or screening surveys. Second, psychologists must advocate for their chosen path with school or district administration to gain their support. This advocacy incorporates discussion regarding the purpose and direction of the assessment, and the rationale for choosing this technique or measure, and outlines the clear benefits of SBA to the school or student. After an agreement has been reached, the psychologist should then gather a group of interested and invested individuals to formulate a plan of action for implementation (for example, teachers, support staff, parents, student leaders). Once a plan has been established, the psychologist should communicate necessary details to school or district administration (for example, cost, time, necessary resources). From here, the plan should be executed. Finally, psychologists should share the results of their work, both successes and challenges, with colleagues and other interested individuals, followed by re-evaluation and planning for future implementation. This process outlines a concrete way in which psychologists may bring SBA to schools at the universal,

targeted and individual levels (Nickerson & Fishman, 2013) and provides detailed models within which psychologists may work.

### **Psychological measures of SBA**

While the previous section outlined strategies and models that allow for a more strengths-focused approach to working with students in schools, it is important for psychologists to be aware of assessment measures that may be applicable to their practice. Although the following list is not exhaustive, it is hoped that these measures will allow practitioners to become more familiar with a variety of SBA measures (listed in alphabetical order).

*Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, Second Edition (BERS-2; Buckley & Epstein, 2004)*

The BERS-2 is a standardised, norm-referenced scale used to identify the individual competencies of children and youth aged five to 18 years and may be completed by children, parents or teachers. Specific scales include interpersonal strength, involvement with family, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, affective strength and career strength. These scales may be particularly important when working with an adolescent who is struggling to find acceptance in the classroom environment and who is struggling with identifying life goals. Psychometrically, the BERS-2 was found to have good convergent validity and strong test–retest reliability (all correlations above 0.80; see Epstein et al., 2004 for review).

*Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Preschool Program, Second Edition (DECA-2; LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2012)*

The DECA-2 is a standardised, norm-referenced measure designed for use with a preschool population (ages three to five) through both paper- and web-based administration. Scales include initiative, self-regulation, attachment/relationships, behavioural concerns and total protective factors. Summary reports also provide specific intervention and recommendation suggestions for areas of individual need. The DECA-2 is an excellent tool for use with young children and demonstrates strong internal, test–retest and inter-rater reliability (Reddy, 2007).

*Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA; LeBuffe et al., 2009)*

The DESSA is a standardised, norm-referenced scale used to understand the social-emotional abilities of children and youth in kindergarten to grade eight (age four to 14 years). It incorporates a number of domain scores, including personal responsibility, optimistic thinking, goal-directed behaviour, social awareness, decision making, relationship skills, self-awareness and self-management.



An exploration of the validity of the DESSA found strong convergent and divergent validity (Nickerson & Fishman, 2009).

*Resiliency Scales for Children & Adolescents (RSCA; Prince-Embury, 2007)*

The RSCA is a norm-referenced scale that focuses on identifying aspects of resilience and strength in children and adolescents aged nine to 18 years. Scales include sense of mastery (such as optimism, adaptability), sense of relatedness (such as relationships with others), and emotional reactivity (such as vulnerability to stress). Psychometrically, the RSCA demonstrates adequate internal consistency and validity (Prince-Embury, 2010).

*Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS; Merrell, 2011)*

The SEARS is a strengths-based measure that focuses more specifically on the assessment of social-emotional abilities, as the name implies. It provides composite t-scores for children aged five to 18 years through self, parent and teacher forms in a number of domains, including self-regulation, social competence, empathy and responsibility. The technical manual reports good psychometric properties for the SEARS (Merrell, 2011).

*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman & Goodman, 2009)*

The SDQ is a free downloadable measure for individuals aged three to 16 years available from the Youth in Mind website. This measure is available in 80 languages with norms from 10 countries and measures emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviours. It should be noted that only the pro-social behaviours section taps into a strengths-based approach to working with children, but this versatile measure may be particularly useful when working with families for whom English is a second language. Psychometrically, this measure demonstrates good convergent validity but poorer discriminant validity (Hill & Hughes, 2007).

*Strengths Assessment Inventory (SAI; Brazeau et al., 2012)*

The SAI uses both self-report and observer-report (for example, teacher, parent) to provide a clearer understanding of personal strengths in youth aged 10 to 18 years. This measure captures a number of aspects of a youth's life, including school, friends, family, free time, culture, faith, work and romantic relationships, and allows for identification of individual talents and priorities. Psychometrically, the authors note that the SAI demonstrates acceptable to good levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Brazeau et al., 2012).

## **Implications**

### *For students*

SBA has the potential to offer many benefits for students undergoing psychological assessment. First, SBA provides families with a more encouraging and optimistic outlook on their child. This more positive and proactive approach may empower and motivate students and families to make change (Rhee et al., 2001). This sense of empowerment makes it more likely that family members will be willing to implement recommendations and interventions suggested by psychologists (Mastoras et al., 2011). When parents and teachers are encouraged by the recommendations, a child may be more likely to receive the supports that he or she needs to thrive and succeed at school.

Second, SBA provides a more well-rounded view of the student. No one likes his or her areas of weakness to be highlighted or shared, and students who are struggling at school often know that they are having difficulty. This negative focus may impact an individual's self-esteem, potentially causing further adverse effect on the child. By using SBA, psychologists are able to provide more accurate information to teachers that fully captures the nature of student strengths and needs. Consequently, this assessment may help students to feel better understood and has the potential to protect, or even enhance, their mental health and well-being (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). Students who have teachers and parents who fully comprehend their strengths and needs will probably feel better supported, having positive impacts on student self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Finally, SBA helps to inform appropriate recommendations and interventions that may be most beneficial for a student. If an assessment has determined that a student is a strong visual learner and weaker in grasping information verbally, recommendations that integrate this profile and incorporate a more prevalent visual component may be more useful and successful than those that focus solely on enhancing verbal learning. In addition, understanding the strengths of a child may aid in supporting areas of deficit. For example, if a child is struggling in mathematics but is strongly connected to his or her peers, the use of a more competent 'maths buddy' may aid the child in developing necessary skills in a less threatening and more enjoyable manner.

### *For practitioners*

Why might SBA be beneficial for school-based practitioners? There are a number of reasons as to why individuals who work in schools may wish to incorporate SBA into their practice. First, utilisation of a strengths-based approach may facilitate greater 'buy-in' from interested parties, such as teachers, school

administration and parents. The identification of strengths in a struggling child may help to create a more positive working relationship between the school and family as well as between the psychologist and the school.

Second, use of SBA may help to decrease the frustration of the parents and teachers who see the child on a daily basis. The focus on strengths may allow these individuals to recognise and celebrate aspects of the child's life that are going well, instead of a continued focus on negative behaviours or outcomes (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Cox, 2006; Terjesen et al., 2004). Given the challenges experienced by some students, an opportunity to re-identify positive traits and aspects of a child may be a welcome change for parents, teachers and the child him- or herself.

Finally, a focus on strengths allows psychologists the opportunity to make a positive difference in a child's life. Going through an assessment report in a parent feedback session when a child is experiencing so many challenges in his or her life can be difficult; there are so many negative aspects to mention. However, the opportunity to comment on positive aspects, no matter how small, allows for a more balanced and hopeful view of the child, providing optimism for improvement in the child's life.

## **Conclusions**

The concept of SBA is not new. Although it is acknowledged that some practitioners recognise the importance of understanding a child's identity beyond his or her presenting concerns and behaviours, this way of thinking is not necessarily the norm throughout academic and educational worlds. The uptake in the use of these measures in school-based assessment is somewhat limited, partly due to the time constraints of psychologists and partly due to a lack of graduate-level training in these measures. It is important for graduate and undergraduate programmes in psychology and education to recognise the benefits of a strengths-based understanding of students and the positive outcomes that may follow these types of assessment.

It is clear that the use of SBA in psychoeducational assessment is beneficial and may provide a more accurate view of an individual child and his or her abilities, particularly when working with challenging children (Climie & Mastoras, 2015). Consideration of individual strengths recognises that each child brings a unique skill set to the classroom and acknowledges that each learner may benefit from individual planning. By working together, parents, psychologists and teachers can

create a more understanding and supportive environment for all students, regardless of strengths or weaknesses.

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