THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING
ON BUILDING CAPACITY IN MIDDLE LEADERS
TO IMPROVE STAFF AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
IN A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IN SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

This thesis is my own composition and is the result of my own research and work.

It contains no material that has been published elsewhere or taken in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree.

No other person’s work has been used without acknowledgment in the text of this thesis.

All research procedures reported in this thesis have been given the approval of the Morling College Human Research Ethics for Education Panel (HREEP).

Signed:  Rebecca Hall

Dated:  November 1st, 2019
Abstract

This qualitative study of middle school leaders utilises a case study approach to examine the effectiveness of strengths-based coaching on building capacity in middle leaders to improve staff and student engagement at a Christian school in Sydney, Australia. Data was gathered from a series of four strengths-based coaching interviews and a survey administered after the completion of all four coaching sessions. The results of this study demonstrated that strengths-based coaching was effective in helping middle leaders to gain a greater awareness of their own strengths, and how to use these strengths more effectively in their leadership roles to build staff engagement. There is scope for more work to be undertaken in assisting middle leaders use their strengths to further understanding of their responsibilities as leaders to drive pedagogical change and improve student outcomes.

[NB: Parts of this thesis are not for publication for reasons of privacy and confidentiality]
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Background to the Study

The study took place in a school located in Sydney, with an enrolment of approximately 1,000 students ranging from preschool to Year 12. A number of new initiatives are being introduced at the School, particularly in areas of pedagogical change focused on increasing student engagement and achieving better student outcomes. The successful implementation of these strategies is the responsibility of Middle Leaders, whose roles sit between the executive staff, comprised of the Principal and Deputy Principal, and the teaching staff. Middle leadership roles include Heads of School, faculty coordinators and stage and welfare coordinators. In this particular school setting, whilst there is a belief that changes are necessary and a sense of excitement about implementing them, there is also some anxiety amongst staff who feel overwhelmed by the task and, in some cases, ill-equipped to lead change. It is the responsibility of senior leadership to build capacity in these middle leaders and enable them to increase their competency and leadership.

The role of senior staff to enhance the leadership opportunities of others is often referred to by the phrase “capacity building”, a term that has been widely used to refer to any effort employed to improve the abilities, skills and expertise of educators. In 2009, Stoll (as cited in Huggins, Klar, Hammonds. & Buskey, 2017) defined capacity as “a quality that allows people to learn from the world around them and apply this learning to new situations so that they can continue on a path toward their goal in an ever-changing context” (p. 3). Strengths-based coaching is defined as both an approach and an outcome that focuses on the identification, use and development of strengths to enable optimal functioning, performance and development (Linley, Woolston & Biswas-Diener, 2009, p.40).

The study addressed strengths-based coaching as a means of assisting middle leaders to recognise and improve areas where they have natural skills and abilities so that the leadership in the school could be better distributed, and all educators engaged in the process of change. Distributed leadership practices engage people who possess the right expertise rather than assigning responsibility only to those with formal positions and have been shown to be more effective for bringing about educational reform and increased academic improvement (Bush, 2011, p. 88).

Similarly, it is the responsibility of middle leaders to drive the changes associated with pedagogy and improve the capacity of the teaching staff. Hattie wrote that teachers account for 30% of the variance in student achievement and the focus for schools should therefore be “directing attention at higher quality teaching” and “identifying, esteeming and growing those who have powerful influences on learning” (Hattie, 2003, p. 4). Middle leaders are largely responsible for building capacity in teachers
and leading reforms in student learning. Coaching of middle leaders is one means by which principals and other executive staff can create the climate for these reforms to occur.

The researcher and coach for this project is the recently appointed Deputy Principal of the School with expertise in using the Gallup Strengths coaching model. The Gallup Strengths Survey is a tool which identifies a participant’s natural patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving and categorises them into 34 themes or talents that are grouped into four key domains (refer to Appendix A) – executing strengths, relationship building strengths, strategic thinking strengths and influencing strengths (Rath and Conchie, 2008, pp. 23-24). These talents are ranked in order from 1-34 according to how prominently they influence the participant’s patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. The Gallup Strengths survey was administered to staff in leadership positions prior to commencement of this study. Middle leaders throughout the school were provided with a link to the online survey and completed a 45-minute survey consisting of 180 questions. Participants selected for this study shared their results with the researcher prior to the commencement of coaching interviews.

This study addressed the question of whether strengths-based coaching is an effective means of building capacity in middle leaders by enabling them to better understand their own leadership style, increase their confidence to lead and facilitate pedagogical change, and provide opportunities for them to reflect on their practice as leaders to develop their identified talents (Rath & Conchie, 2008), talents that have been given to them by God to do His work and serve His people.

Coaching conversations help people to: clarify outcomes; identify and explore strengths that can assist in progressing towards that outcome; explore options and strategies to achieve the outcome; generate insight and clarity through effective listening and questioning; identify action steps; and, incorporate an element of accountability (Campbell & Niuewerburgh, p. 21). Coaching can be a catalyst for change and an approach that helps people manage the challenges they face by exploring ways to “shift practices in the right direction” (Paterson & Munro, 2019, p. 47). It enables people to set realistic goals and facilitates the ability for them to act within the constraints of their current context. Coaching, therefore, has the potential to enable middle leaders to have autonomy and empowers them to take responsibility for improving staff and student engagement in their areas of leadership.
Purpose of the Study

This study examined the effectiveness of strengths-based coaching on building capacity in middle leaders in a Christian School in Sydney, Australia. The purpose of building capacity through strengths-based coaching sessions is in order to:

- Provide an opportunity for middle leaders to reflect on their practice as leaders; and
- Provide an opportunity for middle leaders to develop existing talents

Research Question

How effective is strengths-based coaching on building the capacity of middle leaders to improve staff and student engagement in one Christian School in Sydney, Australia?

Benefits and Significance of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine whether strengths-based coaching enabled leaders in middle leadership positions to build awareness of their own strengths and help them understand the responsibilities of their leadership position, especially in building the capacity of their staff in order to improve both staff and student engagement. The study provided the opportunity for the outcome of strengths-based coaching to be achieved. The criteria used for judging effectiveness in this study was whether middle leaders developed

1. A greater understanding of their strengths;
2. A greater understanding of their role and responsibilities as a leader in the school;
3. Stronger relationships with their team; and
4. Understanding of how to use their strengths better in their leadership roles.

Further strengths-based conversations with all middle leaders will provide the means by which they can identify their strengths and set goals that enable them to lead more effectively. As a result, middle leaders will be better equipped to lead cultural change, increase staff engagement, and consequently student outcomes, whilst maintaining a distinctively Christian approach to education. This is an approach that is concerned with the formation of character that equips students to be disciples of Jesus, enables students to find meaningful ways of serving God and His people, and for students to do the good works that He has prepared in advance for them to do (Ephesians 2:10).

Outline of the Thesis

The literature review in Chapter 2 examines the research on building capacity in middle leaders and the benefits of strengths-based coaching. Chapter 3 presents the argument for the use of a positive psychology framework and a strengths-based approach, as well as providing a biblical perspective for
the approaches taken in this study. The research design, participants, instruments and methodology, along with the processes for collecting and analysing data, are explained in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the results of the study, the findings of which are discussed in Chapter 6. Finally, recommendations for further research and discussion about the implications of this study for the School community are explored in Chapter 7.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Capacity Building of Middle Leaders

Fullan and Quinn (2015) argued that a school aiming to improve academic results and increase student engagement must ensure that all staff involved in this process understand the purpose and nature of the work to be undertaken. This purpose and united understanding, which they refer to as coherence, is found within supportive structures where leaders lead by building capacity in their staff and where effective leaders foster moral purpose by building relationships with people, listening to and understanding the perspectives of others, and creating conditions to connect others around that purpose (p. 19).

Building Capacity through Distributed Leadership

Capacity is built through distributed leadership that allows the people that they have distributed the leadership to, to take risks. Huggins et al’s (2017) study on the importance of the principal’s role in building capacity of other leaders indicated that increased academic results and successful educational reforms take place when school principals increase their school’s organisational capabilities by engaging others in school leadership through distributed leadership practices (Huggins et al, 2017, p. 2). It has been argued that distributed leadership is itself the process of capacity building where principals take “a purposeful approach to increasing school effectiveness through the involvement of other formal and informal school leaders in leadership activities” (Huggins, et al., 2017, p. 5) allowing middle leaders to take risks and learn from their experiences. Leading a school through a period of change requires risk taking and innovation. The impact of recent educational reform trends has made it difficult for a school leader, such as a principal, to take sole responsibility and authority. Therefore, it is the responsibility of senior leaders to distribute leadership by ensuring that all leaders feel empowered and enabled to take these risks and then trust them to do so without negative consequence or micromanagement (Heng & Marsh, 2009, p. 525).

The Importance of Trust for Building Capacity

Dean Fink (2016), in writing about trust, argued that higher levels of learning occur only if sustained by a culture that is characterised by institutional trust, relational trust and self-trust. He also argued that whilst leaders need to feel trusted as professionals they also require indicators to determine “the efficacy of their teaching and leading”, and “benchmarks for growth and development” (p. 43). Kouzes and Posner cite trust as a strong predictor of “the quality of communication, honest sharing of information, acceptance of change, and acceptance of the leader’s influence and team performance” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 220). In situations where coaching is being implemented as a strategy for building capacity in middle leaders, it is vital that the coach creates an atmosphere of trust which will
enable the middle leader to be honest about his or her concerns, failings and the challenges he or she face in their leadership role, and in doing so be able to respond empathetically to the leaders they are coaching, allowing them to feel respected and understood (Nelson & Hogan, 2009, p. 14). Trust is also essential for leaders who seek to live out their Christian faith. Max de Pree (as cited in Banks & Ledbetter, 2004) wrote that “trust grows when people see leaders translate their personal integrity into organisational fidelity when followers see that leaders can be depended on to do the right thing” (p. 99). Strengths coaching sessions provide an opportunity for a coach to connect with a middle leader, building trust, and collaborating through conversations that will help them identify these benchmarks and provide evidence of growth by putting in place mechanisms for regularly learning from the work (Fullan, Quinn & McEachen, 2018, p. 70). Hogan and Benson (as cited in Nelson & Hogan, 2009) noted that “introspection alone cannot meaningfully enhance strategic self-awareness” (p. 16). They maintained that this awareness requires “performance based feedback” which can be achieved through authentic coaching relationships between senior leadership and middle management to provide sound leadership where growth and sustainable change are required.

**Middle Leaders use Data to Identify Needs**

Middle leaders must also be entrusted with the task of interpreting data and diagnosing the needs of the areas for which they are responsible. Fullan (2015) wrote that learning is about “developing the capabilities that allow you to diagnose what is going on in the complex and constantly shifting context of real world practice and then find an appropriate response” (p. 86). Over years of examining the effectiveness of exemplary leaders, Kouzes and Posner (2012) asked thousands of people to reflect on their experiences of feeling both powerless and powerful in their leadership situations. The research demonstrated that people felt powerful when data was shared with them, when they were entrusted to take on responsibility in areas unfamiliar to them, when they were able to exercise discretion about how to handle situations, when someone in leadership believed in their potential and displayed confidence in them to others, when they were able to make some of their own decisions and given the resources to do the task more effectively, and when they were given the chance to learn new skills and opportunities to apply them (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 246). Coaching helps participants to not only identify what is going on by “continuously assessing their capacity to perform in the context of the challenges they face” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 257) but also helps them to work through strategies and options to find the appropriate response by developing competence and building confidence.
Middle Leaders as the drivers of change

Middle leaders are the drivers of teacher-level change. The design principle behind the work of Day and Grice (2019) on the influence and impact of leading from the middle is the belief that middle leadership is a series of actions and the belief held by these leaders that, central to their role, is a responsibility for leading pedagogy that focuses on improving teacher and student engagement and outcomes. Day and Grice’s research findings also confirmed that deputy principals and other senior staff play an essential part in enhancing middle leaders’ opportunities to lead. Harris and Jones (2017) highlighted the pivotal role that middle leaders play in securing better learning outcomes for students. This role stems from the influence middle leaders have on building professional learning communities, and influencing the classroom practice of the teachers they lead (Harris & Jones, 2017, p. 214.) It is the work of middle leaders to help staff study the rationale of a new practice and its impact on the school curriculum, modelling this new practice and helping their staff gain the skills required to implement it (Joyce, 2019, p. 9).

Fullan’s research (as cited in Harris & Jones, 2017) also indicates the challenges faced by middle leaders as a result of attracting pressure from both the top and the bottom of the organisation. Heng and Marsh (2009) attested that the leadership roles of middle leaders often overlap with the roles of others and change as different needs arise (Heng & Marsh, 2009, p. 526). Middle leaders, therefore, require support that allows them to develop their potential, foster interdependency and shared responsibility, and “contribute meaningfully to the development of structures and processes that shape expectations for the larger school community” (Heng & Marsh, 2009, p. 526). Middle leaders have to focus not only on developing the knowledge and skills required to plan and lead changes to the curriculum but are also required to be “diagnostic practitioners of ongoing decision making within a school and to understand and interpret student achievement results” (p. 532) and possess skills in peer coaching, engaging in trialling new pedagogies and adapting to and shaping change (p. 532).

Heng and Marsh’s study of middle leaders in primary schools in Singapore acknowledged that an important skill set for middle leaders is their interpersonal skills, in particular their ability to manage change successfully by influencing others. Middle leaders in Heng and Marsh’s study emphasised the need to build shared culture and establish relationships, both with those to whom they reported and those they led, and recognised the importance of building a shared culture of learning by developing personal capacity (Heng & Marsh, 2009, p. 529).

The literature demonstrated that middle leaders need to value the importance of understanding the strategic direction of the School in order to communicate that vision to the teacher staff. Without an understanding of the School’s strategic vision teachers are more resistant to change because they do
not understand the rationale for decisions (Heng & Marsh, p. 530). Developing capacity in middle leaders means that the executive should include them in the making of key decisions and equipping them so that they can be role models in showing resistant and overwhelmed teachers what is feasible (p. 531). It is also important that schools recognise the significance of subcultures within the school that offer teachers “a sense of identity in the teaching and learning of their subject” and “a sense of spirit amongst teachers with whom they work in close proximity” (Heng & Marsh, 2009, p. 530). Middle leaders are the conduit between the School executive and the teachers, and can also be instrumental in helping to build relationships with teachers across the School.

Building Capacity to Lead Teams

Avolio and Bass (as cited in Nelson & Hogan, 2009,) wrote that competent leaders build effective teams by ensuring they “understand their subordinates needs, abilities and aspirations and can persuade them to share the leader’s vision” (p.10). There has been considerable research into the role of professional learning communities being integral to the success of teachers working collaboratively to focus on continued improvement in student outcomes (Atta, 2019, p. 19). Middle leaders are typically responsible for leading these teams. As the school used for this research study heads into a period of strategic planning, the role of middle leaders to share their knowledge, establish structures and processes that enable the school to set priorities, and formulate strategies of strategic importance (Caldwell, 2019, p.13) will be key to its success.

Strengths-based coaching

Defining strengths

A strength has been defined as “the ability to provide consistent near perfect performance in a given activity” (Winseman, Clifton & Liesveld, 2008, p. 7). A strength is achieved when a talent is combined with both skill and knowledge. An individual’s talents, as identified in the Clifton Strengths Finder survey developed by the Gallup Organisation, ascertain the “recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behaviour” (p. 7) that exist naturally within a person and that cannot be acquired. They are described as inborn predispositions that people do instinctively and are transferable from situation to situation (p. 7).

Kouzes and Posner argued that exemplary leaders allow people to be responsible for their success by “enhancing their competence and their confidence in their abilities” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 243). By asking participants to reflect how their strengths have contributed to their past successes, strengths-based conversations focus on demonstrated capacity to imitate Christ, fulfil our purpose, and build confidence.
Strengths-based coaching methods

Coaching is the art of asking good questions that allow people the room to think; to frame issues from their own perspective; to indicate an underlying trust in their abilities by being accountable, and giving them the opportunity to own the solution (Kouzes & Posner, p. 266). Robinson (2015) argued that the deepest learning occurs when people are encouraged through courageous, supportive and effective coaching practice to locate their own areas for development and new learning, and when the questions addressed in these conversations help staff to examine their moral purpose. When moral purpose is strengthened, people have the agency and courage to act on it. Strengths-based coaching, therefore, is an effective way for school leaders to build capacity in others by helping middle leaders to understand their own strengths and the way they use these strengths to lead. Through developing this collective capacity, leaders will be able to make a greater contribution to student learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2015) and “accelerate the speed of change, foster sustainability and refine the strategy” (p. 58). Strengths-based coaching focuses on the development of people’s existing talents and offers support for growth rather than instruction.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) argued that a leader needs to “continuously assess their constituents’ capacity to perform in the context of the challenges they face” (p. 257). Strengths-based coaching asks people to identify the challenges that they are currently facing and helps them to assess their ability to face that challenge by exploring how they will use their strengths and remember the lessons learnt from past successes in overcoming previous challenges to face this new challenge. Strengths-based coaching completed over a series of sessions provides opportunities for a senior leader to discuss a staff member’s capacity in the context of an existing challenge. Through coaching, staff are encouraged to see how they can utilise their strengths to meet this challenge.

It was the contention of Nelson and Hogan (2009) that poor leadership stems from flawed interpersonal strategies of leaders and they argued that coaching offers preventative measures for reducing the likelihood of problems that derive from these flaws (p. 10). According to Baldwin (as cited in Nelson and Hogan, 2009, p. 11) the mental models or schemas that people have about themselves lead them to respond in particular ways because they unconsciously operate in ways that fit schema-relevant expectations. Understanding the personality of the person being coached and coaching from that perspective is likely to be more successful as it allows the coach to “anticipate problems and craft the relationship accordingly” and because “enhanced self-awareness is an essential precursor to meaningful change” (Nelson & Hogan, 2009, p. 14). Strengths-based coaching can provide ways for middle leaders to identify their expectations and be more aware of the challenges they are likely to face as a result.
Identifying the strengths of others

Developing others as leaders is also essential for sustaining effective school leadership. Whilst the importance of strengths coaching has often focused on enabling leaders to recognise their own strengths, it is also important that leaders enhance the capabilities of others by identifying strengths “in their team and then allocating people and resources according to collective and individual strengths” (Linley, et al., 2009, p. 38). In one 2002 study it was found that managers who operated with a strengths emphasis unlocked 36.4 % higher performance from their employees (Linley, et al., 2009, p. 38).

A strengths-based approach to managing weaknesses

A feature of strengths-based coaching is understanding how to approach and manage identified areas of weakness. Coaching programs that openly allow participants to be honest and open about their weaknesses will have more success in helping people to apply effective interventions for managing areas of weakness. Strengths-based coaching approaches seek to make weaknesses less relevant by “identifying things that de-energise people and creatively finding ways to delegate these to others”, building complementary partnerships, working in teams and identifying times when they have overplayed their strengths (Linley, et al., 2009, pp. 42-45).

Coaching derives from the framework of positive psychology focussing on using talents to build strengths. It aligns with a biblical perspective that God has created each of us in His image, assigning talents to each individual with the intention that they be used to strengthen the body of Christ. An analysis of positive psychology and a biblical framework for this study will be examined in Chapter 3, the Theoretical Framework.

The reviewed literature highlighted the important factors involved in building capacity of middle leaders, such as: establishing trust; creating opportunities for distributed leadership models; building middle leader’s capacity to lead change within their teams; and explored the means by which strengths based approaches could achieve these aims.
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Coaching uses the theoretical framework of positive psychology, which (a) explores strengths rather than weaknesses, (b) asks people to focus on what is working or has worked in the past rather than on what is not working, and (c) is inherently optimistic about the future (Campbell & Nieuwerburgh, 2018, pp. 33-34). Coaching has been defined as a one to one conversation where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate (Campbell & Nieuwerburgh, 2018 pp. 33-34). Mentoring, on the other hand, is typically more directive and involves informing, instructing, giving advice and providing guidance by sharing opinions and giving the mentee options for approaching the challenge that they have identified. Mentoring has been defined as a process in which a “more experienced individual is willing to share his or her knowledge with someone less experienced in a relationship of mutual trust” (Clutterbuck, D. 1992 as cited in Growth Coaching International Foundations of Coaching [Practice Manual], in 2019, p. 3). Coaching, withholds advice and focuses instead on developing the individual’s capacity to determine what they would like to do and how they will achieve it. The modality of the language used in coaching is different from mentoring; rather than providing advice by saying “you should” or “have you tried”, clarifying questions asked in coaching situations also “demonstrate active listening, build trust, invite further clarification, help break down complex issues, and help others to order their thoughts, options and next steps” (Paterson & Munro, 2019, p. 48). Coaching builds capacity by encouraging people to reflect on previous experiences, identify the strategies that have been successful in the past and how these same strategies could be applied to current situations.

Positive psychology became popular in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as a response to the perceived failures of more traditional approaches and the recognition that there had been an imbalance in the study of human experiences (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). Positive psychology has been described as “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104) and its aim was not to deny the existence of suffering but rather to focus on “character, strengths, virtues and the conditions that lead to higher levels of happiness and engagement” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103). Advocates for the field of positive psychology believe that a focus on strengths allows the development of unique and enduring talents of individuals and seeks the greatest growth in areas where these individuals are already exhibiting strengths rather than focusing on areas of weakness. Positive psychology seeks to find a way to cultivate the strengths people possess, to discover their natural talents and hone these talents with skills and knowledge (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 61)
while identifying and managing weaknesses. It allows people to put things into perspective commensurate with their own capabilities, and to create a sense of personal control, both of which are “protective factors for psychological and physical health” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 105). Strengths-based coaching has derived from a framework of positive psychology and the use of strengths-based coaching in the School is designed to help middle leaders develop areas of strength and consider how they can use their own capabilities to improve what they already do well, evaluate their team and integrate this with current and new pedagogical practices.

A distinctively Christian approach to education in this particular school context includes fulfilling the mission and vision of the School to equip students to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Student outcomes and engagement are not purely focused on academic achievement, rather students are also equipped to be disciples through the formation of character, helping them to find meaningful ways to serve, and teaching them the skills they need to do the good works that the Lord has equipped them to do (Ephesians 2:10). Strengths-based coaching aligns with a biblical perspective that regards talents as a means of equipping Christians for the work of ministry and the building up of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Thus coaching assists middle leaders to identify the gifts with which God has uniquely equipped them to build the community of Christ in the Christian school context. Just as “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17) so coaching enables people to recognise and develop their talents.

Barna argued that one of four factors involved in discerning God’s vision for your life is to know yourself. Great leaders, he contends, know who they are at the most intimate levels of self-knowledge, and they also seek the counsel of people who know them and their context and can provide them with keen insight (Barna, 1997, p. 52). However, we must be careful when working in a paradigm that requires a focus on strengths. A Christian perspective on positive self-image must be derived from understanding that the source of our identity is that we are created in the image of God and it is this identity that informs our vision and enables us to define our key goals and objectives in implementing this vision (Williams, 2000, p. 69). It draws on a biblical understanding of leadership that includes metaphors associated with building (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) and the body (1 Corinthians 12), where the role of leaders is to “help maintain unity and engender growth” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 37). The apostle Paul’s aim was to build community, not by lording it over others, but rather by working with them and urging them to imitate him as he imitated Christ (p. 41), where staff members are viewed as co-workers (Philippians 2:25) and people are valued over programs, systems and bureaucracy (p. 77).

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and a drive to be perpetually learning and honing leadership talents (p. 55). A strengths-based coaching model allows middle leaders to perform each of these important actions. Williams and McKibben, (as cited in Banks and Ledbetter, 2004), argued that “having a clear sense of how one is, which comes through developing intimacy with God, is where leadership begins and that knowing oneself is the key to one’s effectiveness as a leader” (p. 85). Jensen states that people, who are made in the image of God for the purpose of reflecting the divine being, should be transformed to grow into the likeness of Christ and are equipped by him for the task (Cairney, Cowling & Jensen, 2011, p. 48).

Another important aspect of the biblical approach to coaching is the concept of first seeking to understand, being quick to listen, and slow to speak (James 1:19). Coaching involves empathetic listening, encouragement, and affirmation as the coach seeks to genuinely hear and understand the perspective of what the other is saying (Paterson & Munro, 2019, p. 48). The vision statement of the school states that we equip and prepare our students to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengths coaching equips others to know their strengths in a way that equips them for “the work of ministry and building up the body of Christ” (Winseman, et al., 2008, p. 30). Strengths-based coaching is an appropriate response for a Christian school where the leadership is seeking to build capacity in middle leaders because coaching is: conducted in the context of relationships; provides opportunities for middle leaders to be heard, and equips middle leaders for the work God has ordained for them to do.

In this chapter, a distinct Christian approach to the implementation of positive psychology was described as the theoretical framework for the study.
Chapter 4: Methodology

Research Design
This research study utilised a qualitative case study approach with the purpose of investigating the implementation of strengths-based coaching in one Sydney Christian School in order to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching on developing leadership capacity of middle leaders. A qualitative case study involves the use of what has been termed “thick description” of “the entity being evaluated; the circumstances under which it is used, the characteristics of the people involved in it and the nature of the community in which it is located” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 119). Case studies are an investigative approach where the researcher aims to identify key features, demonstrate how different programs or interventions influence the way an organisation or individual works, and the effect this has on bringing about change (Bell, 2010). Case studies are an effective way of investigating how an individual or program changes over time due to certain conditions or interventions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013) and are therefore an appropriate research design for this study.

Research Participants
This qualitative research study consisted of one case study made up of four participants who were middle school leaders. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling “drawn from the population in a deliberate or targeted way, according to the logic of the research” (Punch, 2009, p. 359). The criteria for invitation to participate was people who currently held a middle leadership position in the School, who had been entrusted with overseeing pedagogical change in their section of the School, and who were also interested in developing both their own leadership capabilities and the capacity of the staff they led.

Staff who held middle leadership positions such as Key Learning Area (KLA) coordinators, Heads of School and Welfare Coordinators were emailed an invitation to participate, and, as a result, six people responded. The school was already embarking on a process of conducting strengths-based coaching sessions with leaders and, although all six respondents were interviewed as part of the School’s strategic focus on strengths-based coaching, only four were used for the purposes of this study; three females and one male staff member.

To protect privacy and confidentiality, participants will be labelled as Participants A, B, C and D in the results section.

Research Instruments
The main research instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix B) that was administered with each participant over four coaching sessions. The questions asked of participants
included some sample questions developed by the Gallup organisation (Gallup, 2016) in their Strengths coaching approach, questions from the Growth coaching model, and questions that were created by the researcher based on the nature of this particular school context and the researcher’s knowledge of the participants. As the interviews progressed, some of the questions were altered, additional questions were asked and some were omitted altogether as befitted the conditions and needs of the individual. These changes were indicated on the notes that were taken during each session.

At the conclusion of the four sessions a short survey (See Appendix C) was sent to each participant via a password protected secure Survey Monkey account. The survey consisted of four questions using a Likert scale of 1-5 with 5 being extremely effective and 1 not at all effective, and two short answer questions that asked them to reflect on the effectiveness of the coaching sessions in: i) helping them to understand their strengths and, ii) how to use their strengths to meet the challenges they were currently facing in their role. The survey also invited them to include additional comments on the four scaled questions by way of explanation for their response. It was anticipated that the survey would take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Research Procedure

Ethics approval, the Principal’s approval, and participant consent, including consent by each of the participants for audio recordings to be made of their interviews, was obtained prior to the start of the study.

The first of the four interviews with each participant focused on the process of identifying participants’ strengths by asking them: how they would describe themselves; how others, such as colleagues and friends, would describe them; what they loved about their current role in the School as well as what they found frustrating in that role; and, what distracted them from completing the tasks for which they were responsible. The questions also asked them: to identify where a strength could also be considered a weakness; what they understood their role to be; and, what they thought the Senior Leadership of the school expected from them. The addition of several negatively phrased questions in these interviews provided an opportunity for participants to be more authentic and honest. These questions provided the opportunity for staff to build trust with the coach, to reflect on the reality of the situation, including identifying areas that were beyond their control, as well as those over which they could exert some influence. In all cases, participants were prepared to admit their own weaknesses and were also honest about how the structures and procedures of the School contributed to their frustrations as well as their joys.
The interviews were held over a period of two to three months between June and September. The duration of each interview was between 45 minutes to an hour in length and was recorded on the researcher’s mobile phone and stored in password-protected files. Handwritten notes were also recorded during each interview on blank paper and as the conversations emerged any additional questions asked were also recorded in those handwritten notes. The researcher listened to the audio recordings whilst typing up the notes as a means of checking for accuracy in notetaking and ensuring that the most relevant details had been recorded for coding and analysis. Consent was given for the audio recordings which will be stored securely then deleted after five years.

Strengths-based approaches to coaching were utilised to prompt participants to reflect on past successes and how their strengths have contributed to those successes. Therefore it was important to ask questions that allowed them to consider what they do best, what comes naturally to them and what their greatest accomplishments have been in recent times. However, the most important aspect was to ask them to reflect on the strategies they have used to overcome challenges in the past and whether those same approaches could be used to overcome existing challenges. Subsequent questions explored this issue, such as questions that asked them how they had successfully managed to deal with aspects of their roles that did not come naturally to them, what attributes or strengths they had used to contribute to achieving their greatest accomplishment, and what options they have for meeting their current challenge.

The coding process involved writing notes in the margins, identifying key words and themes and highlighting repeated phrases. A summary of the emerging ideas and the challenges faced by each participant were documented and included at the start of the following interview as a recap with participants. This provided an opportunity for the researcher to check that her understanding of the participant’s perspective and reflection had been accurately recorded and that challenges and action items that had been discussed in the previous session could be followed up. Participants sometimes used this recap to clarify a point they had made in a previous session. Each coaching session asked participants whether the discussions in previous interviews and reflections between sessions had helped them to gain new insights of themselves as leaders.

An aspect that needed to be considered carefully in the conduct of this study was the relationship that the coach brought to the coaching relationship particularly - as was the case for this study - where there was a power differential that might have affected the coaching conversation (Campbell & Niuewerburgh, p. 16). There are a number of ways to manage this: the coach needs to listen more than speak; give their full attention to the interview; explain and clarify the roles; explicitly discuss confidentiality; arrange furniture to minimise power differences; and, invite feedback about the
discussion (p. 17). The power differential was reduced by using the couches in the researcher’s office rather than sitting at a desk, ensuring that as much as was possible we were not disturbed and asking appropriate questions that were open ended and allowed the participant to talk at length about their own situations.

Data Collection

The data collected included: hand-written notes taken at each of the four one-hour coaching sessions with each participant and a survey completed at the conclusion of the four coaching sessions. The survey required them to reflect on what they had learnt and to self-report on the effectiveness of coaching by identifying the changes they observed in themselves as leaders, as a result of these coaching sessions.

Coaching sessions were semi-structured, one-on-one sessions between the participant and the researcher using set questions but also were structured to allow the conversation to take different paths depending on the goals and strengths of each individual. Each session required participants to reflect on what they had learnt as a result of previous sessions and the actions they had undertaken as a result of being coached. The researcher recorded both descriptive and reflective handwritten notes during each session and had also received permission from the participants to take an audio recording of each session in order to validate these notes.

Data Analysis

Data collected from notes made during coaching sessions along with reflections from participants gathered using the survey were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching sessions on developing middle leadership capacity. An inductive process was used where the researcher read through all the data, identifying patterns, categories and themes that emerged, then hand coded the data in order to determine similarities, differences and key themes between each of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Themes were analysed for each individual participant and across participants starting with the specific and concrete data gathered from each participant and then progressing to the more general and abstract themes that emerged (Punch, 2009, p. 358).

Validity and Reliability

Strategies used to ensure validity included: triangulation based on several sources of data; member checking through asking participants to check case analysis or descriptions of themes for accuracy; ensuring that negative or discrepant information was specifically discussed; and, identifying any bias that the researcher brought to the study by stating the researcher’s own strengths, weaknesses, and any conflict of interest (Creswell, 2014) such as admitting their own weaknesses and revealing
information about their staff upon which the Deputy Principal might then need to act. The manner in which potential conflicts of interest were managed is further discussed in the section on Research Ethics.

**Research Ethics**

The study received ethics approval from the Morling College Human Research Ethics for Education Panel, approval from the School Principal, and participant consent, including participant consent for audio recording of interviews. Coaching sessions require people to be very honest about who they are as a person and as a leader, identifying not only their strengths but also their weaknesses. Identifying and acknowledging things that may not come naturally or easily to them can be quite confronting. Sometimes these conversations also raise issues about the staff with whom they are working. An ethical consideration was how to use the data that was uncovered in this research whilst maintaining confidentiality and privacy of these people’s real experiences of their leadership journey and not allowing it to influence the researcher’s perspectives of other staff in the school. Examples of potential conflicts of interest were discussions concerning staff members who were failing to meet deadlines. Whilst this could have become an inappropriate escalation of a minor matter, a decision was made to maintain confidentiality and allow the middle leader to manage this situation using the strategies explored in the coaching conversations and report effectiveness of the strategies and their handling of the situation in subsequent sessions rather than focusing on the behaviours of the staff members involved.

The researcher’s leadership style is very relational and staff at the school already engage in frequent formal and informal coaching sessions with the researcher, often seeking her advice. One of the researcher’s responsibilities in this particular school context is to conduct coaching sessions with all middle leaders so it was not immediately apparent to staff who was a participant in the research and who was not, thus ensuring confidentiality. To further protect the rights of participants, the research objectives, including how the data will be used was clearly articulated in writing, written permission was obtained and documentation including all notes and the final report was made available to participants (Creswell, 2014).

This research utilised a qualitative case study of four participants who were each interviewed over four coaching sessions with time between for reflection and implementation of the ideas that were discussed. A strengths-based approach formed the basis of questions asked in the interviews and results were coded with respect to the repeated or main themes that emerged. An inductive process was used to analyse data and extract themes, which were later shared with the participants.
Chapter 5: Results

The aim of this qualitative study was to determine the effectiveness of strengths-based coaching in building capacity in middle leaders in a local Christian School to improve staff and student engagement. The effectiveness was determined by identifying emergent themes in the strengths conversations (that is, the interviews); analysing how middle leaders had used their strengths to address issues and challenges they were facing; and reflecting on the successes of those interventions in subsequent coaching sessions. Finally, a survey at the conclusion of all four coaching sessions asked participants to reflect on the effectiveness of the sessions.

The majority of the strengths-based coaching conversations focused on the middle leaders’ understanding of self and the effect this had on their ability to lead and engage their staff. All four participants acknowledged that, at times, their own leadership styles sometimes hindered and sometimes supported their abilities to build capacity and community amongst their staff. The interviews provided them with an opportunity to consider their methods and growth as leaders.

The results of the survey (see Appendix D) strongly suggested that strengths-based coaching was effective. The first four survey questions were measured on a 5 point Likert scale. Participants were also invited to add a comment after each of the questions, to further explain their response. The data in these surveys revealed that all four participants believed the sessions were either extremely or very effective in helping the participants gain a greater understanding of their own strengths, and revealed an awareness of how they could use these strengths to improve their leadership and to overcome areas of weakness.

[Remainder of Chapter 5, pp. 24-30: not for publication for reasons of privacy and confidentiality]
Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

My research question was “How effective is strengths-based coaching on building the capacity of middle leaders to improve staff and student engagement in one Christian School in Sydney, Australia?”

The philosophy behind strengths-based coaching is that it enables participants to have a greater understanding of themselves and their leadership style, which will in turn enable them to be more effective and faithful school leaders, the outcomes of which should be greater staff and student engagement. Four case studies of middle leaders were used to obtain these findings. Key themes and common challenges quickly emerged from the data. The key themes were:

1. Coaching brings a greater understanding of self.
2. Coaching develops the capacity of others.
3. Coaching brings a greater understanding of others.
5. Coaching allows the work culture to be challenged

Common challenges included: the limitations and boundaries placed on middle leaders who are not always involved in the making of key decisions and yet are expected to ensure their implementation; the need to deal with underperforming staff: and, staff perceptions of expectations and workload. The five key themes will be discussed in the rest of this chapter.

[The remainder of Chapter 6, pp. 31-36, is not for publication for reasons of privacy and confidentiality]
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

Strengths-based coaching is a sound model for the Christian school context as it realigns middle leaders with their moral purpose and their identity in their role (Robertson, 2015, p.82). The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of strengths-based coaching on building capacity in middle leaders in a Christian School in Sydney, Australia to improve student and staff engagement by reflecting on their practice as leaders and developing their existing talents. The study found that strengths-based coaching was very effective in building capacity in middle leaders by helping them to understand their strengths; however, the effect of improving student engagement was not evident from this research. The results demonstrated that coaching of the middle leaders who participated was effective in helping them develop a greater understanding of their strengths in order to build their own capacity, a greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities as leaders in the school and an ability to build stronger relationships with their team including the opportunity to gain effective ways to build capacity in and care for their staff. Participants gained an appreciation for their unique strengths and an understanding of how they could draw upon these when working with staff and students to address the challenges they face. The results indicated that the most direct impact the coaching had was on a greater understanding of themselves, and subsequently their leadership style and capacity.

[Paragraph not for publication for reasons of privacy and confidentiality]

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study mostly associated with the small sample size, time constraints and the ability to assess only the relatively short term impact of coaching on capacity building in just one school. Coaching sessions are time-consuming and there needs to be a relationship
of trust between the coach and the participant for deep sharing to take place. The power imbalance between the researcher and the participants may have also biased some responses.

Recommendations

This case study of middle leaders confirms the benefits of strengths based coaching for building leadership capacity; however, it was unable to deeply explore the consequential changes to student engagement. It is therefore recommended that further research be undertaken into the effectiveness of strengths based coaching for building capacity in middle leaders to improve student engagement, and that this employ an action research methodology that observes changes in leaders and their approaches to pedagogy and assesses the impact these have over a longer period of time.

Whilst further research in understanding the impact on student engagement would be beneficial, the outcomes of this study affirmed the value of strengths based coaching as a method for developing leadership capacity in middle leaders. For the school to access these benefits of increased capacity of middle leaders, the following actions are recommended:

1) Conduct follow up coaching sessions with these middle leaders with more explicit questions about job descriptions, roles and responsibilities and student outcomes
2) Complete Strengths profiles for all staff so that all middle leaders can identify the strengths of their staff and work with them in ways that more effectively encourage their growth and help them meet shared goals
3) Implement Strengths-based coaching conversations across the School as it aligns well with the biblical principles of the School, the vision and strategic plans of the School, and were appreciated by the staff who participated in this study. As it would be too difficult for the Deputy Principal to be responsible for the coaching of all staff it is recommended that, after they have received coaching themselves, all middle leaders will undertake Professional Development in coaching so they can use the same strategies with their staff.
4) An incidental finding that emerged from the study was the need to review and clarify job descriptions for all key positions in the School

Survey results and other feedback from the staff who participated were very encouraging and have demonstrated how ongoing work in this field will further benefit the school in building the capacity of middle leaders.

This study found that strengths-based coaching is an effective means of improving middle leaders’ capacity to lead in the context of a Sydney Christian School and should be further explored in order that students in Christian schools are best equipped to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.
Reference List


# Appendix A: Gallup Strengths Domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Four Domains of Leadership Strengths</th>
<th>Executing</th>
<th>Influencing</th>
<th>Relationship Building</th>
<th>Strategic Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achiever</td>
<td>Activator</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranger</td>
<td>Command</td>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Futuristic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Ideation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deliberative</td>
<td>Maximizer</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Input</td>
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<td>Self-Assurance</td>
<td>Includer</td>
<td>Intellection</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Significance</td>
<td>Individualization</td>
<td>Learner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Woo</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relator</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Gallup Strengths Domains (Rath and Conchie, 2008, p. 24)
Appendix B: Coaching Questions

These questions will be asked over the four coaching sessions. The first session is designed for the coach to get to know the middle leader better, help them identify their strengths, articulate their leadership role and enable the coach to understand the way that the middle leader perceives their role and how they currently operate in their capacity as a leader.

The second session is aimed at exploring specific areas where middle leaders have been successful in the past and helping them to identify what has contributed to that success and how they might continue to use those strategies and strengths to meet their current challenges.

The third session will focus on exploring strategies that middle leaders have used as a result of previous coaching sessions, what they have learnt about themselves in the previous two sessions and how this is helping them to reframe the way that they work and implement strategies that play to their strengths.

The final session will focus on helping middle leaders to recognise future challenges, devise strategies for each new challenge using their strengths, find ways to effectively compensate for their lesser talents and work better with their teams.

Whilst the questions listed below will be used for all participants there will be follow up questions, questions about their specific strengths and weaknesses and specific strategies that are not yet able to be determined as they will emerge during the interviews. Each person will have different strengths, roles and strategies to discuss. These emerging questions will also be recorded during the interview and used in the analysis of the data.

Session One

1. How would you describe yourself using a few words or short phrases?
2. How would your colleagues describe you?
3. How would your friends describe you?
4. What do you really love about your work and the role that you currently have in the School?
5. What frustrates you about your work and the role that you currently have in the School?
6. What are the things that distract you from completing the tasks for which you are responsible?
7. Do you ever become negative or disappointed in yourself? When?
8. Sometimes a person’s greatest strength is also their greatest weakness. When is this true for you?
9. What do you understand your role to be?
10. What do you think God has called you to do in the role that you have in the School?
11. What do you think the Principal expects from you in your role?
12. When you have performed well how do you like to be recognised?

Session Two

1. What new insights if any do you have about yourself as a result of our last session?
2. What are the two or three things that you think you do best in your role? What makes you say that?
3. What aspects of your role come naturally to you?
4. What aspects of your role bring you the greatest satisfaction?
5. What was your most significant accomplishment in your role in the last twelve months? What do you think contributed to that success?
6. A strength is something that comes naturally to us. What aspects of your role do you have to work harder at because they do not come naturally to you? How have you managed this in the past?
7. What is the most important challenge that you are currently facing in your leadership role?
8. How you could use your strengths to help you meet this challenge?
9. The Bible uses the metaphor of a body to describe the way a community of believers work together with each member playing a specific part. What do you think is your greatest contribution to your team? How would you describe the part that you play?
10. How have you used your strengths to serve others?

Session Three

1. What new insights if any do you have about yourself since our last session?
2. What new understandings do you have about yourself as a leader?
3. What new understanding do you have about the way that you interact with the people that you lead?
4. What are you doing differently or what strategies have you used since our last session? How successful were they? What contributed to their success?
5. How have you used your strengths to manage the tasks that you are responsible for in your role?
6. In the last session we identified the most important challenge you were facing in your leadership role? Has this changed? If not how are you working towards meeting this challenge? If it has changed, why?

7. How you could use your strengths to help you continue to meet this challenge or face the next challenge?

8. How have you used your strengths to build relationships with the people that you lead?

9. What do you think the team that you lead needs most from you? How have you contributed to meeting their needs?

Session Four

1. What new understandings do you have about yourself as a leader?

2. What new understanding do you have about the way that you interact with the people that you lead?

3. What new understanding do you have about the way that you interact with the people to whom you report?

4. What strategies have you used since our last session? How successful were they? What contributed to their success?

5. What do you see as your greatest challenge in your role in the future?

6. What would you like your role to look like in 5 years’ time? How could you use your strengths to bring about the changes you would like to see?

7. Is there anything in your job description that you feel ill-equipped to do? What strategies could you use to manage areas of weakness and use your strengths in these areas?
Appendix C: Survey of Middle Leaders following coaching sessions

The survey will consist of four questions using a 5 point Likert scale. The scale used with range from 5 - Extremely effective, 4 – Very effective, 3 - Effective, 2 – Somewhat or partially effective, 1 - not at all effective. This will be followed by two short answer responses.

1. How effective were the coaching sessions in helping you to gain a greater understanding of your own strengths?
2. How effective were the coaching sessions in helping you to gain a greater understanding of your role and responsibilities as a leader in the school?
3. How effective were the coaching sessions in helping you to develop stronger relationships with your team?
4. How effective were the coaching sessions in helping you to understand and use your strengths in your leadership role?

There will also be a comment box provided after each of these four questions to allow participants to add further detail if required.

The two short answer questions will be as follows:

1. What new insights have you gained about yourself as a leader as a result of these coaching sessions?
2. What changes have you introduced to your leadership style as a result of these coaching sessions?
Appendix D: Survey Results

Not for publications for reasons of privacy and confidentiality