
A Strengths-Based Approach to the Social Developmental Study

Erin T. Gleason

School social workers commonly conduct Social Developmental Studies (SDSs) to provide multidisciplinary teams with information about medical, social, academic, cultural, and behavioral issues that affect a student's learning. This information helps the multidisciplinary team to make eligibility decisions and to plan appropriate interventions. This article describes ways in which social workers can apply the *strengths-based approach*—a social work practice approach focusing on individual and environmental resiliencies, talents, connections, skills, and gifts—to components of the SDS. It also describes specific strengths-based applications to observations, interviews, academic reviews, standardized measures, written reports, and oral presentations. Examples illustrate how identified strengths and protective factors can be used to solve problems associated with risk factors.

KEY WORDS: *social developmental study; strengths perspective; school social work; social history; strengths*

As dictated by federal law, the purpose of the Social Developmental Study (SDS) is to help determine whether a student has a disability and is eligible for special education. For this reason, the SDS concentrates on assessing limitations in student functioning. With an inherent focus on exploring deficits, prioritizing students' strengths while conducting an SDS is not an easy or intuitive task. However, it is a critically important task that can help school social workers to support students in better, more socially just ways.

This article examines how school social workers, despite challenges embedded in the system, may apply the strengths-based approach to an SDS and infuse it into their involvement with multidisciplinary teams. If the time spent on SDS components—including interviews, academic reviews, observations, and standardized measures—is focused on strengths, resilience, protective factors, and "what works," then the SDS can effectively guide educational interventions. Through written and oral reports, social workers can describe individuals' strengths in a way that transcends usual understanding; offers a fresh perspective; acknowledges heroism, courage, and kindness; creates a holistic context for

educational planning; transfers wisdom between team members; and challenges the interdisciplinary team to help the student reach goals in positive, creative ways.

SDS AS PART OF AN EVALUATION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

School social workers often conduct SDSs as part of the evaluation process to determine student eligibility for special education. An SDS involves gathering and synthesizing information about a student's medical, developmental, and social history, including information about a student's social interactions, behavior patterns, family background, cultural background, transitions, and school performance. To complete the SDS, school social workers commonly interview the student and his or her parents or guardians and teachers, observe the student, review academic and special education files, administer adaptive behavior scales or other standardized measures, write an SDS report, and present the report at a meeting to discuss eligibility for special education. This information and other data are then used by the multidisciplinary team to assess the ways in which a complex array of ecological factors affect a student's educational functioning

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and to make more informed decisions about the student's educational eligibility and needs. The SDS can also be used to design ways to solve problems, build on capabilities, and help students reach educational goals.

OVERVIEW OF THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

The strengths perspective integrates concepts related to resilience, empowerment, hope, healing, and meaning construction. Rather than focusing on deficits, disease, labels, and problems, social workers acting from the strengths perspective are concerned with resources, connections, skills, and gifts (Cowger, Anderson, & Snively, 2006).

Resilience and Protective Factors

Resilience, a psychological construct within the realm of the strength-based approach, refers to successful adaptation, an ability to exploit positive features of the environment, and the positive ways people respond to stress (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1999). Resilience refers to individual, familial, and environmental characteristics that modify risk and allow children to thrive despite at-risk circumstances (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Fraser, 2004; Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Wang et al.). Educational resilience theory recognizes that overlapping ecological contexts of family, school, peer, and community are interdependent and that they all affect learning (Fraser; Wang et al.). Saleebey (2006c) writes,

We want to calculate how people have managed to survive in spite of their troubles, what they have drawn on in the face of misfortune or their own mistakes. We want to understand what part of their struggle has been useful to them. We want to know what they know, what they can do, and where they now want to go. (p. 285)

Language and Questioning Strategies

Strengths-based language avoids pathological labels that can prove distorted, limiting, mortifying, and identity stripping for people (Saleebey, 2006c). Instead, the language of strengths is possibility focused, hopeful, appreciative, and positive (Saleebey, 2006a). A strengths-based approach consists of questioning strategies that attempt to identify "what works" and "how it works," for example, exception questions ("When things were going well, what was different?"), survival questions ("How have you managed to survive this far?"), support questions ("What people have given you special understanding, support, and guidance?"), and esteem questions ("What accomplishments in your life have given you pride?") (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Saleebey, 2006b).

Keystone Risk Factors

Although the strengths-based approach avoids fixating on problems, it still acknowledges that people experience risks and challenges that need attention. Problems are often determined by a causal network of intertwined variables that cannot all be addressed, but prioritizing a key problem can be useful in guiding intervention goals. Conditions that are primarily responsible for problems and are subject to change through intervention may be called "keystone risks" (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004).

APPLYING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO COMPONENTS OF THE SDS

Student Observation

As part of the SDS, school social workers often observe students in educational or social settings. Applying a strengths-based approach to the observation involves observing the student holistically, with interpretations grounded in context; noticing what the child can do rather than what he or she cannot do; studying the events and contextual conditions that occur during the "best" times; using quantitative measures that focus on strengths; and identifying potential next steps.

When conducting an observation, social workers may try to understand the "big picture" of the student's academic experience, but

may also enter the observation with a specific question in mind, such as “How does this child cooperate in groups?” Social workers may use specialized observation tools—such as time-on-task measures, social interaction measures, or participation measures—but may maintain focus on a holistic understanding of how intertwined academic, social, psychological, and behavioral contexts fit together (Drummond & Nutbrown, 1996). Encompassing questions may be asked, such as “What motivates the student the most?”

One of the core facets of the strengths-based approach is identifying what is occurring when things are going well so that it may be rekindled or further developed. During an observation, social workers may observe what is happening when the student is succeeding, especially with regard to the key risk factor. Social workers may pointedly observe the antecedents, contextual factors, and postcedents that seemed to make the behavior successful. In essence, the conditions of the best-case exception may be explored so that they may be replicated, a practice illustrated by the case example in Table 1.

The strengths-based approach suggests that an observer may try to understand everything that children can do (Drummond & Nutbrown, 1996). For example, an observation of a coloring activity could reveal that the student can retrieve materials independently in the classroom, ask for help when needed, and share appropriately with others. It could reveal that the student sits quietly and waits for others to finish, follows three-step directions, persists even when frustrated, or stays on task for five minutes. Quantitative strengths-based measures (“percentage of time on task”) may also be

used to balance quantitative negative measures (“percentage of time off task”).

Student Strengths Assessment

Interviews. Interviewing parents, guardians, teachers, and students is a common component of the SDS and is an ideal opportunity to gather strengths, stories, and examples. In SDS interviews, social workers may communicate respect, work to equalize or share power, and surrender their need to act like experts (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004; Saleebey, 2006a, 2006c). They may work to make people feel welcome and heard and may actively reach for “mutual recognition of and respect for the power of each contributor” (Lowery & Mattaini, 2001, p. 117). Before social workers ask any questions, they should check with interviewees to find out whether there is any information they do not want shared with the multidisciplinary team, a process that preserves trust. During interviews, social workers may work to understand the ways in which oppression in the form of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism affect students’ lives and try to understand ways students overcame oppression. They may discard the idea that professionals possess privileged or esoteric knowledge and instead activate, support, and honor people’s unique ways of “knowing” (Dietz, 2000).

If parents feel valued, listened to, and understood, then trusting relationships flourish. Parents are essentially the child’s first educators—they teach children crucial first skills, including eating, walking, talking, toilet use, and washing (Rennie, 1996). Social workers can elicit from parents their wisdom about what works best to help the student, and the SDS interview can

Table 1: Case Example: Key Risk Factor—Social Anxiety in Academic Situations

Observation	Problem Solving
<p>The school social worker observed Joe in three different high school classes: math, social studies, and English. The school social worker noticed that Joe participated the most when the students were asked to first write the answer, then asked to share it; when students were asked a question in a small group of six or fewer students; and when students were asked to share an answer from a prior homework assignment. The school social worker shared this information with the team, and teachers learned ways to encourage Joe’s participation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the strategies into the individual education program as accommodations. • Have social work sessions focus on helping Joe to help himself by using these strategies independently whenever possible. • Encourage teachers to give all students—not just Joe—time to prepare answers.

bridge continuity between home and school educational experiences. Social workers might ask parents, "What is your son or daughter good at?" "What does your son or daughter do that makes you proud?" "What time do you enjoy most with your son or daughter?"

Interviewing teachers provides an opportunity to uncover valuable information about student strengths and may also illustrate some of the positive ways the teacher has helped the student. Social workers might ask teachers the following: "What special classroom job would this student most excel at?" "Describe a task that was difficult for this student and a way he or she overcame it." "What have you done that has helped this student the most?" "What comes easily to this student?" "When does this student work best independently?" "What motivates this student?"

Student interviews are perhaps the most important part of the SDS. The SDS provides structure for the social worker to act as a medium to encourage student participation in educational planning. Through the student interview the social worker can gather information and clarify understanding of the student's strengths, desires, dreams, and expectations regarding life and education so that they may be communicated to the multidisciplinary team. If the student is older, he or she should be invited to participate in the actual multidisciplinary meeting, but because the student may not feel comfortable participating in a large group, the one-on-one meeting with the social worker may be the only time the student's voice may be heard. If the student is able to participate in educational planning, he or she will likely be more motivated to participate and less resistant to change. The student interview is also an opportune time for the social worker to talk with the student about how he or she feels about the evaluation process and to attempt to normalize and positively reframe the process, which is often viewed by students as frightening or embarrassing. During the interview, social workers can ask students, "If you had to join one sport, hobby, or club, what would it be?" "What are your friends like?" "How have your friends helped you out?" "What is one way you're a good friend?" "What

is your favorite part of the day?" "Of what are you most proud?" "What's your favorite way to help people out?" "Who are your role models?" "How has your family helped you out?"

Even though the SDS is only an interview, it can still have useful intervention effects. When people are asked to participate in student assessment, it often leads them to reflect on personal practices and to target personal change associated with the issues at hand (Drummond & Nutbrown, 1996; Folgheraiter, 2004). When people tell stories, they need to reorganize thoughts and may make sense of something in a new way. For example, when describing social relationships, past nicknames, or friendships, a student might gain insight into how he or she is perceived by peers (Haglund, 2004). When possibility questions are asked, people may gain direction for change. When answering the question about an ideal classroom job for a student, a teacher might realize that he or she could easily arrange for the student to have that job. When answering a question about what it would look like if the child had terrific homework habits, parents might realize ways they need to provide more structure for the student to be successful.

Standardized Measures. In addition to stories, some standardized assessment tools can be extremely effective ways to assess students' strengths as well as their difficulties. Social workers may carefully evaluate standardized measures they use as part of the SDS to ensure that they are strengths-based or at least contain balance between capabilities and difficulties, rather than focusing solely on deficit areas. One instrument that attends to strengths is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-Second Edition (BERS-2). Developed from a strengths perspective, BERS-2 has been found to be psychometrically sound (Buckley, Ryser, Reid, & Epstein, 2006; Mooney, Epstein, Ryser, & Pierce, 2005). Standard scores are calculated for five strength subscales: interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, and affective strength, as well as an overall strength index. A rapid assessment instrument, BERS-2 takes about 15 minutes to complete, is written in clear language, and does not require special training (Mooney et al.).

Another rapid assessment instrument, the School Success Profile (SSP) (Bowen, Woolley, Richman, & Bowen, 2001), for junior high and high school students, and a similar version for students in third, fourth, and fifth grades, the Elementary School Success Profile (ESSP) (Bowen, 2006), also incorporates questions about strengths and assets. By measuring the social environmental domains of neighborhood, school, friends, and family and collecting data from multiple sources, including parents, teachers, and children, this instrument assesses student well-being, behavior, and school performance. The SSP instruments have the added bonus of a free corresponding Web site (www.schoolsuccessprofile.org) with links to evidence-based interventions. Both the BERS-2 and the SSP/ESSP assess individual and environmental assets.

In addition to the BERS-2 and the SSP/ESSP, social workers may use adaptive behavior scales as part of an SDS. Adaptive behavior scales are used to assess students' motor-physical skills, self-help-independent functioning skills, interpersonal-social relationships, responsibility-vocational skills, and cognitive competencies and communication skills (Kamphaus,

1987). Sometimes adaptive behavior scales are used to determine eligibility for special education or to document baseline behaviors so appropriate service levels may be identified and progress may be tracked (McCarver & Campbell, 1987). Although multidisciplinary teams often review adaptive behavior scales only to identify deficit areas and baselines, social workers should encourage the team to use the scales to identify students' strengths. By identifying strengths in specific skill areas, the team can use and leverage the identified strengths to plan effective ways to address risk factors (see Table 2 for examples).

Administering a standardized measure may involve asking parents tedious questions and can be disempowering because of its formality and one-sided questioning. In addition, these measures can contribute to parent anxiety and a feeling that "their child is not good enough." To counteract these negative tendencies, social workers may explain why and how the scales are used and what is normal. They may reiterate to parents that their child is not expected to be able to do every task mentioned and that it is normal for all students to be stronger in one area and weaker in another.

Table 2: Examples: Using Strengths to Solve Problems Creatively

Protective Factor/Strength	Key Risk Factor/Need	Creative Problem Solving
Parent indicates that child is a real leader around younger children. Child loves to help younger kids around the neighborhood.	Child is highly disruptive during art class.	Arrange for child to be a helper/model/co-teacher for younger children's art classes one to two times per week.
Child loves to watch music videos and sing along at home.	Child has low self-esteem.	Arrange for child to sing a holiday song over the PA system.
Child loves to make things, to put things together.	Child cannot follow classroom routine.	Post daily or weekly classroom routine on puzzle. Have child put it together (in order) for the class.
Child is on task and alert during the morning.	Child has difficulty with social studies and tends to "tune out" during lessons.	Arrange a schedule change so child has social studies in the morning.
Child knows a significant amount of historical facts.	Child makes bullying comments to others during morning announcements.	Arrange for child to formulate a history question/riddle during morning announcements to be presented daily to the history class.
Child is close to uncle and loves animals.	Child does not practice reading at home.	Arrange for child to read with uncle about animals.
Child scored high on adaptive behavior scale for community orientation, or "knowing where things are."	Child's adaptive behavior scale weaknesses are in socialization, peer interaction, and expressive language.	Arrange for child to be a school tour guide with another peer for children who are new to the school.

Review of Academic and Special Education Files

In a thorough SDS, school social workers may spend an ample amount of time reviewing academic and special education files, which is an ideal opportunity to identify patterns of strengths. The social worker could systematically review report card comments to identify strengths such as “child does not give up, even when tasks are difficult;” “child enjoys listening to books on tape;” or “child includes others at recess.” Because strengths are often not recorded in academic files, the social worker also should carefully examine what is absent from the file to pinpoint strengths. For example, the social worker may notice that the student did not have a single behavioral referral in his or her file. Finally, the social worker may look for positive exceptions, especially those related to the prioritized keystone risk factor, which offer rich clues into how to solve current problems. For example, if a student’s third-grade report card comments noted that the student was “a joy to have in class,” yet first-, second-, and fourth-grade comments noted behavioral problems, then the social worker might try to identify why third grade was such a success. The child could have had a structured, supportive behavior system or the teaching style could have been a good fit with student needs. The case example in Table 3 illustrates how reviewing academic files can unearth potential solutions.

Documentation: The SDS Report

School social workers’ SDS reports become official educational documents that remain in the special education school files for years. The social worker may invite parents and students to read and revise the report before it is formally

submitted. The SDS document can follow students to new grades and new schools. Parents, teachers, and students can read it. Its paper status alludes to a permanency that demands respect. Documents are sneaky. Although they claim to be neutral and a “report of the facts,” all language is persuasive (Fitch, 2002; Hall, 1997). Social workers may understand the inherent power of an SDS document in depicting students and the ecological contexts of their lives and may use it appropriately and justly by expanding on strengths.

School social workers often debate about how much personal information to divulge in an SDS document. However, if the focus is not on the details of the problem, but rather on the details of the coping mechanisms used to deal with the problem, then confidentiality quandaries dissipate. If students read negative descriptions of themselves in SDS documents, their hope may be depleted. Similarly, if teachers read a problem-focused document about a new student, their belief in that student’s potential may be limited. Alternatively, positive descriptions of students could help students construct more positive self-concepts that are also self-fulfilling. If teachers read SDS documents that depict students’ strengths, it is likely that they would actively look for, notice, reinforce, and build on those strengths.

Some authors have argued that social workers are under constant pressure to look professional and that they believe that reporting on technical deficits makes them look professional (“competence reporting on incompetence”) (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000, p. 140). By exploring problem details, social workers believe they demonstrate that their work is a thorough, responsible, and justifiable professional activity (Hall, 1997). The

Table 3: Case Example: Key Risk Factor—Steve Has a History of Truancy

Information Learned	Problem Solving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steve is never absent or tardy on Mondays or Wednesdays—days when he has physical education (PE). • Steve’s favorite part of going to school is intramural sports. • Steve has received rave reviews in physical education (PE) throughout his schooling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have PE teacher call Steve’s home when he is late or absent. • Allow Steve to use gym to shoot baskets during 10 minutes before school. • Have Steve earn reward of extra PE time for improved attendance. • Engage Steve in organizing aspects of intramurals as a way to re-engage him in school.

same fastidious approach, applied to strengths rather than deficits, is not only as professional, but has the potential to raise professionalism to a new level.

Meeting Presentation

When presenting SDSs at multidisciplinary team meetings, school social workers have power—they are given the legitimacy to speak, to be listened to, and to be taken seriously (Hall, 1997). They can share that power with the person whose story they are telling. Before beginning the SDS oral report, school social workers may briefly explain the purpose of the SDS—to understand the ecological issues affecting the child's learning and to help to guide educational planning. Social workers may again address the parents and student, indicating that if they want to add something (clarify or expand) during the report, they are welcome to do so. At the end of the report, social workers can turn to parents and the student and ask them directly if they have anything to add or clarify.

During the SDS presentation, school social workers are like storytellers. Rather than reading through categories in a disjointed way, social workers should tell the story in a way that provides sufficient context and background to make it meaningful. They should describe events in a way that not only explains what happened, but also explains why what happened is important, and what can be learned from it. Social workers may describe not only what the student experienced, but also how he or she overcame oppression, transcended inhibiting structures, and mustered courage (Hall, 1997). Furthermore, they should point out specific resiliency skills that have been used by the student, teachers, and parents. By providing personal, memorable examples of strengths, social workers ensure that people will remember them. (If the student is at the meeting, it is great for him or her to hear the positive aspects of the story being told by a professional.) Finally, it is fully in the realm of social workers' roles to make suggestions as to how student strengths might be nurtured. They should take the lead in this process. To not make such suggestions wastes

much of the valuable information the social worker has so meticulously collected. Social workers can transfer the wisdom and "lessons learned" from one team member to the rest of the team. They should highlight not only the student's strengths, but also the unique contributions of the school staff members, administrators, and parents.

Communicating detailed strengths has the multiple advantages of eliminating defensiveness, blaming, and isolation and instead building a climate of teamwork. A focus on possibilities propels the team toward relevant action. Post-modern thought asserts that history is a "changing narrative, open to endless recasting" (p. 5), that meaning is constructed through language and dialogue with others, and that knowledge is a product of social discourse (Laird, 1993). As social workers reframe stories in a strengths-based manner, such stories become accepted as the dominant understanding (Dietz).

USING STRENGTHS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS CREATIVELY

As described earlier, the strengths-based approach does not ignore problems, but rather prioritizes a keystone risk factor. If the SDS focuses on strengths, then the SDS written and oral report provides the multidisciplinary team with a wealth of useful information to assist in educational planning and decision making. Lessons learned about conditions that contribute to student success help the team to expand on those conditions. This can occur while brainstorming individual education program goals and objectives, services, accommodations, scheduling, strategies for professionals, or placement options. Although formal accommodations are usually made on the basis of deficits, social workers can advocate that they also be based on strengths. Aversive activities may be paired with reinforcing activities to encourage growth. Parent partnerships or communication plans may be guided by family strengths. At the high school level, vocational counseling, career guidance, or college preparation can clearly benefit from identified strengths. Strengths may focus on establishing social support and may form the basis for referrals for special programs,

resources, or extracurricular activities. Strengths may be used as a starting point to “re-anchor student self-confidence” by developing capabilities (Kam-shing, 2003). Social work or educational interventions that make use of strengths minimize resistance to change by capitalizing on things the student enjoys and creating positive (constructional) behaviors rather than simply eliminating negative behaviors. (See Table 3 for examples of this process.)

CONCLUSION

SDSs can be useless documents that ramble on and reinforce an emphasis on the deficits, pathologies, and problems in student lives, or they can be effective tools for change. Strengths-based SDSs breathe new life into educational planning and provide the structure to allow social workers to promote positive reframing and labeling. By expanding on talents, gifts, and resources, social workers can help people to see students and families as heroes. In addition, strengths-based SDSs allow school social workers to build stronger and more trusting relationships with teachers, parents, and students. In addition to identifying student strengths, social workers can point out the contributions of each multidisciplinary team member, which catalyzes teamwork and minimizes blaming and complaining. Social workers are able to gather the wisdom of all those involved and share it in a way that transcends previous understanding. By focusing on accumulated wisdom and the specific conditions that help students succeed, social workers provide the context and details needed for truly individualized planning. When details of strengths are explored and teamwork is built, then creativity can flourish. The multidisciplinary team can imaginatively solve problems in constructional rather than restrictive ways. The strengths-based approach is not “another thing” for social workers to do—it is a new way of fulfilling an old responsibility. Complex information about strengths is priceless. It propels interventions that work. **CS**

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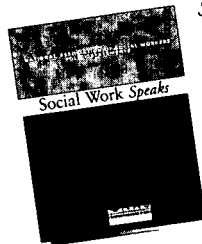
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