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# Strengths in action:

## A pilot study of a strengths development programme within tertiary education utilising the Clifton StrengthsQuest™ & narratives of strengths interviews

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience of two sub-sets of students who took part in a pilot study which explored the effectiveness of StrengthsQuest® (Clifton and Anderson, 2004), together with StrengthsQuest coaching and Narrative of Strengths interviews within the Bachelor of Social Practice and the Bachelor of Nursing at Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. The pilot study was primarily focused on whether or not identification and appreciation of strengths could contribute to students' education as social workers and nurses, and aid them in making choices about career direction. We also enquired into whether the programme we devised could be a starting point for the development of a strengths-based approach within social work and nursing education.

Students reported that by becoming aware of their talents their confidence increased and they became more appreciative of what they had to offer in their personal and professional lives. They also reported improvements in study, shaping their career choices and personal breakthroughs. The strength of student feedback indicates that there is value in the integration of a strengths-based approach into social work and nursing education.

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### Introduction

Students' future career achievements are greatly influenced by the extent to which they discover their talents and develop and use their strengths (Anderson 2004). Yet our perception from decades of teaching nursing and social work students was that it was rare for our graduates to enter practice clear about what they uniquely had to offer their professions.

Our experience of using StrengthsQuest in the development of our own professional strengths as lecturers and practitioners in the fields of counselling, social work and nursing led us to consider how StrengthsQuest might assist students to gain insight into what they might contribute and provide for further development of talents within their chosen fields. For example, students might have a strong desire to work in foster care, but would loathe child protection; or would be ideally suited to working in an emergency department, but would find hospice care frustrating. Ultimately, we hoped that through better informed

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choices, beginning practitioners would find greater professional satisfaction and be better able to contribute to the people and organisations they seek to help.

We discovered that whilst there is extensive research into the use of StrengthsQuest in educational settings<sup>1</sup> there is no research into the application of StrengthsFinder®/StrengthsQuest in the domain of social work, counselling or nursing education. Existing research demonstrates increases in student confidence and future outcomes (Synder, Lopez & Teramoto Pedrotti 2011) and shows that StrengthsQuest can aid students in their career choices (Clifton & Anderson 2002). Research also shows some correlations between particular strengths and particular careers and work environments (Clifton & Anderson 2002).

We were also interested in the use of StrengthsQuest because of the affinity between StrengthsQuest and a key approach taught within our curriculum known as strengths-based practice. The strengths-based perspective (Cowger, 1994, Cowger & Snively 2002, Saleeby 2008) is a model of social work practice which has become prominent within the last 20 years, particularly within mental health. The advent of the strengths-based approach brought about a long overdue paradigm shift in social work practice. It has enabled practitioners to address problems through a lens of strengths and empowerment rather than deficit and weakness. StrengthsQuest, however, is a strengths development programme which has no direct relationship with Saleeby's Strengths Perspective for social work practice, although the philosophical foundation of StrengthsFinder is closely allied to the Positive Psychology perspective (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

In nursing, strengths-based care has been explored by Gottlieb and colleagues (Feeley and Gottlieb 2000; Gottlieb and Rowat 1987; Pless et al. 1994) and recently the need for strengths development of nurses themselves has been noted (LeGrow 2012).

StrengthsQuest is a version of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® for use in educational settings. StrengthsFinder is an established and standardised online tool for identifying and expanding individual's strengths that has been used within businesses, schools and community organisations (Rath 2007). It is the outcome of decades of research by a team of scientists at Gallup headed by the organisation's founder, Donald Clifton, who is also regarded as the father of strengths-based psychology. StrengthsFinder helps participants identify their top five talents<sup>2</sup> (as themes) and learn how to use them to their best advantage by refining them into strengths through the application of skill and knowledge (Clifton & Anderson 2002).

Whilst we have taught our students to adopt a strengths-based perspective with their prospective clients, we were aware that this contradicted the way in which we perceived our students' development as practitioners. As teachers we remained largely bound to the traditional paradigm of improvement of weaknesses. We would guide our students to professional competence by cheering students toward betterment by improving on weakness, neglecting a detailed exploration of strengths and talents. Our students might learn about strengths-based practice, but they did not have the opportunity to develop their own strengths in a deliberate way. The richness of StrengthsFinder®/StrengthsQuest results brought home to us that in general, people tend to have only rudimentary insight into their

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<sup>1</sup> Over 500 colleges and universities have taken place in strength-based development (Lopez & Louis 2009).

<sup>2</sup> 'A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behaviour that can be productively applied' (Clifton & Anderson 2002: 6)

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strengths. StrengthsQuest opens up pathways for development by training a laser light upon previously unidentified talents and abilities.

Whilst we initiated this project because we believe that focusing on students' strengths is more conducive to learning than focusing upon deficits, we also believe that addressing weaknesses is necessary for competent professional practice in social work, counselling and nursing. As social work and nursing educators with a responsibility to ensure that our students' practice is safe, competent and ethical, we realised that focusing on strengths should not lead to a Pollyanna-ish denial of weakness. StrengthsQuest provided us with a gateway to both because weaknesses can be directly addressed through the lens of existing strengths.

Our discovery of StrengthsQuest appeared to offer us a way forward. However, it also presented some challenges. Whilst there is a shared philosophical heritage between the origins of StrengthsQuest and the strengths-based approach, there is a fundamental philosophical difference: StrengthsQuest could be described as delivering strengths through 'expert knowledge' (Geertz 1973), in that, a person's strengths are delivered to them via the results of the online questionnaire supplemented by an in-depth and personalised description of strengths. In Saleeby's strengths-based practice, however, social work clients are asked to name their own strengths and social workers then work with them to explore and utilise these strengths in addressing life problems.

This contradiction in approach between the expert versus non-expert stance raised questions for us about the use of StrengthsQuest, but it also led us to consider how we might use StrengthsQuest in a way that was less 'expert driven'. It was this dilemma that caused us to consider how we might modify our utilisation of StrengthsQuest results for our students.

One of the authors (KI), a narrative therapist, saw an opportunity to address this dilemma by contextualising the strengths descriptions provided by StrengthsQuest within participants' life histories by using a semi-structured interview format based on narrative therapy practices as a supplement to the Strengthsfinder questionnaire. Whilst StrengthsQuest results are highly tailored, our experience of narrative therapy practice led us to conceive a way in which we could enliven the usefulness of StrengthsQuest results beyond the descriptions that StrengthsQuest offers by situating them within a participant's life experience.

We hoped that these Narratives of Strength (NOS) interviews would reveal 'insider knowledges' (Epston & Maisel 2000) about what has aided development of identified strengths and offer ideas and gateways for further strengths development. We hypothesised that students who had taken part in the NOS interviews would develop a relationship to their strengths which was situated within their life experiences rather than the more usual abstract relationship with strengths experienced by those who did not take part in the NOS interviews. We speculated that a deepening of students' relationships with their strengths would facilitate awareness of strengths and commitment to strengths development. We were also hopeful that the findings from the NOS interviews could give rise to new ideas for how to go about strengths-based work in social and health agencies.

In this article we look at the results students reported from both the StrengthsQuest results and the additional results reported by those who took part in the narrative of strengths interviews.

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## Methodology

All second year Bachelor of Social Practice and Bachelor of Nursing students were invited to participate. Of the 70 Bachelor of Social Practice students and 98 nursing students approached, 32 nursing and 43 social work students agreed to take part. The pilot study took place in several stages with sub-sets of students:

Stage 1: A pre and post-study questionnaire about each student's relationship with their perceived strengths.

Stage 2: A sub-set of 24 students who took part in StrengthsQuest

Stage 3: A subset of 12 students who took part in StrengthsQuest and StrengthsQuest Coaching and an evaluation interview.

Stage 4: a subset of six students who took part in StrengthsQuest, StrengthsQuest coaching, Narrative of Strengths interviews and an evaluation interview.

### Coaching

Students in stage 3 received intensive coaching over a 10-day period, followed up with coaching sessions led by the research team alongside Debbie Marriott, an expert-coach trained by Gallup. The coaching exercises were designed by Gallup for use in educational settings for strengths development following use of StrengthsQuest. Through the coaching sessions it became evident why students might be having difficulty with a particular area of practice or study, and openings for addressing weaker areas of practice became apparent. For example, a student who left assignments to the last minute realised that she could take advantage of her strength of 'adaptability'<sup>3</sup> to produce better work under pressure rather than chastising herself for not beginning work earlier. This realisation improved her performance.

Another student struggled with teamwork. He found that his strengths of 'ideation'<sup>4</sup> gave him lots of ideas he wished to contribute, but when 'ideation' combined with his 'activator'<sup>5</sup> strength, impatience got the better of him and he would introduce his ideas without having developed sufficient relationships with team members. He realised that by focusing primarily on his strength of 'connectedness'<sup>6</sup> he could introduce his ideas in a more timely way and found they were better received. Students also realised through the coaching programme that if they did not have the strengths most ideally suited for a particular project or task, they could partner with others around them with complementary strengths.

### Evaluation interviews

Students in the group 3 (who also made up the group 4) took part in a semi-structured evaluation interview. Transcripts of the evaluation interviews were examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2008). We looked first at reported results from the evaluation interviews as a whole and then looked specifically for particular outcomes from the NOS interviews. Each of the researchers involved reviewed the text of each transcript to identify

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<sup>3</sup> People who are especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to 'go with the flow.' They tend to be 'now' people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time. (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>4</sup> People who are especially talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena. (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>5</sup> People who are especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient. (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>6</sup> People who are especially talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason. (Signature Theme Report).

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themes and then we met to compare and collate our findings. The NOS interviews were conducted by David Epston and Kay Ingamells, neither of whom were involved in academic assessment of students during the project.

### **Narrative of Strengths Interviews**

The Narrative of Strengths interviews were developed by taking practices from narrative therapy<sup>7</sup>, another key approach taught within the Bachelor of Social Practice curriculum, and putting together a semi-structured interview format designed to bring forth stories of the strengths identified in StrengthsQuest.

Narrative therapy ideas have a strong and growing international reputation within the fields of therapy, counselling, social work and community work (Crocket 2008), and have recently begun to be applied within other contexts as well such as organisational change (Hancock & Epston 2008). Narrative ideas have a philosophical fit with the strengths perspective (Blundo 2009).

## **Results and discussion**

Once we had received the Unitec Research Ethics Committee's approval for this project, our first aim was to evaluate the usefulness of the StrengthsQuest questionnaire, together with StrengthsQuest coaching for our participants. All second year students in the BSocP and BN programmes were asked to complete a pre and post-questionnaire which asked about:

- How participants perceive their strengths
- How participants perceive the utilisation of their strengths
- Participant aspirations for study and career
- Clarity of aspirations for study and career
- Participants' level of confidence that they will reach their aspirations for study and career
- Measurement of current levels of engagement, hope and wellbeing.

This paper will focus only on the qualitative data gained from stages 3 and 4. Quantitative data and the wider implications of this pilot study will be reported in a separate article.

Our analysis of the interviews for stage 3 revealed the following key themes:

1. Becoming aware of strengths and reclaiming strengths previously perceived as weaknesses
2. Increased confidence/feeling more at home with self
3. Shaping of career choices and personal breakthroughs.

Although these themes are interrelated, we present them here in distinct sections for clarity. In the following section we report our results from interviews with students, and link these themes in students' development as social work and health professionals.

### **Theme one: Becoming aware of strengths and reclaiming strengths previously perceived as weaknesses**

An interesting and recurring theme was that students reclaimed strengths, which they had previously perceived as weaknesses. This finding mirrors Gallup's findings. They discovered

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that students began to see themselves in new ways and that qualities previously perceived as weaknesses were transformed (Clifton & Anderson 2002). According to Gallup (2008), strengths are better described as talents which become strengths when they are honed through skill and knowledge. We see one of our key jobs as teachers to help students to hone those talents into practical skills that will be utilised in students' daily professional practice. This does not mean that students should ignore negative feedback. Rather, it is about using feedback to reflect upon and utilise strengths in ways that address shortcomings.

Brim (2007) writes about the 'dark side of the strengths'. The 'dark side' of strengths applies to strengths which, because of their relative rawness, are not necessarily or consistently having a positive impact upon self and others. This phenomenon may explain the reactions of a number of students to their initial strength descriptions. Some were amazed to find that their talents and thus potential strengths had previously been described in negative terms by others and so they themselves had come to regard them as flaws. In the coaching groups we discussed how strengths can be manifested in helpful or unhelpful ways depending on the context in which they occur and how they are expressed. Clifton and Anderson (2002) also mention the need to control the shadow side of strengths and manage them in relationship to other strengths.

In the coaching groups, in-depth exploration of talents and how they were manifested enabled students to consider how they might nurture less developed strengths in ways that would be experienced more positively. Increased awareness of strengths, those that students had developed well and those that they had not, aided students' confidence and transformed previous pathologizations of strengths, enabling students to take up new perspectives:

A lot of my friends give me the eye because I am always with different people. They look at me strangely as if to say 'where did you pick up that person from?' Now I can see it as my 'includer'<sup>8</sup> strength. I never used to see 'includer' as a strength. I just thought it was how people should be (Marama).

This is an example of how the students tended to take their strengths for granted, presumably because they had been previously undistinguished and unappreciated. Coaching sessions enabled them to contextualise these talents into practical skills and abilities which help them in their study, work and personal life. They also became more empowered by realising that they can choose how they respond to others, not by dismissing their comments, but by using them for their growth and development.

I see things that are wrong and tell people how to fix them. I used to think it was really bad and I was training myself out of it. Words I would have used to describe my 'restorative strength' before the project were 'bossy, pushy, know-it-all, and nosy'. It was just something I did that I had never even known had a name (Gloria).

In the final evaluation interview she comments:

I don't see myself as being pushy or bolshie now. I don't feel so much like I am trouble or a bad person. I'm just happy being me and I haven't usually been happy being me. Now I know that when I am being 'restorative' it is an asset.

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<sup>8</sup> People who are especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them. (Signature Theme Report).

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This student looked at her 'pushiness' through new eyes and has seen that negative responses from others had led her to cease expressing this talent altogether. She was able to revive her 'pushiness' and consider when she could use it to good effect and when and how she might need to develop her 'restorative' strength without overpowering others.

Students reported that this process of identifying, appreciating and utilising their own strengths helped them to become more appreciative of the differing strengths of others and of difference in general. In the social work and nursing fields, appreciation of strengths and diversity is fundamentally important for sound, ethical practice with clients and patients. Coming to see others in terms of their strengths has perhaps more relevance for health and social work students, than for those studying to enter most other professions.

**Theme two: Increased confidence/ feeling more at home with self**

Improvements in confidence across various domains of life including study were a dominant theme. Students were able to go beyond where they would have previously stopped, and to use their strengths to take actions they might not otherwise have taken.

Knowing about these themes of strengths has helped me to prepare myself mentally in new situations. Before I used to have these quite negative thoughts like 'I can't really do this, I am out of my depth'. Knowing I have 'achiever'<sup>9</sup> as one of my themes helps me to prepare and I just try to go ahead with it without having these negative thoughts (Rona).

Rona is a competent student hampered by a lack of confidence. What she learnt about her 'achiever' strength during the project enabled her to push past her uncertainties.

Another student applied what she learnt during the course (the importance of inclusion in social work), married it with her strength (being an 'includer'), and helped her niece to be reintegrated into school:

Yesterday, my niece was suspended from school and I challenged the school. Knowing that I was an 'includer'<sup>10</sup> enabled me to take a leadership role and defend the family. I ensured they were being included because I ensured they were being heard. I was using my strength as an 'includer'. This is a big shift for me (Lupe).

Kiri reclaimed her 'communication' strength:

One of my strengths is 'communication'<sup>11</sup>. I used to take it for granted. I thought everyone learned to communicate. I am a storyteller – I relate stories and build bridges between ideas. I didn't know that I had a specific way of communicating that was powerful for others and for myself (Kiri).

Most people do take their strengths and talents for granted. The project helped students to identify their strengths and grow them within the context of their professional development.

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<sup>9</sup> People who are especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>10</sup> People who are especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>11</sup> People who are especially talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters (Signature Theme Report).

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Students' increase in confidence was in large part connected to being able to see themselves in terms of their strengths which they could then harness and utilise:

I used to think everyone was like me in the ways in which they relate to others and the world. I place myself in the whole world. I realised that this is my 'connectedness' strength. I see myself as part of the big picture. It is about seeing myself as more part of the whole than as an individual. It may be to do with my grandfather having been a Buddhist monk. It is something in me. It's cultural (Yasmin).

The detail of the personalised descriptions coupled with an examination of each person's strengths provided by the coaching programme grounded students' perceptions of their strengths so that they naturally started building their competence.

Now that I know that 'empathy'<sup>12</sup> is one of my strengths, when I come across a patient who needs a bit of personal care, I might hold their hand or something like that. Before I would have done it and not really thought much about it and now I know that this is one of my strong points and I should use it (Betty).

Increased confidence was reflected in students' attitudes towards study and the ability to apply their strengths, once they could discern them, to study and placement:

My strength of 'responsibility'<sup>13</sup> was evident to me about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the time on my placement. Although I know I am a responsible person I would also stray away from it. In clinical placement though, I knew it was up to me to make sure we knew what patients' blood pressures were, that their vital signs were checked and medications were given on time. I think 'responsibility' helped me here (Rona).

This student reports that awareness of her strengths enabled her to be more responsible, and she also learned to self-assess her own performance. Rona's words illustrate the point made earlier that whilst people may possess strengths, they still need developing through skill and knowledge. The students reported overwhelmingly that they had learned a new way of reflecting on their work and practice:

I used to hate not knowing the class more because I've been a part-time student. Then I thought, 'Well I have 'positivity'<sup>14</sup> and 'includer' as strengths so I'd better use them. So I put myself out there, got out of my shell, and even got up in class and spoke out (Marama).

Some were able to perform better and whilst they did not attribute this change to a particular strength they did attribute it to the project:

Sometimes I have been very inconsistent with case notes and now I realise that in the last couple of months I have been much more consistent and effective. Usually I would be screaming to put everything together on the computer and in files. Every month there would be this fear. Every month I thought I would learn and it never happened. But in the last couple of months it has all changed (Lupe).

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<sup>12</sup> People who are especially talented in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>13</sup> People who are especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty. (Signature Theme Report).

<sup>14</sup> People who are especially talented in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do. (Signature Theme Report).

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### **Theme three: Shaping of career choices and personal breakthroughs**

There were some dramatic changes of direction for some students, which they attributed directly to what they had learnt about their strengths:

I have changed my focus and I now want to go into mental health. There are a lot of Pacific people who are very isolated because of culture and family values and obligation. A lot of these things drive Pacific families into mental un-wellness. I would like to see if I can help with that. I believe in including people and now realise that is one of my strengths (Lupe).

Others found that involvement in the project affirmed and gave them confidence to pursue different directions: one student realised her abilities were suitable for management; another decided a police social work career was appealing. This student also believes his awareness of and utilisation of his strengths allowed him to succeed against 200 other candidates in a job application. More recently he has been promoted against stiff competition. He was the only applicant without formal training for the post. He attributes his on-going success to putting his strengths to work both on the job and at job interviews.

Another ambitious student decided to set up her own service and has since applied for sponsorship for a research project:

I have had this vision of setting up a service for women adjusting to life after childbirth. Before the project I had been thinking 'I can't do that because I don't have any experience'. What's happened is that it has all just come together and I am going to be doing my third year placement within the project that I have now set up. I will graduate into my own practice next year. The project has enabled me to see that I have the ability to do what I want to do, that what I need is here; it is part of me (Amy).

One student fulfilled a dream to undertake his third-year placement in India – something he indicated in the pre-study questionnaire. Whilst he may have gone regardless, he believed that the project influenced his ability to explore this idea further. The project also shaped his career aspirations:

I can see myself ending up in an advocacy role. I think before this interview and before StrengthsQuest I might have said I wanted to work in an area where I was supporting other people but I am not sure I would have said advocacy (Ross).

Students attributed a number of unexpected breakthroughs in their personal lives to their project involvement. Presumably strengths development in one domain of life will most likely enhance utilisation of the strength in other areas. Consequently, we concluded that shifts in students' personal lives had relevance to the overall results. In the following example, Ross's utilisation of his strengths may well come to have a bearing on the use of these strengths in his social work practice:

I've been with my girlfriend for about a year. She can be very fiery and volatile and I used to react to her reacting to me which was very counter-productive. Then I realised that by just being positive and not always taking on what she was putting out, things would get settled very, very quickly. In that sense, awareness of my strengths has been very good for my relationship with her. I could attribute this to using my strength of 'positivity' and 'communication' and probably 'empathy' as well (Ross).

In summary, this part of the project, which added coaching sessions to the StrengthsQuest

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results for 12 students, enabled the participants to bring some of their strengths into focus for the first time and, for some, transformed characteristics that were previously perceived as negative personality traits into strengths through fresh exploration and strengths development. Those who had described strengths negatively in the past re-claimed them and in doing so opened up new possibilities for their expression.

## **Results from the evaluation interviews**

All 10 of the possible 12 students in group three who took part in the final interview reported that the project was extremely beneficial and another who was unable to attend the interview reported equally dramatic benefits informally at a later date. By focusing on their strengths, students were able to identify and enhance them in many aspects of their lives. Students appeared to experience something of a paradigm shift in their perception of themselves. These shifts were characterised by new-found confidence, enthusiasm to learn more in order to become more competent, breakthroughs in study or personal life and for some a new career direction in harmony with their talents. Notably, students said they believed that the benefits of their involvement in the strengths development project had prepared them better for the world of practice and for understanding how they might be best able to apply their strengths in their careers.

## **Results from the Narratives of Strengths interviews**

Six of this group of 12 students (stage 4) were invited to participate in 'Narrative of Strengths' (NOS) interviews. These students were purposively selected to reflect the ages, grades, gender and ethnicity of the larger group. One of the students left suddenly because of a health issue before we could do the evaluation interview. Of the five interviewed, three students reported important outcomes, one reported helpful outcomes and the remaining student did not attribute anything in particular to the interview.

The NOS interviews used semi-structured questions designed to bring forth stories of the interviewees' primary strength and to determine if the student could locate this strength within a larger story or legacy. Most were able to identify stories of how they either were 'apprenticed' into a particular strength, usually by a family member, or trained themselves in the development of their strength. Some did not identify 'others who inspired them', but specific experiences which they connected to the shaping of their strengths. As hoped, students who participated in the NOS interviews described a deepening of their relationship to the strength that was storied, a deepening which was not experienced by those who did not participate in this part of the study. By bringing their strengths to life inside stories of their personal and family history, four out of five of these students reported shifts in their personal and professional lives that were more dramatic than the shifts experienced by the students who took part only in the coaching programme and which they attributed to the NOS interviews. These shifts included one student who had found greater confidence by tracing her strength to her grandmother. Later, she was able to draw upon her strength to bring about peace in her family. Another's relationship to herself changed dramatically. Another was able to put her reliance on alcohol in social situations aside and be less shy.

The response of one of the BN students illustrates how strengths come to be sited within life history. This student said that the interview helped her to see that her strength of 'har-

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mony' was connected to her past and was consciously chosen and developed rather than something she had stumbled across or inherited genetically. Initially, the student was asked questions that invited her to site her strengths within stories of her life. She spoke of how 'harmony' came into its own when she returned to her parents' house to visit:

I noticed that every time I go in they just stop arguing. Until now I just thought it was because I respected them or listened to them but now I see that it's a special thing. The same thing happens with my flatmates. They would call me 'the mother'. My friends say that I act like glue with them. They say that I can settle others down (Josie).

The NOS interviewer explored the genealogy of 'harmony' as strength, asking 'Do you think this ability to settle others down may have been passed down to you?'

She responded:

I think it may have been passed down by my grandmother. I remember that she would sometimes mend conflicts among families. I hadn't thought of this before. I used to go to my grandparents during the holidays and my eight aunts and uncles would be there. Sometimes they would be fighting and she would talk to them and they would just settle down. I was kind of amazed by that.

A BSocP student also describes the origins of her strength of 'harmony'. The first excerpt is about her relationship with her grandmother, and how her realisation that her 'harmony' strength had been handed down to her reinforced her relationship with it:

I was blown away by the interview as 'harmony' opened up a door for me which led me to my grandmother who had died 12 or 13 years ago. So beautiful! I felt she was close to me right then and there. I would be reminded of her every so often at home because she had given me this special pot. In the interview we talked about the ancestral mat she gave me before she died. Now every time I or my children see that mat I always think of her. Every day now when I open my drawer of my dresser I see it sitting there and it reminds me of her. And now when I go in to my kitchen and see her pot, I go - 'That's Nana's pot!' And my kids are aware of that too. The interview brought her back to me and is keeping her alive. In that interview I became aware of how proud my grandmother was of me. I have been a much happier person in the last couple of months as a result. Now I know that I am better than I thought I was (Lupe).

Following the NOS interview, she applied her new strength awareness in her family life:

Since doing the StrengthsQuest my 'harmony' strength led me to be concerned about my nephew who lives next door to me. I used my strength of 'harmony' to help him to find harmony within himself and within the family. He tried to commit suicide because he was suffering from depression and no one knew. He hadn't got out of bed for three days and I went to see him with his mother. I asked if I could help and he said 'no' and pulled the blankets up. I wrote his mother a note and passed it to her then and there. I said 'you need to talk with him and see what's wrong with him and you need to say sorry to him if you have done anything. You need to make peace'. In Samoan families parents have authority over the children and I think this is what was causing the problems. And then his mother, my cousin started to apologise to him and to tell him that he is important in our family and that he is loved. That sort of thing is not often heard in most Pacific families because we use actions more than words. That was my strength of harmony. The next day he got up and started eating. He is much happier. Much happier.

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Extracts are given below from three more students who took part in the NOS interviews. These sections indicate how these 'excavations of strengths' through the interviews led to a change in perception of self and to ideas for the future or specific actions.

An NOS interview with a BSocP student directly contributed to her thinking that a management career could be possible. This thinking originated when she was discussing her response to a difficult situation with a young person whilst on placement. On placement, the student was appalled at how her manager had spoken to a young person who had been skipping school. She worried that the young person was going to run away and managed to turn the situation around by engaging him using her 'includer' and 'empathy' strengths. During the interview, she reflected that had she been the manager she would have dealt with the situation differently and created a different culture within the workplace. She considered how her 'includer' strength could be used to further her commitment to 'inclusion' of Maori and Pacific Island clients by mentoring other colleagues:

I like the idea of being in that role and maybe as a guide to how Maori and Pacific Islanders wish to be handled. There are so many workers that don't have a clue ... And you can see on their faces that they can't be bothered. I had looked at how long it would take ... how many years it would take me to do a masters or management training and I was kind of put off before. If it hadn't been for this interview I would have been quite content just getting out there in the field instead.

She also talked about how the NOS interview had contributed to her social confidence:

We talked about my 'includer' strength in the interview. I am actually really shy but if I see someone who wants to be included, I put the shyness to one side. Talking about it in the interview has helped me to embrace being an 'includer' more and not to be my shy little self. There have been a few social situations lately where I have been on my own and normally I would just smoke say five cigarettes, but I went up and spoke to people and I can't believe I actually did that rather than running away and hiding in my little corner. Usually I need alcohol to get over my shyness. Now I don't need to drink to meet people. And I can actually remember their names afterwards. And I can be genuine. I have found the courage not to need alcohol.

The NOS interviews were designed in part to give roots to newly identified strengths and ground them in life experience. The interview results suggest that these roots have taken hold and that for most of the participants the interviews helped to give more life, meaning and sustenance to strengths.

All students in group three who were involved in either the coaching programme or the coaching programme and the Narratives of Strengths interviews reported that participation in the project had been an extremely positive experience. All 10<sup>15</sup> who took part in the evaluation interviews found that involvement in the project has improved their confidence in relationship to study, career or both; they also reported that they have learnt how to utilise their talents to address perceived weaknesses. Four of the five students who took part in the NOS interviews perceived an important benefit of the interviews was being able to embody

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<sup>15</sup> These are the 10 students who were able to take part in the final evaluation interviews out of the original 12 in group three.

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what had been previously one-dimensional strengths into their life histories. This situating of their strengths within their lives also 'peopled' their strengths with others from their lives that had been influential in the development of their strengths.

## **Learnings and possibilities for further development**

This pilot study revealed that there is evidence that StrengthsQuest combined with StrengthsQuest coaching and Narratives of Strengths interviews are useful in enabling students in the field of social work and health to identify their talents and contextualise them within their life histories and career aspirations. Implications for social work and nursing education are significant as StrengthsQuest, coaching groups and Narratives of Strengths interviews brought to life the uniqueness of each student, and helped them to build on their talents and to find ways of utilising them to achieve required competencies.

Pedagogical innovations of this type could make a distinctive contribution in the education of social work and nursing students. StrengthsQuest, StrengthsQuest coaching and NOS interviews could be introduced in the first year of study as part of a course through which students engage with the concept of professional practice for the first time. In the following years of study a coaching programme or peer mentoring programme could be developed. Equipped with their talents and abilities, students in their fieldwork and clinical placements could revisit strengths in the light of the practical work in which they are engaged. This could provide a scaffold for skills training to enable students to develop their strengths as part of the development of their practice. In their final year students could reflect more deeply on how talents evolved into practical competencies would potentially create social and health practitioners grounded in their strengths and abilities, poised and eager to contribute to what they uniquely have to offer their professions and communities.

We envisage the possibility of a longitudinal study focusing on whether or not participants continue to utilise and develop their strengths whilst in professional practice, as well as a comparative study following on from this pilot with two cohorts of nursing students and two cohorts of social work students from two educational institutions.

Personal experience of strengths development may well also enable students to think more in terms of strengths when working with their future clients and patients and might also contribute to their enthusiasm for and ability to use strengths-based approaches more effectively in their future practice.

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