A Strength-based perspective with Regina Public Schools

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Abstract

The Regina Public School Board is informed by a strengths-based philosophy which includes the Circle of Courage model. The purpose of this paper is to identify first, how social workers within the Regina Public School Board apply a strength-based perspective in their interactions with students, administrative staff, parents, teaching staff and other allied agencies and second, its relevance to their practice. A qualitative case study was conducted that utilized the framework of a case study and a semi structured interview for face to face interviews with social workers employed by the Regina Public School Board. It is anticipated that the data gathered will benefit new and existing staff by providing guidance for their daily work and will help to clarify how school social workers are utilizing a strength-based perspective to support students, families, administrative and teaching staff and allied agencies.
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Introduction

The Regina Public School Board is informed by a strengths-based philosophy which includes the Circle of Courage model. The purpose of this paper is to identify first, how social workers within the Regina Public School Board apply a strength-based perspective in their interactions with students, administrative staff, parents, teaching staff and other allied agencies and second, its relevance to their practice. A qualitative case study was conducted that utilized the framework of a case study and a semi structured interview for face to face interviews with social workers employed by the Regina Public School Board. It is anticipated that the data gathered will benefit new and existing staff by providing guidance for their daily work and will help to clarify how school social workers are utilizing a strength-based perspective to support students, families, administrative and teaching staff and allied agencies.

For the purpose of this report school social workers responsibilities are defined by The Canadian Association of School Social Workers and Attendance Counsellors, 2001:

School social workers provide services to students who are experiencing difficulties within their environment, which impacts on their school functioning. School social workers may provide the following services: Consultation with school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents; individual counselling and support to students; family counselling and support to parents; group counselling for students; parent and school staff education programs and presentations; bridging the gap between parents and schools; referral services to community agencies; community development programming; collaboration with community programs; and other services employed on an ad hoc basis to meet the specific needs of individual students (The Canadian Association Of School Social Workers and Attendance Counsellors, 2001).

The following pages of this report include a literature review that highlights the strength based perspective, Circle of Courage, community home and school collaboration, allied agency collaboration within the school and social worker and teacher collaboration. These sections of the literature review were included to gain an understanding of the collaborations that exist within Regina Public School Board. This report will then follow with an explanation of methodology, findings, discussion and a
conclusion. The findings and discussion conclude the report and outline the correlation between the literature review and the findings.
Literature Review

Strength-Based Perspective.

Saleeby (1997) states that the strength-based perspective was originally developed by staff, faculty and doctoral students at the University of Kansas - School of Social Welfare. Guo and Tsui (2010) found that a generalist, strengths-based practice was developed in response to criticisms of the mainstream medical model. “The medical model views disability as a problem of the person caused directly by the disease, trauma or other health condition and calls for individual medical care provided by health professionals” (Preedy & Watson, 2010, pp. 425). Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt, (1989) found that the tendency was for professionals to focus on what is wrong with clients rather than recognizing and focusing on their strengths and resources. Weick et al. (1989) observed that the client often becomes known as their diagnosis (an alcoholic or a schizophrenic) and was subjected to the stereotypes these labels include. These labels prevented clients and others from recognizing their strengths, individuality and their capacity to grow (Staudt, Howardw, & Drake, 2001).

Smith (2006) defines strength as something that helps a person to cope with life or that makes life more fulfilling for that person and others. These strengths are not fixed personality traits; they develop from a series of events in a person’s life within given situations containing certain events that may either promote or impede human strength. Smith (2006) views strengths as incremental - one strength builds the foundation for achieving another. For example, a person who has endured bullying through school may see themselves as being stronger because of it and this strength helps to build on the belief that they can help others. Using the foundation of surviving, the once bullied person believes that they can help others find their strengths and persevere and survive their difficult situation. Strengths can also develop from a need to find
meaning and purpose in our lives. We try to find people, places and experiences that help us connect with the world. People are able to learn about themselves and others as they struggle to overcome difficulties even those that they cause themselves (Anthony & Cohler, 1987).

Saleebey (1997) views the key principles of the strengths perspective to be belonging, cooperation, empowerment, interruption of disbelief, discussion, and renewal. The strengths perspective focuses on the positive and not the negative aspects of a person’s life and the capacity to achieve his or her potential. “The basic assumptions are that: (1) individuals have the ability to grow, (2) focusing on your strengths will enable you to grow, (3) a person does the best they can, (4) human behaviour is complex and difficult to predict and (5) clients always know what is best for them” (Weick et al., 1989, p.4). Social workers collaborate with clients in identifying their strengths rather than acting as experts with solutions to problems (Staudt et al., 2008).

Consequently, Weick et al. (1989) have found that a choice is made for social workers to focus solely on those aspects of a person’s life that reflect their successes however small they may be. Focusing on people’s strengths rather than their failings reveals the key concept of the model. Saleebey (2006) sees the language of strengths as hopeful, grateful and positive. The approach consists of questions that attempt to identify what is working and how it is working; for example, exception questions (“When things are good, what is different?”), survival questions (“How have you managed this far?”), support questions (“Who are your supports or who gives you direction?”), and esteem questions (“What are you most proud of?”) (Saleebey, 2006). By placing an emphasis on their strengths a person will be more likely to continue to strive to achieve their personal goals by utilizing their strengths (Weick et al., 1989).
Social workers who act from a strengths perspective are concerned with the client’s resources, connections and skills rather than focusing on their deficits, disease, labels, and problems (Cowger, Anderson & Snively 2006). Emphasising the positive aspects of a person’s personality serves as a motivation for achieving personal goals. People do not achieve their personal goals by concentrating on their problems (Weick, et al., 1989). Gleason (2007) found that one of the core aspects of the strengths-based approach is identifying what is occurring when things are going well so that achievement of personal goals continues to move forward.

Two principles have been found that guide the strengths perspective. The first is that people have the capacity to determine what is best for them and second that people do the best they can (Weick and Pope 1988). The first principle; that people have the capacity to determine what is best for them is also a social work value. Value one of the Canadian Association of Social Worker’s Code of Ethics is titled “the respect for the inherent dignity and worth of a person” (Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), 2005) and as such “social workers uphold each person’s right to self-determination consistent with that person’s capacity and with the rights of others” (CASW, 2005). This value recognizes that people have an understanding about what they need and that they make their choices based on their own best judgement of what will meet that need. Social workers who operate from a strengths perspective believe that this awareness can be used to help people recognize their abilities and the positive influence they have on their lives (Weick et al., 1989).

The second principle is that people do the best they can. Weick et al. (1989) observed that given the complex way that situations occur, it is difficult to imagine that there is only one solution. Even when people are making what seem to be wrong choices from an outsider’s
viewpoint, they are exercising their judgement to find what is best for them. It is impossible for even the best trained professional to decide how another person should best live his or her life.

Lastly, Weick et al. (1980) found that the assumptions that focus on a strength-based approach include that people possess a wide range of talents, abilities, and skills. No matter how few or how many of these are expressed at one time, people have untapped, undetermined reservoirs of mental, physical, emotional and social abilities that can be accessed. Tong (2011) also views the strengths-based approach as assisting the client to discover and use their own strengths and resources, to cope with and find solutions to their problems. The strengths perspective is based on the value of these positive attributes and on the ways in which individual and social resources can be enhanced and sustained (Weick et al., 1989). This emphasis on positive qualities and attributes creates a positive perspective for social work practice. Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with this family? The question becomes, “What are the strengths in this family that will help them grow and change” (Weick et al., 1989)?

Circle of Courage

“The Circle of Courage is a philosophy that integrates the best of Western educational thought with the wisdom of indigenous cultures and emerging research on positive youth development” (Reclaiming Youth International, n.d.). The Circle of Courage model is symbolized by a circle and inside the circle the values of belonging, generosity, independence and mastery are seen as being shared (Reclaiming Youth International, n.d.). Aboriginal people see sacred meaning in the number four. The medicine wheel has four divisions and its circular framework symbolizes the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Van Bockern & McDonald, 2002). One of the main themes of the Circle of Courage model is that a set of shared values must exist in any community to create an environment that benefits everyone. Van Bockern and McDonald
(2012) view shared human needs as the traditions and practices of cultures that deeply cherish children and treat them with respect and dignity.

Therefore, Brendtro et al. (2002) feel that Native American child-rearing beliefs provide an opportunity for education and development for youth in today’s society. The beliefs of the Native Americans have developed over 15,000 years and have been passed down in oral traditions. These traditions and knowledge are mostly unknown outside the two hundred tribal languages of the Aboriginal cultures of North America. Anthropologists understand that Native Americans raised brave, polite children without using harsh methods (Brendtro et al., 2002).

However, the Europeans that colonized North America tried to “civilize” Aboriginal children in strict boarding schools, unaware that Indigenous people possessed a sophisticated philosophy that treated children with deep respect (Circle of Couraengz, n.d.). Brendtro et al. (2002) also found that the early educators believed that their role was to civilize the young Aboriginal children. Western educators saw themselves as superior and that the Western approach to child care was the right one. Children were forcibly removed from family’s homes and placed in residential schools. They were forbidden to speak or write their own language and their perceived uncivilized Indian identity was stripped from them.

Self-esteem is the main goal in raising children. When a person lacks self-esteem they are vulnerable to a number of psychological and learning problems. There are four basic elements of self-esteem are significance, competence, power and virtue (Coopersmith 1967). Significance is viewed as others accepting you, paying attention to you and being affectionate with you. A lack of significance is seen as rejection, being ignored and not belonging. Competence develops as a child learns and adjusts to their environment. Success brings a feeling of satisfaction and a
sense of self-worth (Coopersmith 1967). Failure on the other hand leaves a child with a lack of motivation but in some can foster resilience.

Garmezy (1994) defines resilience as the abilities, skills, insight and knowledge that a person gathers over time as they fight to overcome difficulty and meet challenges. It is not about denying a difficult life but about the ability to keep moving forward despite setbacks (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Resilience is about connecting to people, linking to others based on shared interests, and connecting to life itself (Bernard, 2012). For example, creating a sense of belonging can start by having families, schools, and communities become “psychological homes” where students find caring and respectful relationships (Benard, 2012). Creating opportunities for participation within the community such as making decisions, contributing strengths to the community, giving your opinion and having it heard are excellent ways of creating a sense of connectedness (Benard, 1991). This sense of connectedness like the Circle of Courage makes everyone feel that they are related somehow, that they belong (Circle of Couragenz, n.d.).

Van Bockern and McDonald (2012) identify four essential human needs that regardless of time or place are assets in a person’s life. The essential human needs that Van Bockern and McDonald (2012) identify share common elements with Coopersmith’s four basic elements of self-esteem. They are:

1. Belonging – sense of community, loving others, and being related somehow to everyone you know. Treating others as relatives forges powerful bonds that draw all into respectful relationships.

2. Mastery – competence in many areas; cognitive, physical, social, and spiritual. Having self-control, responsibility, striving to achieve personal goals rather than superiority.

3. Independence – making one’s own decisions and being responsible for failure or success, setting one’s own goals, disciplining one’s self.
4. Generosity – looking forward to being able to contribute to others, be able to give cherished things to others. (p.16)

These four needs encourage youth to experience positive personal development and teach them to appreciate their own strengths (Hatter & Van Bockern, 2005). Brendtro et al. (2002) see a person who lacks self-worth as being vulnerable to psychological, social and learning problems. In order to avoid these problems the four needs must be met within each person. “In order to thrive, all children need the opportunity to be reared in schools and communities that cultivate belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity” (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003, p. 22). Resilience is about connecting to people, linking to others based on shared interests, and connecting to life itself (Bernard, 2012). For example, creating a sense of belonging can start by having families, schools, and communities become “psychological homes” where students find caring and respectful relationships (Benard, 2012). Creating opportunities for participation within the community such as making decisions, contributing strengths to the community, giving your opinion and have it be heard are excellent ways of creating a sense of connectedness (Benard, 1991). This sense of connectedness like the Circle of Courage makes everyone feel that they are related somehow, that they belong (Circle of Couragenz, n.d.).

Equally important is having the adults that work with the youth develop their own emotional intelligence (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2002). Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, control and evaluate emotions (Cherry, n.d.). When children spend time with emotionally intelligent people, watching them, and doing what they do, they too learn emotional intelligence. It is not enough for children to be taught values through traditional lessons; they have to feel and experience them, to gain mastery, a sense of belonging and independence. This will only happen when the adults surrounding the children come to accept and live the Circle themselves.
Van Bockern and McDonald (2012) believe that:

all stakeholders in a Circle of Courage School need to continually share the vision of the school: meeting the needs of children as defined by belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Schools that fail to provide opportunities for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity are toxic to children. If schools are not working to meet the needs of children, they are not working very well. (p.14)

Van Bockern and McDonald (2002) view a Circle of Courage school as one where the teachers and support staff are competent in their professions. McDonald (2010) argues that a teacher does not promote a positive learning environment by simply walking into the classroom with a smile on his or her face; it is more about their instructional competence. Competence in instruction is an approach that leads to developing a safe and accountable learning environment where all the students are actively engaged. Wenger and Van Bockern (1999) agree that teaching competence happens when teachers create a rich social environment and teach content that is meaningful in a nonthreatening way.

Equally important, Brendtro and Du Toit (2005) view school staff as being in constant contact with the child and therefore need basic knowledge and skills to assist him or her with their developmental needs. Children that are struggling want adults who will respond to their needs, not react to their behaviour. By responding to their needs quickly, the adults can then support the children. School staff need to be trained in the framework of the Circle of Courage in order to provide support to children (Brendtro et al., 2002). Coetzee (2005) sees the support being in the form of identification, intervention and youth development. School-based developmental programs include an administration that has a strong foundation and provides teaching and classroom organization that support a positive school environment. In other words, staff should be equipped with basic knowledge that allows them to respond to challenging behaviour in or out of the classroom, perform effective assessments, decrease
severity of discipline, expulsions, suspensions and refer students quickly to resources that can help in a crisis.

Starting in the earliest grades, shared power should exist. This can take the form of voting, having classroom meetings, having a choice in assignments, designating classroom duties (dusting the book shelves, leading others to gym class), and contributing to peer mediation (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012). This helps children to develop the assets of mastery, independence and belonging by contributing to their school environment and learning new skills.

In addition, Van Bockern and McDonald (2012), view a Circle of Courage school as a place where the universal needs for belonging and human attachment can be met through relationships of trust and respect so that the child feels loved. In school, a child’s desire for achievement (mastery) is nurtured. The child learns to cope with the world and realize that he or she can succeed. The child’s free will or need for autonomy (independence) is encouraged by increased responsibility so that he or she will have the power to make decisions. In addition, the child’s character or sense of altruism (generosity) is nurtured by concern for others so that the child can say there is purpose to my life (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012).

Similarly, Cameron and Thorsborne (2001) believe that schools have an important role in teaching children to replace negative behaviour with positive behaviour. Strategies to encourage positive behaviour emphasize children caring for other people and being the recipient of care. These behaviours provide children with opportunities for insight and learning by teaching them about relationships. When behaviour causes deterioration in a relationship young people need to learn how to restore the relationship though accepting responsibility, forgiveness and strengthening relationships (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001).
Yamagishi and Houtekamer (2005) employ the Circle of Courage during counselling sessions by drawing a large circle on a piece of paper and dividing it into four quadrants and placing the words belonging, mastery, generosity and independence on the circle. Yamagishi and Houtekamer then talk in general terms with the student about the four quadrants. They discuss the child’s ideas about the Circle and their knowledge about Native American traditions. They are generally able to build on the child’s knowledge and bring his or her attention to the fact that the child is in the center of the circle or more accurately the center of something empowering. In each of the four quadrants Yamagishi and Houtekamer help the child identify strengths and skills and areas that need improvement. The children are then asked to pick the quadrant that they feel is the most important to them in terms of needing to change. This area is then turned into an achievable goal for the next session.

As a result of their work with the Circle of Courage, Yamagishi and Houtekamer (2005) have found that the format resonates with children despite their age, background, or presenting problem. The Circle of Courage provides an opportunity to build trust and help the child think about all the areas of their life not just school. They found that the Circle is also a useful evaluative tool. When students return they update the Circle to show new perspectives and how they have achieved their goals.

In summary, Brendtro et al. (2002) view Native American child rearing as possibly the most effective system of discipline for children and youth. The approach was developed from a culture where the goal was the education and empowerment of children. Current research is now reaching the point where a more holistic approach such as the Circle of Courage could be adopted and possibly duplicated by society as a whole (Brendtro et al., 2002).
Strength based perspective and the Circle of Courage

The strength-based perspective emphasizes the resources a person has available to them (Miley, O’Melia & Dubois, 2007). It is important that there is an accounting of what a client knows and what they can do (Saleeby, 1996). A child’s existing strengths are what promotes resiliency in periods of difficulty (Norman, 2000). Similarly, the Circle of Courage utilizes strength-based interventions to enhance the four assets of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2005). Resilience builds with increased assets.

The Regina Public School Board is also “united by four shared values statements, I belong; I want to know; I am responsible; and I respect” (Regina Public Schools, para. 1, 2012). Like the Circle of Courage, these Shared Values provide direction and encouragement for students to take responsibility for themselves and for other members of the community. Students are encouraged to take part in various activities such as progress report conferences with teachers and parents to collecting food for the Food Bank. The Shared Values of Regina Public Schools like the Circle of Courage look beyond individual differences and allow for equal opportunities for each individual to be recognized and encouraged for their individual characteristics and contributions to the community (Regina Public Schools, 2012).

The Circle of Courage and The Regina Public School Board’s four shared values are similar in many respects to the CASW Code of Ethics. The values and principles of social work include respecting the inherent dignity and worth of persons, service to humanity and the pursuit of social justice (CASW, 2005). The values and principles of social workers combined with the Shared Values of Regina Public School and the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage all combine to ensure that the needs of the students are being met by all that are involved in their growth and development.
The field of psychology is also moving towards highlighting client’s assets with the science of Positive Psychology. Positive psychology reinforces a client’s strengths, emphasizes their well-being and strives for ideal functioning on all levels (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005). Park and Peterson (2008) found that people do their best when their communities, experiences, relationships and traits are all working together. For Park and Peterson (2008) doing well in life is represented by a coming together of all of these four domains similar to the balance strived for with the four assets (mastery, independence, belonging and independence) of the Circle of Courage.

The strength-based perspective and the Circle of Courage both work with the student’s existing assets and help build new ones. They both promote resiliency to help the student overcome difficulty and meet challenges and both can be used to support the other. They are both excellent resources for the school counsellor.

**Home and School Relationships.**

When building a relationship between schools and families, Constable and Walberg (2002) view the family as the most important mediating system. Families are not a private entity. Families need assistance from their communities and have obligations within these communities. Parents need to participate in education to help build a school community that is effective. Working to facilitate this relationship between school and family is an important part of the school social worker’s role. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) have found that resilience in children is promoted when the resources in the family and school all work together to promote the healthy development and educational success of children.

Bernard (1995) similarly found that resilience in children can be nurtured and supported. He believes that by establishing protective factors in their environments the negative effects of
adversity are reduced. The main protective factors that families, schools and community can promote in children are caring adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation in school and community and high parent and teacher expectation regarding their academic success (Bernard, 1995). These protective factors also compliment the four essential needs as described in the Circle of Courage (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012).

Undoubtedly, “families cannot educate their children in a complex modern society without the assistance of schools and schools cannot educate without the cooperation of families” (Constable & Walberg, 2002, p. 374). Schools or families could prevent the other from achieving its desired function. The community, which is often represented by the school, has an obligation to ensure that all families have the assistance be it economic, social, educational, political or cultural, that they need to accept their responsibilities (Constable & Walberg, 2002). Bryan (2005) believes that schools can be organizations that instill hope to neighbourhoods and families.

As a result, when changes in the child’s home occur, the school social worker can assist and support the child during the changes. Oppenshaw (2008) sees the social worker as being able to help the student find resources that are available to them and to help them identify goals. It is important to also involve the child’s teacher to help during the changes. In a strength based model even the smallest of changes can help a child to see themselves and the situation differently (Constable, McDonald & Flynn, 2002). The partnerships between home, school and community are developed to meet the needs of children and families who are experiencing difficulties (Constable, McDonald & Flynn, 2002).

Unfortunately, many minority and/or poor students who are experiencing difficulties tend to have multiple stressors that put them at risk for failure at school (Bryan, 2005). They often
have difficulty focusing on learning which affects their academic success. The social and emotional difficulties they are experiencing consume their lives. Often their families are struggling with economic instability and have few supports. These families usually are not able to meet with teachers or not available if the social worker comes to offer support at their home (Openshaw, 2008).

When the social worker can meet with families Amatea, Smith-Adcock and Villares (2006), found that attention should focus on family strengths as opposed to deficits. Educators are interested in finding ways to actively support families and their effort to prepare their children for success when they are experiencing school difficulties. Walsh (2003) considers each communication between home and school as a chance to strengthen the family’s capacity to overcome adversity and successfully raise their children. In contrast, Amatea, Daniels, Bringman and Vandiver (2004) found that when teachers met with parents, usually the mother, the result from all parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds was the expectation that the invitation from the school to “talk” would be bad news. This often translated into a negative reflection of their parenting skills or that their child was a “problem” and that parents were often hesitant to attend any meeting for fear of being judged. Students usually weren’t involved in these meetings. Amatea et al. (2004) believe that if the children were present at these meetings they would see the teacher and their parent cooperating to reach an agreement and delivering the same message. The child would learn skills such as communication, planning, problem solving and teamwork.

Equally important is that Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that parents who do become actively involved in their children’s school life do so because of their personal beliefs and what they believe they are supposed to do to help their children succeed at school. Middle
class parents were likely to speak directly to the teacher if they had concerns whereas working class parents more often engaged in “watchful waiting” (Minke and Anderson, 2005). Parental involvement in education is an important goal that should be encouraged. Blue-Banning, Summer, Frankland, Nelson and Beegle (2004) state that early in education parents should be engaged as collaborative partners so they are prepared to become effective partners as their child grows older. Minke and Anderson (2005) have found that a trusting and respectful relationship between school and family is the foundation for successful partnerships.

Finally, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found that in order to have a successful partnership parents described the need for frequent and open communication that did not “candy-coat” the bad news, avoided implications of blame and remembered to include positive comments about their child, in other words a strength-based perspective. Parents wanted easy access to organized information about resources available to them. Parents also emphasized “the need to check tactfully to make sure that all parents, especially possible non-readers, understood the reports, description of rights and other documents they were receiving” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 175). Parents stressed the importance of having the professionals they were working with acknowledge the validity of their points of view. Lastly, parents wanted simple courtesy: calling them by their last names or asking permission to use their given name and for the professionals to be on time for their meetings (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

**Allied Agencies.**

Osborne and Collison (1998) do not view school counselling and community alliances as a new occurrence. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) agree. They have found support within the community from businesses, libraries, civic and youth groups is becoming more common. The need for more integrated services is due to the increased number and complexity of student
problems (Dryfoot, 1994). Schools are formal establishments that are regulated by laws and funded through taxpayers (Fertman, 1993). Their mission is clear. Provide an education to children. Community agencies’ missions on the other hand are not as concrete. Missions and visions vary from agency to agency and their work is hard to measure. Funding comes from grants and donors who all have different agendas. Resources are always limited. Each has their own culture, language and philosophies. Despite these differences, Fertman (1993) believes that community agencies can be a major support for schools when both share a common goal of supporting their clients.

Osborne and Collison (1998) however feel that community allies are underutilized mainly due to the fact the social workers are leaving university prepared to work alone. Social workers do not form partnerships, which is not very efficient or an effective way to practice. Walsh, et al. (1999) view social workers as needing to accept that with the high volume of students they have, they cannot do all the work alone. Walsh et al. (1999) feels that this high volume will not change in the near future. By forming collaborative working alliances, social workers can combine their efforts and work collectively to meet the needs of all their students.

Likewise, Jackson et al. (2002) found that it is crucial that social workers learn to work with the various stakeholders within the school community as their support and involvement can be essential to the development of the school community. Osborne and Collison (1998) view the agencies as a cost cutting measure for the schools and as providers of expertise. Adelamn and Taylor (2002) also feel that school-community partnerships can be cost effective and successful. Community agencies can place staff at schools which makes access easier for students and their families. These services are a way of encouraging the school to open their doors to the community and encourage greater involvement by families (McMahon, 2001).
Unfortunately, Osborne and Collison (1998) discovered that there are few effective models of how the two should work together. Social workers need to have a very good understanding of how they fit into the system in terms of their relationship with allied agencies. Muro and Kottman (1995) suggested that the demeanor of the social worker should not be that of the expert. The social worker should seek to help other staff develop their skills in working alliances and promote open communication. The relationship should be well defined and guidelines clear. Collaborative relationships do not happen easily and therefore effort needs to be taken to ensure these relationships work well for the sake of the client and the social worker.

Bemak (2000) found three areas that lead to a successful school community agency collaboration. The first is the outreach link with support services that youth may need. These may include mental health or social services. For example if a social worker has three hundred students assigned to them and they have one student who is suffering from a mental illness the social worker will probably not have time to provide weekly therapeutic sessions to the mentally ill student. This student would be better served by receiving services from an allied agency that specializes in this area and can schedule weekly visits with the student. By transferring care of this student to an allied agency the social worker is freed up to work with other students who require support.

Bemak (2000) views the second area as a close coordination with the agencies such as bringing them physically to the site. This prevents students from falling through the cracks and promotes communication between the social worker and the provider. For example at Balfour High School in Regina there are a number of agencies that provide services to the student at the Shirley Schneider Support Center such as Planned Parenthood, Qu’Appelle Health District and
Family Service Regina. These agencies all provide an integrated approach to care for the students and their children.

Bemak (2000) sees the third area being the development and implementation of prevention and intervention programs. These programs can be either in the school or off-site. These could include classes/sessions on drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy planning, domestic violence and parenting classes.

When an allied agency does come to the school, Osborne and Collison (1998) observed that there are five stages of integration that occur; (1) hostile coexistence – this occurs when both the external provider is in the same building but there is no cooperation or interaction with school personnel (2) peaceful coexistence: the service provider is in the building but there is little or no interaction. (3) cooperative existence – service providers work in the same setting, may share information but there is still a definitive separation of the two. (4) Effective collaboration – all work together on cases respecting each other’s speciality. Lastly stage (5) integration system - information is shared by all professionals and decision making is collaborative.

As a result, in order for the school and the allied agency to reach the fifth level Osborne and Collison (1998) suggest that a number of issues need to be addressed: first, professional respect – the majority of human service professionals come out of school prepared to work as individuals. They are ill prepared to work as part of team and so they must learn to work collaboratively. Second, a collaborative working environment – group dynamics must be understood and accepted. Third, leadership should be shared on a rotating basis. Lastly effective and efficient service – services should primarily benefit the student and the community in which the families live and work.
In summary, allied agencies and the school system must learn to work together to ensure that the student achieves success. Students are coming to school with complex problems (Dryfoot, 1994). Community agencies provide expertise and Fertman (1993) believes that they can be a support for students and schools when both share the common goal of supporting the student.

**Professional Collaboration within the School**

In order to successfully meet the needs of students Wagner (1998) sees an increased need for school personnel to learn to work together. Murray (1995) found that due to professional training, school wide responsibilities, and the accessibility of both social workers and school principals this often leads each to assume that they are primarily responsible for working with students, teachers, community group and parents. Kaplan (1995) established that these two groups, because of their professional training and ethical approaches, have different tactics when dealing with student issues in the school. In general terms, the principal’s focus is on learning, group centered achievement and obtaining quantitative results. The social worker is focused on the student’s mental health and well-being. These differences can often lead to conflict between the two (Wagner, 1998).

Often social workers and principals don’t agree on the social worker’s tasks and role (Murray, 1995). Shoffner and Williamson (2000) found that principals view the social worker’s role as helping the students build skills that are related to their school work and functioning. Social workers see their role as indirectly increasing the student’s academic achievement by supporting and counselling them. They are advocates for the student and focus on the cause of the student’s behaviour. Murray (1995) found that principals are student advocates but for the
whole group and tend to focus on the student’s behaviour. They look at discipline as a means of keeping the school orderly, disciplined and safe (Murray, 1995).

Niebuhr, Niebuhr and Cleveland (1999) also found that administrators often assume that social workers should perform a variety of duties, which are important but take them away from their own tasks; for example coordinating special events or after school activities. Often social workers view what they can and cannot do based on the principal’s needs and goals. “…Enhancing the principal…” (Niebuhr et al., 1999, p. 676) as opposed to helping students is often the unspoken role for the social worker.

As a result of the demands on their time, Jackson et al. (2002) found that social workers and principals have very few opportunities to discuss roles and learn about each other’s perspective. Shoffner and Williamson (2000) suggested a meeting be held where both could learn about each other’s perspectives and tasks. This might also help administrators learn about programs the social worker is expected to start, possibly motivate principals to provide mentoring programs for new counsellors and simply improve the working relationship between the two. Social workers and principals generally share the common goal of being concerned for the welfare of their students and need to find ways that they can work together to ensure the student’s needs are being met. Social workers often hide behind confidentiality in a desire to maintain distance with principals. They view confidentiality as an absolute necessity for building the relationship with the student and tend not to make an effort to communicate with their principal on issues that could have mutual concern (Kaplan, 1995).

But Niebuhr et al. (1999) have found that there are opportunities for collaboration such as the social worker and the principal assessing the school for potential threatening influences such as gang activity or sexual harassment. Both could examine whether there are areas in the school
that the students avoid due to possible threats or harassment. A collaborative approach could lead to a productive relationship that could help develop efficient programs and services for students (Wagner, 1998).

Bemak (2000) also believes that it is essential the school social worker and other professionals within the school work closely together. He suggested three areas in which social workers have the opportunity to work closely with other professionals to ensure that the needs of the student are being met. First, the social worker and school administrators must collect and share data about academic achievement and school performance to help develop programs that meet the needs of the students. Second, the social worker must work closely with teachers. This could include discussing and observing classroom behaviour, helping the teacher develop group process skills, conflict resolution strategies and help identify serious mental health concerns. Lastly, the social worker coordinates with other support personnel such as the school nurse and establishes clear communication about the student (Bemak, 2000).

Therefore, Wagner (1995) stresses that in order for the student’s needs to be met, collaboration and support between school personnel needs to become more effective. Social workers and principals need to understand and appreciate their very different roles so that they can work together to meet the needs of the students. Niebuhr et al. (1999) believe that the principal and the social worker are viewed as the leaders of the school and as such it is essential that they collaborate for the benefit of the school population.

**Social Workers and Teacher Collaboration**

Bronstein and Abramson (2003) from Binghamton University in New York have found that due to an increased number of students from poor or single parent families there is an urgent need for collaboration between teachers and social workers. Teachers need to have support
when they are dealing with issues in the classroom that affect student’s learning processes. Bronstein and Abramson (2003) feel this support is the main task of the school’s social worker. Teachers are realizing that they are not able to educate in isolation. The students they are trying to educate are dealing with a wide variety of issues that interfere with their learning. Both teaching and social work share a mission and understanding of a mutual goal; do what is best for the student. This goal can provide an important opportunity for collaboration (Lynn, McKay & Atkins, 2003).

Similarly, Abrasion and Mizrahi (1996) believe that teachers and social workers share some commonalities; both are in a female dominated profession, practice in a bureaucratic setting and are service orientated. These commonalities can help each relate and understand the other. Having a shared understanding and appreciation among collaborators has been linked to effective interdisciplinary collaboration (Abrasion & Mizrahi, 1996). In addition, Gifford et al. (2010) found that each of these professionals can have a unique impact on the student and their school experience. This impact is improved through the collaborative effort of teachers and social workers. Each could utilize the other’s training and experience and work together to provide an excellent education for students. Furthermore, Lynn et al. (2003) found that collaboration between teachers and other school staff is essential to the development of school-based mental health services.

Lynn et al. (2003) believe that the students, teachers and social workers are influenced by the community and the school environment. This influence can improve or damage collaboration between teachers and social workers. Lynn et al. (2003) offered a couple of strategies for promoting collaboration; establishing a positive environment where everyone agrees that they are all working towards the common goal and scheduling regular meetings with
teachers to help ensure a good exchange of information. Social workers also need to take time to understand the teachers’ expertise and work to find a mutual understanding of both professions’ boundaries.

In addition, Bronstein and Abramson (2003) believe that teachers may have a more traditional view of the school environment than social workers. Teachers appear to be more influenced by the norms of their school than are social workers and social workers are often seen as “outsiders”. Bronstein and Abramson (2003) found that in their role, social workers are given the opportunity to support teachers and their views of the school, classroom and students and how they can help. Social workers can be seen as a resource to help with teacher’s workload instead of creating the perception that they are taking away from the teacher’s central role. It is important that social workers share information and provide help that teachers want. For example, Bronstein and Abramson (2003) suggested social workers could arrange meetings during school hours between teachers and parents and cover the classroom for the teacher. The result being, the teachers and parents work together to help the student and the social worker has access to the classroom to observe the interactions with students and share these possibly helpful observations with the teacher.

School social workers are seen as assisting teachers to greater productivity by supporting them with

educating families on student classroom needs and processes, problem solving, making referrals to external resources, facilitating home visits and parent conferences, providing individual and small group counselling, developing after school programs, initiating community networking and resourcing, providing consultation and assisting with attendance and truancy issues (Dente, 2011, p.6).

Social workers are also available to help students with relationships and life issues such as hunger and poverty. “School social workers can also assist schools with understanding cultural
diversity, including race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability/disability status and socioeconomic status concerns” (Dente, 2011, p.6).

In addition, as organizers of programs, social workers can provide information about multiculturalism and oppression to teachers. Each can share ideas that are multiculturally sensitive to help teachers reach more students and help the students reach their educational goals (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003). Teachers need to view school social workers as a support so they can maintain their primary emphasis on the student’s academics. Social workers can help with this by helping teachers understand and appreciate the link between psychosocial involvement and better academic performance (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003).

In order to make that link between better academic performance and psychosocial involvement Berzin et al. (2011) suggest communication between home, school, community and the social worker should be followed by collaboration with the teacher. School-wide collaboration tends to occur less frequently. Less frequent school-wide collaboration is more in-line with the more individualistic role assigned to the school social worker. Missing this opportunity causes the school-wide staff to miss the chance to learn from the expertise of the social worker. Berzin et al. (2011) found that when social workers have a limited role in the school culture, the school tends to spend less attention on the student’s social and emotional development. By increasing the role of the school social work better cooperation between education and mental health would support better student outcomes. Berzin et al. (2011) also found that supporting teachers and paying attention to student mental health promotes positive health and educational outcomes.

By paying attention to student mental health Lynn et al. (2003) view school-based mental health services as providing a much needed service to students in need of services, especially
students in low-income neighbourhoods who might otherwise not have access to services. An
effective collaboration between school social workers and teachers is essential to accessing
services. Berzin et al. (2011) see teachers as the key to reporting mental health needs and
referring students for assessments. Some teachers may welcome this role while others may not
want to accept the responsibility. Teachers have a major role in negotiating the school system
and accessing mental health services for students. In collaboration with school social workers
teachers can promote and identify mental health care for students with in the school.

As a result, Dente (2011) believes that teachers and social workers will be a resource for
students in the middle of technological advances. During this time of transition, it is easy for the
student to get lost in all the changes not to mention the everyday problems associated with
school. Teachers and social workers are in a position to collaborate and unite their efforts to
provide information to students about mental health issues. With budget cuts and restrictions
teachers and social workers working together to utilize available resources will improve the
learning experience of the student and their emotional well-being (Dente, 2011).

Methodology

Social scientists have been doing what is now called qualitative research for about a
hundred years (Lichtman, 2006). They have been asking questions about people’s lives, their
culture and how they make sense of their world. Anthropologists and sociologists interviewed
people, observed their interactions, collected and analyzed artifacts and wrote accounts of these
experiences from various locations throughout the world (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) also found that other professions such as teachers, lawyers, health workers
and social workers have an interest in exploring a particular phenomenon through qualitative
research. The general purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of how people
make sense of their own lives, describe their journey (not the outcome) and describe how people interpret what they have experienced (Merriam, 2009).

There are several approaches to qualitative research; they include ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, feminist theory, generic approach, narrative analysis, postmodernism and critical theory and mixed methods (Lichtman, 2006). As a process Merriam (2009) sees qualitative research as inductive; data is gathered to build concepts, hypothesis or theories rather than testing a hypothesis. This research project utilized a case study format to explore how the social workers of Regina Public School Board utilize a strength-based perspective in their daily work with students, allied agencies and other professionals.

The reasoning for choosing a case study follows from Merriam’s (1988) thinking. A case study is particularistic. It focuses on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon (strength-based practice). The research focuses on the process not the outcome (how the individual social worker operates from a strength-based orientation). It often makes for a good description of a practical problem or situation that arises from everyday practices. A case study is also heuristic which means that the study improves the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon. Lastly, it can bring about a new meaning, extend the reader’s experience or confirm what is already known (Merriam, 1988).

Undoubtedly there are strengths and limitations to case studies. Merriam (2009) found that the case study is often selected as the method of research because of the nature of the research problem. Case study offers a means of examining difficult social problems consisting of multiple variables of possible importance in the understanding of a phenomenon. Merriam (2009) also found that the case study is appealing to applied fields (education, social work, administrative and health) as they can help improve how people practice. Such is the situation.
with this research; the research from this case study can be utilized by new and existing school social workers as reference material for their practice within the school board.

Merriam (2009) states that the major limitation of the case study method is that the writer must decide how much analysis, summary and description to include. This means the study is limited to the understanding and reliability of the researcher as they are the major instrument of data collection and analysis. Consequently, the researcher is left to their own capabilities throughout most of the research (Merriam, 2009). To ensure the reliability of the case study Lichtman (2006) found it helpful to combine case studies with other methods. This paper combines a case study with an environmental scan.

Environmental scanning became popular during the 1960’s when Francis J. Aguilar (1967) originally conceived it. It was quickly adopted by many major organizations. Aguilar characterized a scan as an assembly of information that helps reduce misinformation from flowing into the organization and providing an early warning for managers of the changing external conditions (Russell and Prince, 1992). Weiget, Fetsch, Jensen, Yang and Rogers (1992) view an environmental scan as a method of gathering valuable information about the environment of an organization and its employees. Brown and Weiner (1985) view environmental scanning as a method of scrutinizing the organization for new and unseen information.

The scope of an environmental scan can be limited or extensive. Fahey and Narayanan (1986) suggest that organizations scan their internal environment to identify and monitor trends and patterns and assess their organizational influence. This environmental scan will focus on the social workers of Regina Public Schools.
Morrison (1992) identified three types of environmental scans; they are irregular, periodic and continuous. Universities and colleges generally utilize an irregular or periodic system that focuses on task environment. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on the irregular system as this case study is a one-time study with no currently planned follow up. Morrison (1992) identified a quick way to complete an environmental scan is to interview the major stakeholders regarding their views. This case study interviewed the social workers of Regina Public Schools.

Thomas (1980) found the content of a scan needs to be considered in terms of the scope, range and futurity of the exercise. Scope can range from very broad to very narrow. The purpose of this environmental scan was to conduct interviews with the social workers of Regina Public School Board to answer questions surrounding their work with a strength-based approach. The range of this scan was very narrow. The scan was intended to demonstrate how social workers with the Regina Public School Board utilize a strength-based perspective in their interactions with students, parents, administrative staff, teachers and allied agencies.

**Data Collection.**

Data for this project was gathered from eight of the fourteen social workers of the Regina Public School Board. Their contact information was received from the professional associate for this practicum. Introductions to some of the social workers occurred at a meeting held by the Regina Public School Board. Each social worker in attendance was given a description of the study and a copy of the questions and a consent form. All the social workers employed by Regina Public School Board were then contacted three times, first by email and then twice by telephone. Copies of the questions and consent forms were emailed with the initial contact email. Interviews were arranged at the interviewees’ convenience and completed primarily at
schools within the Regina Public School Board. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed (with the permission of the interviewees) by the writer.

**Data Analysis.**

Once the interviews were transcribed the tapes were played back and read to ensure accuracy. This helped the writer become more familiar with the data. Each interview was then read three times. The data was sorted and compiled on a word processing document according to the questions asked.

Thematic analysis was the method used to identify patterns or themes that emerged from the qualitative data for this case study. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). The data was read and re-read and preliminary thoughts of themes or patterns were written down. The data was then organized in a word processing document in response to the questions. It was then coded on paper according to themes that had been previously written down. Anything that was related to a theme was assigned a code. Another word processing document was created that contained four possible themes. The themes were typed out and the coded data was then cut and pasted to the corresponding theme. The data for the themes was then reread to ensure that the data did support the theme. One theme was eliminated as there was not enough relevant data to support it. The three remaining themes were reviewed to ensure that there was no overlap. Responses that were especially descriptive of the theme were selected and used as support for the theme in this report.
Results and Interpretations

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme is relationships and it addresses the importance of relationships when working from a strength based perspective. The second theme is communication and it reflects the importance of establishing and maintaining an open line of communication between anyone involved with the student and the student themselves. The third theme is an eclectic view of the strength based perspective and it addresses the different views the interviewees have of the strength based perspective.

Relationships.

The first theme that emerged from the data was the importance of relationships with students, principles, allied agencies, teachers, administration staff and parents. Participant one stated that is probably why I like strength based the most because it always builds off a strong relationship foundation. Without that it is like a house, the foundation will crumble. Participant four also spoke generally about working with students, principles, allied agencies, teachers, administration staff and parents that most important is building the relationship with them. Participant seven found that Why Try training help(s) build relationships and using the lesson planned to work on resiliency and strengths. The Why Try Program teaches social, emotional, and leadership values. It is a resiliency based program that is aimed at helping teachers, counsellors and administrators apply the principles of resiliency and help the student become successful (Why Try, n.d.).

Participant eight said when working with parents

*I will say ok let’s try this and I will call you in a week or two and then we will see how that (went) kind of thing. Ok maybe we should try this or that; you keep tweaking it as you go. You keep building on it and you keep going. So that you are there you have built the relationship already so that when a crisis happens and it does. The foundation is there and you carry on.*
Participant one specified that when working with administrative staff,

*the buildings that I am most effective in are the ones where the principals feel that they are most supported by me. Whenever I go to one of my schools the first thing I do is go to the principal. How is everything going this week?*

Participant six detailed that when working with allied agencies *I touch base and see how so and so is doing, is there anything you need me to work on particularly. How is our plan going? I have a really good relationship with the schools and all the teaching staff. It works really well.*

The relationship theme was also continued in the question that asked interviewees if there were any other comments. Participant one stated that *all interactions and strategies should be client focused and relationship driven and relationship focused.*

**Communication**

The second theme to emerge from the data was the importance of communication with students, principles, allied agencies, teachers, administration staff and parents. Participants were asked; what are some examples or techniques that exemplify a strength based response when working with students, principles, allied agencies, teachers, administration staff and parents. Participant seven stated in general terms that *it is making sure that we are sharing.* Participant six stated that

*I always include my principals in all the schools- let them know my caseload. I give a copy of my caseload to the principals let them know who I am seeing what kind of things I am working on. Because they are the captain of the ship. Because when I leave I need to ensure that they know what is happening with the kids. So that if something is happening with the kid that they are aware of it. And I always tell the kids that the principal needs to know all this information in case I am not here. So they share that with the kids.*
Participant eight stressed that

communication is really important with outside agencies. Keeping everybody in the loop, so they know what is going on. I find we will often have these big case conferences where everybody is brought in to determine what everybody’s roles are and who has been doing what and then following up on those things is good.

Participant one stated that

I really like teachers that connect with families. Because one of the first things I like to ask when things are going wrong with the kid I like to ask have you talked to the parents. Maybe there is an upsetting event before that morning. More often than not when teachers do phone parents it is great we talked about and it makes sense now and we have worked through it. Participant two also believes in collaboration with parents. I don’t think we can go ahead without that. I don’t think we should. Most schools are including parents by telling them what they are doing. But being part of the decision making. Do you think this would work for your child? What other ideas do you have and actually have them participate in.

Participant three believes in talking to the parents

and ask for their feedback and input as to where they see the problem. If there are things we need to go to the home for (like) the more complex kids and just do a little bit more of a developmental history and ask (parents for) their perspective and how they manage (daily). Participant six sees the open houses (as) where they (the parents) come in and talk about what the Circle of Courage is and (this is) how we include families and how we share some of their strengths.

Participant three felt that students - if they are having difficulties then I will say we should share with your teacher would you like to do it or would you like me to do (it)? Participant three also felt that

the teachers respect me really well. Because they know that they can come to me and they know I will get the answers as best as I can. So I won’t just say no, I can’t tell you who I see. I share with whoever is seeing them. They are part of the solutions usually. (Be)cause they see the kids all the time.
When talking about a strength based perspective with allied agencies participant one stated that

*the big one is working on having a positive attitude because sometimes when I refer kids to child and youth about mental health concerns that I don’t think I can help with at school; it is very important to be positive when you talk to those people (Child and Youth).* I made a referral there not long ago and phoned the worker instead of telling the worker the problems; (I said) this is Johnny (and) this is what I see. How can we work together as a team? Do you mind if I work with Johnny at school and you work with the family. (It is about) finding a way to fit with the other agencies you work with.

Participant two stated that a release of information was essential to keeping communication flowing between the agencies involved.

Automatically I would say get an authorization. If (the) parent is willing to go, get an authorization signed so we can communicate with others working with the family. Are they okay with that? We need to work together that is part of the collaboration. That is part of the allied agencies. We need to collaborate with them. I am not about seeing a child that somebody is seeing at a child and youth. If they already have a counsellor that is fantastic. I will support whatever they are doing. I am not going to be doing something different here. It doesn’t make sense.

Participant eight also stressed that

*communication is really important with outside agencies. Keeping everybody in the loop, so they know what is going on. I find we will often have these big case conferences where everybody is brought in to determine what everybody roles are and who has been doing what and then following up on those things is good.*

Participant six stated that

*our outside supports have been key in working with these like it is very strength based we all sit around the table. Who is doing what? What are our gaps? How do we fill our gaps? What are the gaps with the family? Awesome, I love it.*
Eclectic Interpretation of Strength Based Perspective

The final theme that emerged was the eclectic interpretation that the social workers of the Regina Public School had about the strength based perspective. The interviewees were specifically asked; what does a strength based practice mean to you? Participant one stated that it is usually a dialogue and if the kid is unable to do the dialogue it is usually through observations. Seeing how they interact with people, things they do, how they respond to situations. Participant two detailed that

whoever the client is they get to decide a lot of things. They are really the expert about themselves and you are there as to maybe give ideas or support. Sort of looking at evaluating their strengths and thinking about them as the expert of their life and themselves rather than me being expert. I am really there to support them where ever they want to go. They decide what their goal is and I am there to help them to support them.

Participant four felt that it is about looking at all their strengths. It doesn’t have to be like overwhelming or super amazing it is basically something that they feel they are good at. It can be something as simple as maybe math. Participant eight found that

often times when a kid comes to us there’s been, not always, a negative kind of view of the kid this is the problem kid they have been doing this and this and they are tired. So we change the framework to look at positive rather than negative changes of the whole way of looking at the child and it opens up ideas on how to help the kid.

Question two asked; is a strength based practice relevant to you work within the Regina Public School System? If so how? Participant two stated that it is. They would ask the student

what is their goal for the day and the student decides well this is what I am going to do today. This is (what I want to) work on today. Ok so what is an obstacle that is going to stop you from getting there? What is going to be something that is going to stop you and they think about that. And a plan is developed around that obstacle. To me that is strength based.
Participant five also agreed that it was and indicated that

*I think that working in the school system lots of individuals will get
cought up in focusing on the challenges and needs of people and then
just get wound up focusing on the problem all the time and especially
in meetings.*

Participant six agreed and identified that *it is very much strength based and kind of
working on how you master the problem you are trying to overcome.* Participant seven
wondered if *we (are) meeting that kids need for belonging?* Participant eight summed up the
theme

*I am eclectic in terms of my approach, it is one of the approaches I
would use with kids, adults, parents, grandparents, teachers,
everybody kind of thing. You are always looking for that thing that
worked here it worked this time what happened that we can apply it
next time. So it is always inherent. It is just how it works for me.*

**Discussion**

In this case study, data was gathered from social workers that explored the strength based
perspective in Regina Public School Board. Inductive theme analysis revealed three major
themes related to their practice. Inductive theme analysis looks for frequent, dominant or
significant themes in the raw data and then condenses the data down to uncover the links to these
themes (Thomas, 2003).

The first theme revealed that the social workers believed in all their interactions with
parents, students, administrative staff, allied agencies and teachers that the relationship was
essential to a strength based perspective. Participants discussed the relationship and the
importance of emphasizing positive changes and creating a positive perspective to work from.
For example instead of asking what is wrong with this family social workers are asking; what are
the strengths in the family that will help them grow and change?
Similarly when working with teachers that are supporting students, social workers focus on the positive to maintain that relationship. When the teacher focuses on the positive the student is more willing to listen and cause less disruption in class. In the same way principals and social workers build and maintain their relationship through open communication. One participant maintained their relationship by touching base on a regular basis. Likewise when working with allied agencies social workers touch base to see how the student is doing and how the plan is working. Two social workers used the analogy that the relationship is like the foundation of a house, without it the house would crumble. This is an excellent illustration of the importance of the relationship within the strength based perspective.

The second major theme revolved around communication and its importance in the strength based perspective. Participants stressed the importance of sharing information. For example including the principal in the caseload and bringing them up to date on each student so if something happens when the social worker is not there the principal can step in. Similarly the participants encouraged students to share their feeling with their teacher because often they can be part of the solution. Likewise collaboration between families and teachers is important to develop. The participants encourage this relationship because they don’t feel that they can go ahead without it. One participant suggested open houses are an excellent way to open up communication by including families and sharing student’s strengths. All the social workers feel that parents are essential to good communication.

All interviewees agreed that communication with all involved in the student’s care was essential to the student’s success. For example, when communicating with allied agencies it is important to focus on the student’s strengths not their weaknesses. Ensure that everybody that is working with the student is in the loop, working as a team, identifying gaps and filling them in.
Having a wrap-around effect with the student and the team helps the student feel supported, promotes resiliency and stimulates their positive skills, gifts and abilities.

The final theme that emerged was the eclectic interpretation of the strength based perspective presented by the social workers of the Regina Public School. All interviewees agreed that the strengths perspective focuses on the positive and not the negative aspects of a person’s life. That everyone has gifts, skills and abilities and can use these to reach their goals. In addition the student’s strength does not have to be amazing it is basically something they feel they are good at.

The social workers believe that the client gets to decide what goes on in their lives because they are the expert on their lives. The social worker’s role is to provide support. The student decides the goal and the social worker helps them achieve it by working around the obstacle. Instead of focusing on the obstacle they focus on what the student is good at and how they can overcome that obstacle with their existing strengths.

All the participants agreed that the two areas that were essential to ensuring a strong practice were building and maintenance of the relationship and the open communication with all involved in the student’s care. All find strengths in their clients, look past labels, build on the client’s success, believe the client is the expert in their own life and always focus on the client’s successes not their limitations.

All participants agreed that open communication is vital in their work but the one issue - confidentiality and obtaining a release of information was only raised by one participant. Confidentiality is central to the CASW Code of Ethics, “social workers protect clients’ identity and only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with informed consent of the clients or the clients’ legally authorized representatives, or when
required by law or court order” (Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), 2005). It is a strong possibility that guidelines may already be in place with Regina Public Schools, however it still is worth mentioning in the discussion of this case study.

**Limitations**

When considering the limitations of this case study future research could possibly delve a little deeper into the Circle of Courage. Future researchers could perhaps ask a specific question about the Circle of Courage and how the social workers use it in their daily practice. The Circle of Courage model is part of the strengths-based philosophy that The Regina Public School Board is informed by so it would have been beneficial to highlight its application in this case study. This would have provided some additional information about how the strength based perspective and the Circle of Courage work together. This type of question could also highlight some additional information that only partially came to light during the interviews conducted in this study.

The other limitation of this study is that the data is self-reported. As a researcher we are extended a privilege of learning from others’ expertise and sharing of their knowledge. As a researcher we take what interviewees say at face value. However, sometimes interviewees have selective memories they remember or don’t remember incidents that relate to the questions. In addition, they could possibly attribute positive outcomes to their own skill but attribute the negative events to others’ lack of skill (USC Libraries, 2014).

**Recommendations**

The researcher acknowledges that she does not know all the programs, services, and procedures available to staff, parents and students of the Regina Public School Board. With this
caveat in mind, the following recommendations based on the literature and findings of this research are proposed.

1. **An in-service that focuses on the collaboration and the sharing of knowledge between social workers, teachers and administrative staff.** In the literature review it was suggested that staff should be equipped with basic knowledge that allows them to respond to challenging behaviour in or out of the classroom, perform effective assessments, decrease severity of discipline, expulsions, suspensions and refer students quickly to resources that can help in a crisis (Coetzee, 2005). In addition, Shoffner and Williamson (2000) suggested a meeting be held between the principal and social worker where both could exchange information about each other’s perspectives and tasks and reach a mutual understanding of shared concern for the welfare of the student. This could help the principals learn about programs the social worker is expected to start, possibly motivating the principals to provide mentoring programs for new counsellors and improve the working relationship and communication between the two.

2. **Further strengthen the relationship between teachers and social workers.** Social workers are seen as assisting teachers. The social workers support teachers, educate families on student classroom needs and processes, problem solve, make referrals to external resources, facilitate home visits, parent conferences, provide individual and small group counselling, develop after school programs, initiate community networking and resourcing, provide consultation and assist with attendance and truancy issues (Dente, 2011). From the data it appears that the majority of Regina Public School Board social workers interviewed for this study are doing this. Therefore, it would be beneficial to further strengthen the relationship and as a result further enhance the communication between teachers and social workers and ensure that it is a collaboration that continues to benefit the student, teacher and the social worker.
3. Professional development day designed to refresh strength based counselling techniques. Given the writer’s findings of an eclectic interpretation of strength based perspective it is suggested that a yearly professional development day be set aside to refresh strength based counselling techniques. The principals and teachers could also attend helping to maintain and deepen their relationship and communication to ensure that all are on the same page philosophically.

4. Clear guidelines and procedures for the release of the student’s confidential information. Given that only one of the eight social workers interviewed mentioned the need for a release of information to be signed by the student, it is suggested that clear guidelines and procedures for the release of the student’s confidential information be established and communicated to the social workers of Regina Public School Board.

Conclusion

The Regina Public School Board is informed by a strengths-based philosophy which includes the Circle of Courage model. The purpose of this paper was to identify first, how social workers within the Regina Public School Board apply a strength-based perspective in their interactions with students, administrative staff, parents, teaching staff and other allied agencies and second, its relevance to their practice. A qualitative study was conducted with the framework of an environmental scan to capture the perspectives of school social workers. The scan revealed that all the participants interviewed believed that the strength based perspective was relevant to their practice and that they operated from a strength based perspective. The social workers interviewed view the relationship as the foundation of their practice with students, administrative staff and parents.
In addition, the study revealed that the social workers believe that there are positives in every person and that strength is not always something amazing it is generally something the student feels good about. When it came to working with other staff and allied agencies the relationship was viewed as the most important strength based approach that they utilized. While working with parents and teachers accenting the positives about the student was viewed as a strength based approach that worked well with both.

The social workers interviewed told rich stories/interactions about working from a strength based perspective. The majority focused on finding the strengths in a child and developing that; it is obvious from the interviews how much respect the social workers have for their clients.

Through the course of the interviews the social workers of Regina Public School revealed themselves to be dedicated and hard-working counsellors that put their clients first. It was a privilege to interview them and gain insight into their practices.
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Appendix

Open Ended Interview Guide

1. What does a strength based practice mean to you?

2. Is a strength based practice relevant to your work within the Regina Public School System? If so, how?

3. What are some examples or techniques that exemplify a strength based response when working with:
   a. students
   b. administrative staff
   c. parents of students
   d. teaching staff
   e. allied agencies?

4. Do you have an example of a story/interaction that utilizes a strength based perspective in your work as a school counsellor within the Regina Public School Board that you would like to share?

5. Any other comments?