

## PART ONE



# Teaching Turnaround One Identify Your Teaching Strengths

**Turnaround One: Identify Your Teaching Strengths** is the topic of Chapter 1. It focuses on you, the teacher, the change agent, the classroom leader, and the champion for children who sets the tone and establishes the learning environment for each and every one of your students. While you may be tempted to move to the next Teaching Turnaround because you want to know how to help your students, we ask you to take a deep breath and focus on **you** for a moment.



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# Identify Your Teaching Strengths

With the new day comes new strengths and thoughts.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

When we ask teachers to identify their strengths, we often hear a deafening silence roll like a wave across the room. Inevitably, someone calls out, “How about if we tell you our weaknesses?” The teachers chuckle and, almost in perfect unison, breathe relief as they wait hopefully to see if we will redirect our question. We never do. Teachers aren’t in the practice of identifying and exploring their strengths and less so publicly labeling them as such. They are, however, fully comfortable discussing what is not going well. In many ways, teachers and students have been conditioned to continuously and frequently unpack their deficits. To combat this mindset and to shift the focus on the inevitable, we use a process-oriented protocol workshop approach (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010) called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), to engage teachers in discovering their strengths in all aspects of teaching. **Appreciative Inquiry** is an organizational change theory that uses inquiry questions to focus on what is going well to create new possibilities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative Inquiry focuses us on the positive aspects of our lives and leverages these characteristics to address the negative aspects (White, 1996). The process includes a five-step approach (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver) that

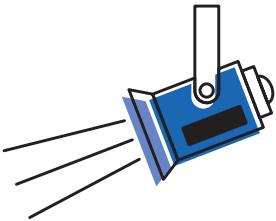
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- Appreciative Inquiry:
- An inquiry process
- that focuses on what
- is working well to
- implement change.

we have adapted for preservice and inservice teachers to begin the process of identifying and leveraging their strengths for success. This process is most productive when you can engage with other teachers in sharing your thoughts and ideas.

# SPOTLIGHT ON YOUR PRACTICE:

## Your Strengths



Gather together in a professional learning community, find a partner, or reflect on your own to begin this important process.

| EXPLORING YOUR TEACHING STRENGTHS<br>FROM AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PERSPECTIVE  |  |
|--|--|
| AI Stage: <i>Define</i>  | AI Define Prompt   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Arrange yourselves in pairs to conduct interviews.</li><li>• With a partner, share your story following the prompts to the right. (Actively listen and be prepared to retell your partner’s story in the <b>Discover</b> stage that comes next.)</li></ul> | <p>Think back on a point in your mathematics teaching. Think about a peak experience when you felt fully engaged and successful.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Tell your story (Paired Interviews).<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Describe what was happening.</li><li>• Who was involved?</li><li>• What were you doing?</li><li>• In what ways was this experience meaningful, energizing, engaging, and valuable to you and your students?</li><li>• What strengths did you bring to this experience?</li></ul></li><li>2. What are the characteristics you value most about yourself in this experience?</li></ol> |

| AI Stage: <i>Discover</i>   | AI <i>Discover</i> Prompt  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rearrange your pair into groups of four or six.</li> <li>• As you listen, record themes you noticed from the paired interview discussion on sticky notes.</li> <li>• Discuss how the themes might be grouped, organized, and named.</li> </ul> | <p>Share your partner's story in your small group. Think about the successful mathematics teaching stories you just heard. What can we discover about the common themes in our stories? In your groups, discuss</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What themes do you notice in the stories about our mathematics teaching strengths?</li> <li>2. What themes do you notice in what characteristics we <b>value about ourselves</b> in our successful mathematics teaching?</li> <li>3. How can we organize these themes?</li> </ol>  |
| AI Stage: <i>Dream</i>  | AI <i>Dream</i> Prompt   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain in groups of four to six.</li> <li>• Chart, draw, or record the group's ideas.</li> </ul>   | <p>Let's build on the themes we developed. What if you were regularly using your teaching strengths? Imagine what this teaching would look like. Imagine what you would be doing. Imagine what students would be doing.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As you imagine, consider the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Particular structures in the classroom environment</li> <li>• Student engagement</li> <li>• Selection of tasks</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Discuss with your group your thoughts and ideas from your imagining.</li> <li>3. What do you notice about the groups' ideas?</li> <li>4. Are these dreams out of reach or within grasp?</li> </ol> |
| AI Stage: <i>Design</i>   | AI <i>Design</i> Prompt  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain in your groups of four to six.</li> <li>• Make sure you have some chart paper and markers on hand. You may want additional materials such as construction paper.</li> </ul>   | <p>Using the ideas from the group and the discussion of your teaching strengths, design a mathematics classroom environment where you regularly plan ways to use your strengths. Include as many details as possible. Be ready to share your design.</p>   |

continued >>

| AI Stage: <i>Deliver</i>  | AI <i>Deliver</i> Prompt   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Locate your original partners to discuss and reflect.</li></ul> | <p>Think about your group’s design for strengths-based instruction and all the designs that you heard about from the other groups. With your partner, discuss the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What can you do to bring your idea to a reality?</li><li>2. What is the smallest step you can take tomorrow?</li><li>3. How can you ensure that you will take this action?</li></ol> |



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**Reflect:** How did this process help you identify your teaching strengths?  
How can you continue the work you started here?



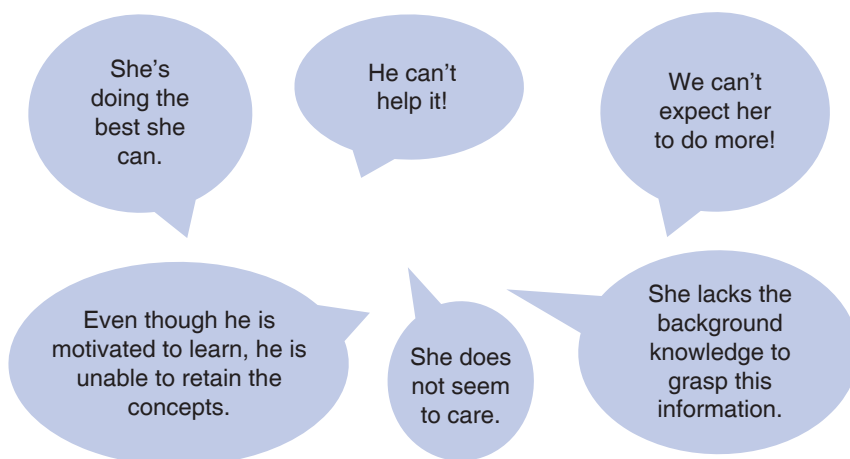
### Turnaround Tip

Every day, challenge yourself to tell one person about at least one teaching strength you experienced and ask at least one other colleague to share a teaching strength from the day. Or, record your teaching strengths in a My Teaching Strengths Journal.

## What Do You Believe About Your Students’ Learning?

If asked explicitly to do so, most educators would state positive beliefs about their students. It is the comments made when, perhaps, teachers feel most vulnerable, tired, and even frustrated that underlying beliefs may slip out. Take a look at some comments (Figure 1.1) we have heard in our work with teachers, and also likely made ourselves, about students we teach.

**FIGURE 1.1: Comments Made About Students**



Each of these comments describes an underlying belief that a teacher has about students. While some of these comments might, at first, seem like they are caring and the teacher may describe them as such, they unintentionally undermine the work that teachers do to support students at the highest level. More important, they can—by word or behavior—potentially affect the students' beliefs about themselves.

A well-known study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), titled *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, examined how teachers' beliefs about their students and their teaching practices were influenced by the information they received about the first- and second-grade students they were going to teach. These teachers were told that about 20% of students had been tested and were found to be smarter and more able to learn at greater rates than other students. In reality, the students were randomly selected. Remarkably, the students perceived as "advanced" outperformed the other first and second graders!

Rosenthal and Jacobson's study sparked other researchers to test the Pygmalion effect in multiple contexts, including the preschool (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999) and college classrooms (McLeod, 1995). Even in these varied contexts, the teachers' beliefs about their students influenced their teaching practices and, ultimately, student performance. In a recent study, Klehm (2014) found that teachers' attitudes about their students with disabilities to "learn and achieve higher level thinking was a significant predictor" (p. 236) of student performance on

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:

national assessments. Clearly, these studies help educators understand the critical role that teacher beliefs and expectations play for students in the teaching and learning environment.

Although often unintended, our beliefs may reflect biases, particularly about students who have different cultural, gender, language, and economic backgrounds than we do. Some groups of students have experienced discrimination in schools and suffer when their teachers make assumptions about their learning capabilities because they are different. Some schools create structures and policies that may “dehumanize” students and make it difficult to recognize the valuable contributions that each and every student makes to the mathematics classroom (Gutiérrez, 2017). Understanding our own biases and beliefs is the first critical step in uncovering, nurturing, and cultivating our own strengths as educators (Berry, 2008). Gutiérrez (2017) explains: “Not until we seek to stand in the shoes of our students, to understand their conceptions, will we will be on the path to recognizing and embracing their humanity” (p. 2).

Like a detective, it can be helpful to first examine a statement, determine the underlying belief, and then create an alternative, asset-based belief that contradicts or even challenges the initial belief. Through examination of these statements and beliefs, teachers, administrators, families, and other school leaders can begin the work of identifying key instructional practices that will address students’ needs based on their strengths and potential.

Take a look at the statements, the underlying beliefs inherent in the statements, and alternative beliefs that emphasize assets and strengths (Figure 1.2). What do you notice?

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language that we and others  
use to describe our students.

When we work to identify a belief that focuses on moving in a positive direction, we are more likely to interact with other teachers, our students, and families in more positive and productive ways. The first step in changing the narrative is to consciously hear the language that we and others use to describe our students. Truly examining the words that we use to describe our students will help us

identify underlying and harmful beliefs that sabotage good teaching practices. In the Spotlight that follows (page 30), we invite you to explore your own beliefs about your students.

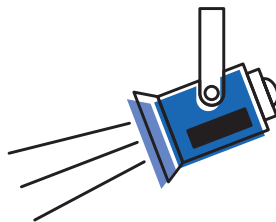
**FIGURE 1.2: Shifting to Beliefs That Emphasize Students' Strengths**

| STATEMENT  | UNDERLYING BELIEF   | ALTERNATIVE BELIEF   |
|--|---|--|
| She is doing the best she can.   | She can't learn more.   | She can learn math. We just need to find an entry point into her learning.   |
| He can't help it.  | He doesn't have self-control or self-regulation skills.   | He has better self-control when he is able to select manipulatives, tools, and a place to work.  |
| We can't expect her to do more.  | She cannot learn more mathematics than she is currently learning. She is incapable of learning more.  | If we raise our expectations and set success criteria in collaboration with the student, she will be able to achieve.  |
| She lacks the background knowledge to grasp this information.                  | How much students can learn depends on the background knowledge they hold. Students are unable to learn without the right background knowledge. | She has solid knowledge about money. Let's use that knowledge to develop ideas about place value.  |
| She does not care.   | This student's behavior indicates that she does not value school.   | The student's behavior indicates that we need to show her how much we care about her learning.   |
| Even though he is motivated to learn, he is unable to retain the concepts.     | Students who struggle with retention cannot learn mathematics.  | I notice that he retains more when he is able to work with his peers to solve problems. Let's try pairing him with a classmate.                              |
| He can do this—he is just lazy.  | Students choose to not work.  | We need to find out why he does not complete his work.   |
| You just need to tell them how to do it because they can't think on their own. | Direct instruction is best for students who struggle.   | My students are capable of higher-level thinking and problem solving.  |
| His parents don't care and can't help him.                                     | Families that cannot attend conferences don't care about their child's learning.  | Families care very much about their children's school success but don't always show it in the same way or in ways that resonate with teachers' own families. |



# SPOTLIGHT ON YOUR PRACTICE:

## What Do You Believe?



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We've spent some time unpacking some comments that we have heard; now it is your turn. Take a moment and really think about the students you teach. Shine the spotlight into your mathematics classroom on a student who is currently struggling and a student who is meeting expectations. Write down statements you have made or heard others make about each of the students in each box.

Student #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Student #2 \_\_\_\_\_

What kinds of underlying beliefs do you notice in these statements?

Next, select at least one alternative, asset-based belief for the student who is currently struggling and record it in each box.

Student #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Student #2 \_\_\_\_\_

- How does the asset-based belief redirect your thinking about the student who is currently struggling?
- How might an exercise like this promote strengths-based teaching?



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Consider this Turnaround Tip to empower the relationships you are building with your students.



### Turnaround Tip

Share your strengths-based belief with the student who is currently struggling and with other teachers who work with this student. Sharing our strengths-based beliefs with our students can improve our relationships with them.

## What Do Students Think You Believe?

We know and observe regularly that teachers work diligently to develop positive relationships with all their students. Teachers who develop these close connections report that their students are more cooperative, demonstrate more self-directed behaviors, and exhibit higher levels of engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Students want their teachers to know them as special and unique learners who possess an array of strengths, weaknesses, and interests (Daniels & Perry, 2003). Not surprisingly, students' interest in classroom learning and their perception of their own abilities as learners are associated with their beliefs about the degree to which their teacher cares about them and recognizes them as unique learners (Daniels, Kalkman, & McCombs, 2001). Learning new content in innovative ways motivates students to not only engage in the learning at hand but also work harder. On the flip side, students express concerns about their mathematical skills when they are required to do repetitive work and as a result engage less in the task, perhaps associating the repetition with negative beliefs about the value of these tasks (Daniels & Perry, 2003). Being understood as a unique learner is clearly important to our students. While we have the most desirable intentions, we may unintentionally communicate unintended messages about what we believe our students are able to accomplish. These beliefs are often reinforced through the current heavy emphasis on standardized testing.

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Students want their teachers to know them as special and unique learners who possess an array of strengths, weaknesses, and interests (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

We can discover what our students believe about our behaviors as mathematics teachers by inviting conversations with them about the teaching and learning practices that they desire. You can start these informal conversations with

individual students or with small groups, or more formally through a whole-class meeting. Record students' ideas on chart paper for later reference. Try the following conversations starters in your next class.



## Try It!

### Conversation Starters

These conversation starters can be posed with individual students, small groups, or as a part of a community circle.

#### What do teachers do

- To help you feel encouraged to do your best in math class?
- To show you that they care about your learning?
- To help you learn math?
- To help you feel comfortable in speaking up to answer questions during math instruction?
- To get to know your likes and dislikes?
- To learn about what you are good at in math?
- To challenge you in math class?
- To help you when you don't understand math?
- To make you excited to learn more math?
- To help you work with your classmates and learn from others?

Surveys can also offer great opportunities to learn about students' beliefs about their teachers, schools, and learning environment. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation conducted a large-scale Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project to determine which teacher and school factors contributed to student success and discovered that student survey results revealed that students were able to identify when and how they were challenged by their teachers, teacher clarity, expectations, and care for their students. Remarkably, the teachers who had higher student survey scores were linked with higher student achievement (MET Project, 2010). Not surprisingly, students recognize good teaching when they experience it! Surveys can be administered and data can be collected electronically through free survey options (Google Form, surveymonkey.com) or in paper format. While there are many validated survey instruments that

can be purchased (e.g., Tripod, [www.tripodproject.org](http://www.tripodproject.org); YouthTruth, [www.youthtruthsurvey.org](http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org); My Student Survey, <https://mystudentsurvey.com>; and iKnowMyClass, [www.iKnowMyClass.com](http://www.iKnowMyClass.com)), you can also design a survey of your own to learn more about what your students believe about your teaching.

The next Try It! is an example of questions that you can ask your students. If you choose to survey your students, it is important to collect this information anonymously so they can answer more openly. If you do not have access to technology, you can ask someone else to administer the survey to your students to soften any sense that there is an answer they should give.



## Try It!

### Students' Beliefs

1. My teacher encourages me to do my best in math class.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
2. My teacher cares about me.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
3. My teacher knows what I am good at doing in math class.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
4. My teacher knows what I need help with in math class.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
5. My teacher knows what I like to learn in math class.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
6. My teacher thinks I can learn challenging math.  
Always      Usually      Sometimes      Never
7. During math instruction, my teacher is best at  
\_\_\_\_\_

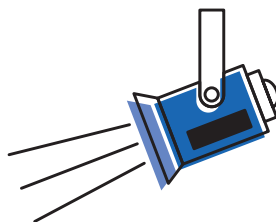


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# SPOTLIGHT ON YOUR PRACTICE:

## Monitoring Your Message

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Video or audio record your classroom in five- to ten-minute segments throughout the day or over the course of the week. Make sure that you capture moments in your classroom during both mathematics teaching and transitional times.

As you watch or listen to your recordings, write down particular statements that you make that may indicate your underlying beliefs about your students. For example, you might say, “I know that you will be able use lots of strategies to solve this problem.” Or “I am going to put you in groups to work on this task because you think of great ideas when you work together.”

**Statements:** After recording these statements, consider the beliefs that you are communicating to the students and write them down.

Select one statement that you want to ensure that you continue to foster. How will you make certain that students continue to receive this important message?

Select one statement that you want to ensure that you change. How will you make certain that you change this message?



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Implement this Turnaround Tip as a formative assessment about your own teaching practice.

Understanding the ways in which we communicate can be better interpreted by collecting evidence about our teaching practices. In the following Spotlight activity, teachers are invited to gather and analyze teaching data.

Sometimes it is helpful to develop visual reminders about our affirmative beliefs to help us focus on the positive messages we want to convey to our students.

Finally, we ask you to consider how your beliefs about your students, your own teaching strengths, and the messages you communicate to your students form a network of strength-building ingredients. In the Spotlight on the next page, we ask you to develop an action plan for each of the areas explored in this chapter.



### Turnaround Tip

Collect and share the results with your students and explain to them how you plan to either continue and/or improve a particular teaching practice. Include a list of action steps for implementation.



### Turnaround Tip

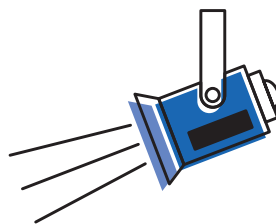
Develop your own affirmative belief statements and post them around the room. Share your belief statements with your students, families, and colleagues.

## Summary

As you venture into exploring how your own strengths can empower you to identify your own capabilities and, in turn, find strengths in your students, your proficiency as a change agent emerges. By creating a habit of identifying your own positives rather than teachers' all too frequent common focus on their weaknesses, the tenor of the instructional experience moves to more solid relationships with the content and the students. Using the tenets of the Appreciative Inquiry model builds productive change on top of a foundation of what's working well. As mathematics teacher educators, the two of us often encounter teacher candidates who come to student teaching seminars or classes feeling that they can't reach a student or don't know how to "handle" an instructional situation. They, like many teachers who care deeply about their students, report that they can't sleep over these concerns and even cry as they talk about particular children. By refocusing their attention to their strengths, we ask them to immediately start journaling about this student and the small (or big) successes they can claim each day. They are surprised when they feel better about these situations as the initial tendency to focus on their frustrations is great. It is these transfers in attention that match the Try It! activities found in this chapter. We know this first step is really a leap. Ready for the next footstep forward? Let's go!

# SPOTLIGHT ON YOUR PRACTICE:

## Making Connections



In the first box, record an example. In the second box, consider an action plan item to implement in your classroom as a result of your learning.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| What I Learned About My Beliefs                            | How Can I Ensure That I Believe in the Mathematics Ability of Each and Every Student? |
| What I Learned About My Strengths as a Mathematics Teacher | How Can I Continue to Showcase My Strengths in My Mathematics Classroom?              |
| What I Learned About My Mathematics Teaching               | How Can I Build on My Best Teaching Practices?  |