

## The strengths approach in practice: How it changes lives

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If you are beginning to tire or lose hope after almost 40 years of the neoliberal agenda dominating the political landscape and commissioning of social services in Aotearoa, then it may be timely to read *The Strengths Approach in Practice: How it Changes Lives*. This book encourages us to reconsider the strengths approach as a stance against the New Public Management positivist approaches to social work intervention, which often focus on cause-and-effect responses to problems.

This book is pragmatic in reminding us that micro-level activism won't necessarily change society, but that every action matters and can ultimately bring hope. However, the main point of difference about this book is that it asks us to actively seek out possibilities in systems, structures, policies, and laws, as an alternative to retreating to the common positions of cynicism and blame.

The book does this by presenting a collection of stories that illustrate the strengths approach in action. These stories and examples are told through the lens of a small NGO, Students and Refugees Together (START), which is based in the South West of England. The book is structured by discussing how the strengths approach can be applied across multiple levels of society, from individuals through to law, policy, and organisations, and then concretised by providing real life examples from START. The overarching message of the book is to provide an alternative to feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, in the hope

that readers will transfer this into positive action for social justice.

An example of how it does this occurs early in the book whereby readers are encouraged to view law as a resource, as opposed to an obstacle and "to look for the spaces for creativity and opportunity in its application" (p. 49). It then discusses how applying the strengths approach to structuring organisations, can help avoid the some of the pitfalls of contract compliance and commissioning which often beset the NGO sector.

Instead of structuring organisations as separate enterprises which compete against each other for contracts, it encourages like-minded professionals to shape collective responses, which can "create potential in difficult circumstances" (p. 68). It encourages collaboration and consistency amongst organisations, and an awareness of the neoliberal myth that growing organisations who are often winning funding contracts, are a sign of health. The application of the strengths approach is also encouraged in the content of these funding proposals whereby organisations are invited to present as "capable collaborators" alongside the people they help, and that they seek funding for the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time (p. 105).

The book also discusses something which many of us would benefit from, which is to encourage organisations to have a governance structure that is strengths based. It proposes organisational structures which

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include solidarity instead of hierarchical structures of management, mutuality whereby people and the planet are cared for, and a sense of shared responsibility to care and act.

As I currently work in education, one of the sections which particularly resonated with me was the strengths approach to learning and student knowledge. The tone of this section was beautifully reflected in the opening statement and use of Socrates' quote, "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel" (p. 148).

My current mahi at the University of Auckland involves connecting and supporting social work students with their placements. The book highlighted a number of parallels between the English and Aotearoa contexts of this space—the most significant being that we both exist within an environment of statutory regulation. Within this model, students are viewed as inferior to employed staff and a number of tasks are viewed as too complex for students to carry out.

Instead, the book suggests a model for student placements which views students as

potentially high contributors who can make a difference in the agency in which they are placed, as opposed to being a burden and additional to social workers' already high workloads. It also suggests that providing student support is regarded as a core activity for all staff, and this is supported by a focus on critical reflection and supervision.

This book openly states that it offers a "stimulus rather than a recipe" for action, and for some readers, it may at lack some of the detail they require (p. 169). However, maybe this is indeed the strengths approach in action, whereby we as readers are encouraged to be aspirational and look between and beyond the current structures of the systems and contexts which surround us.

Overall, this book is well written and very accessible. I would recommend it to anyone who is being impacted by the frustration of navigating systems and organisations which are often siloed and at times hostile. By focusing on strengths within and across systems, we create space and possibility for stories of empowerment, diversity, hope, creativity, and reciprocity to flourish.

Reviewed by [Georgina Guild](#), Professional Teaching Fellow, The University of Auckland