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Chapter 3
Reflective Teaching Through Character Strengths: A Self-study of Reciprocal Educator–Student Growth in the Teaching Advancement of Universities (TAU) Programme

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Abstract This self-study examines reciprocal educator-student growth arising from a strengths-based pedagogy grounded in positive psychology as part of an institutional programme within the national Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowship Programme. Positioning the practitioner-researcher as a participant, the study traced iterative enactment reflection cycles with a cohort of 103 first-year Human Resource Management students, combining structured Gibbs-aligned reflection with Mezirowian criteria for transformative learning. Multiple qualitative artefacts (researcher journals, lesson plans, audio-visual stimulated recall, student reflective logs and essays, field notes, and programme documents) were triangulated and interrogated with critical friends to broaden the interpretive vantage points and enhance rigour. An analytic protocol mapped Gibbs' reflective micro-stages (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action) onto Mezirow's indicators of transformative learning (disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, communicative testing, and enacted transformation) to distinguish between instrumental adjustments and perspective change. The findings coalesced into six interrelated themes. Three of these themes are related to educator development: (1) teacher identity and reflective practice; (2) pedagogical innovation, instructional redesign, and (3) leadership, agency, and social justice advocacy. The other three focus on student development: (1) strengths-based self-awareness and agency; (2) collaboration, interpersonal growth, and academic engagement; and (3) resilience, and professional readiness. Evidence of mutual reciprocity emerged when teacher interventions generated disorienting

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experiences for students, prompting critical reflection, which, in turn, prompted the educator to re-examine their practice and sustain change for the benefit of all involved in the learning experience. These implications underscore the value of integrated, reflective frameworks, embedded character-strengths activities, and institutional support for reciprocal, equity-oriented professional development. Recommendations for programme design and future multi-site research are offered to test the transferability of the Reciprocal Growth Model.

Keywords Reflective teaching · Character strengths · Strengths-based pedagogy · TAU higher education · Strengths gym

3.1 Introduction

The Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Programme, established by the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), represents a coordinated national effort to advance educational leadership, foster innovative pedagogies and promote inclusive teaching practices across South Africa. Responsive to shifting student demographics and institutional imperatives, TAU prioritises the professional growth of its academic staff as a catalyst for systemic transformation in higher education. As a TAU participant, the researcher in this case served as a change agent by promoting strengths-based and transformative methods in higher education with positive psychology.

Despite the global popularity of positive psychology and strengths-based interventions, research on the experiences and professional growth of educators who utilise strengths-based pedagogy remains scarce. Primarily focusing on student outcomes, the literature overlooks how these approaches might stimulate changes in educator identity, reflective practice, and institutional and classroom transformation, particularly in the distinct socio-educational context of South African universities.

This study aims to address this critical gap by conducting a reflective self-study within the TAU Programme, focusing on the implementation of Level 3 of the *Strengths Gym* programme. *Strengths Gym* (Proctor & Fox Eades, 2019) is a positive psychology, strength-based intervention aligned with the Values in Action (VIA) Institute, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the science and practice of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths comprise 24 universal positive qualities that represent the best of human nature. These strengths are categorised into six virtues: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. Individuals can discover their character strengths through the VIA Survey, which helps foster personal growth, improve well-being, and build resilience by aligning one's actions with core values. *Strengths Gym's* structured, dialogic, and experiential activities are designed to help individuals identify, apply, and reflectively utilise their character strengths.

Underpinned by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and bolstered by Gibbs' reflective cycle, this investigation explores how a strengths-based intervention within TAU can promote mutual growth, also referred to as reciprocal growth, for teachers and students. Reciprocal Growth is understood as a dynamic principle within complex systems, where synergistic interactions between components drive collective advancement and sustained well-being. The development of teaching methods, changes in professional identities, and promotion of inclusivity were all considered. The central research question that frames this inquiry is, "*How can a strengths-based intervention within the TAU Programme foster simultaneous educator and student development in a South African university context?*"

3.2 Literature Review

3.2.1 Strengths-Based Pedagogy in Higher Education

The concept of "strength-based pedagogy" originates from a range of educational and psychological traditions and does not have a single originator (Fung, 2017). Although the term "strengths perspective" was first used in social work by Weick et al. (1989) to highlight human autonomy and potential, Clifton and Nelson's (1992) work significantly advanced its application in education, and Peterson and Seligman (2004) formalised it using positive psychology principles. Using frameworks such as the VIA Classification to increase academic engagement, resilience, and subjective well-being, modern strengths-based programmes include these theoretical underpinnings to promote "optimal functioning" in learners. This method focuses on identifying what students can do well, building on their real strengths rather than the problems they face. Learning spaces shaped this way help students feel connected, make decisions for themselves, and grow their confidence in their abilities. Instruction is shifting toward matching students' interests and skills (Modry-Mandell & Nguyen, 2022). When applied in daily teaching, the approach helps learners who face various challenges, such as those with disabilities. Support often comes through lesson plans rooted in personal interests, aiming to improve both school achievement and overall well-being. Advocates of this approach argue that by focusing on strengths, educators can enhance engagement, build confidence and resilience, and co-construct more inclusive and equitable classroom partnerships (Fung, 2017; Modry-Mandell & Nguyen, 2022).

This perspective is particularly valuable in South African higher education, where first-generation and historically disadvantaged students would benefit from transformative pedagogies that foreground students' existing skills and contextual resources, thereby contributing to the broader social justice agenda of educational equity and participation parity rather than the deficit approach that focuses on limitations. (Leibowitz, 2017). Strengths-based pedagogy has been shown to promote engagement, self-efficacy, resilience, and well-being by highlighting what students can do

and providing structured opportunities to recognise, apply, and reflect on their character strengths, such as through the *Strengths Gym* intervention (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Linkins et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Along with supporting changes in educator practice, these interventions help instructors transition from being content transmitters to facilitators who focus on the overall development of their students and align classroom practices with the ideals of social justice and inclusion. Incorporating strengths-based activities into the regular curriculum ultimately helps students learn while also allowing teachers to improve professionally, as both groups engage in cycles of self-reflection, self-application and self-identification. Furthermore, the empowering feature of this transformative pedagogy contributes to the broader goal of achieving quality education, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all). SDG 4 emphasises the crucial role of access to quality education, ensuring access to education for all, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or disability. SDG 4 focuses not only on enrolment rates but also on enhancing the quality of education, emphasising that increased access requires additional investment in educational resources (A4ID, 2022).

Strength-based pedagogy is enacted through programmes such as *Strengths Gym*, which help students identify and apply their strengths (Proctor & Fox Eades, 2019). When incorporated into development programmes such as TAU, these interventions not only enhance student learning but also offer faculty opportunities for reflection and growth (de Kaat, 2020). Additionally, integrating strength-based pedagogy with social justice frameworks promotes equitable well-being. It encourages educators and students to critically examine their assumptions and adjust their personal and professional identities in the process. A strength-based approach fosters an ideal environment for transformative learning. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory provides a thorough theoretical framework for this process.

3.2.2 Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), initially formulated by Mezirow (1991), views adult learning as a process of scrutinising and modifying fundamental presumptions, resulting in significant changes in viewpoint, attitudes, and behaviour. Experiences with unsettling situations, critical self-reflection, rational discourse, and adopting new ways of thinking and doing are the four interconnected processes at the heart of TLT. Because it places more emphasis on changing perspectives than on making technical adjustments, this framework offers a potent lens for professional development in higher education (Kitchenham, 2008). In response to the complex educational landscape of South Africa, TLT was operationalised in the TAU programme through action learning, collaborative enquiry, and structured reflection. This allowed for inclusive pedagogical adjustments and reframing of teacher identity. By securing cycles of transformation in discussion and introspection practice, TLT empowered educators to move beyond content delivery towards facilitation

that addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, with direct relevance for equity and social justice in post-apartheid contexts.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the practice of reflective teaching, particularly as enacted through systematic self-study, offers a concrete methodology for educators to engage with and enact transformative learning processes in their professional contexts.

3.2.3 Reflective Teaching and Self-study

Reflective teaching is a methodical and critical analysis of one's own teaching methods, combining academic understanding with practical insights to improve practice and enhance the positive student experience (Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983). Gibbs' Reflective Cycle—moving from description to feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan—offers an organised structure for this work, prompting teachers to attend to both what happened and their emotional and intellectual responses to it. Embedded in reflective teaching, and particularly valuable for classroom-based enquiry, are the core elements of self-study: systematic documentation (e.g. reflective journals, lesson artefacts, recordings), multiple sources of data and triangulation (student feedback, peer observation, assessment outcomes), explicit theoretical framing that links practice to literature, reflexive interrogation of assumptions and positionality, transparent and ethical reporting of methods and findings, and iterative cycles of enactment and revision that both improve practice and generate knowledge (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Samaras, 2011). Together, these elements move reflection beyond impressionistic commentary toward rigorous, shareable inquiry that supports both individual development and collective learning.

Self-study is a methodical, evidence-based investigation into one's own teaching, with the dual goals of enhancing practice and contributing to academic discourse (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). It emphasises transparency, reflexivity, and the integration of personal experience with scholarly frameworks (Samaras, 2011). Gibbs' Reflective Cycle provides a practical mechanism for operationalising the abstract principles of TLT, as its staged prompts encourage the critical reflection and testing of assumptions that lie at the heart of transformation (Cranton, 2023). For example, the cycle's analysis and conclusion phases invite teachers to surface and scrutinise their underlying beliefs about teaching and learning. In contrast, the action plan phase supports experimentation with alternative practices—steps that mirror transformative processes such as experiencing a disorienting dilemma, engaging in critical reflection, and trying out new perspectives. This article defines self-study as a methodical enquiry into my teaching using TLT and Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. It includes various data sources such as reflective journals, lesson artefacts, and student reflections. Through iterative cycles of reflection and engagement with critical friends, this study assesses how strengths-based pedagogy during TAU influenced my professional identity and fostered students' self-awareness, collaboration, and academic engagement.

3.2.4 Social Justice in Pedagogy

Social justice in education refers to the ongoing pursuit of equity and inclusion and the dismantling of systemic barriers that limit access, participation, and outcomes for historically marginalised students (Bali, 2020; Leibowitz, 2017). In the South African context, the legacy of apartheid and persistent structural inequalities have necessitated policies and pedagogies that foreground non-discrimination, redress, and redistribution of educational opportunities (Department of Education, 1997, 2001; Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004). Social justice frameworks in higher education demand not only the equitable distribution of resources but also the fostering of participatory, affirming learning environments that recognise and build upon the diverse strengths, identities, and lived realities of all learners. When paired with strengths-based pedagogy and transformative reflection, social justice commitments become actionable: educators are called to challenge deficit narratives, design inclusive curricula, and ensure that university spaces enable all students to flourish as active participants in shaping a democratic society. Numerous studies have identified various elements linked to students' disengagement experiences in higher education. Health, social support, university culture, curriculum, and identity (e.g. race and gender) are all important factors (Thomas, 2010; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Additionally, students who become disengaged or marginalised because of unresponsive university practices are a common problem for university educators (Ryan, 2011). How educators engage their diverse students and acknowledge and build upon the resources they bring to their studies is critical to success in terms of social justice and student retention. Within the TAU Programme, exposure to socially engaged pedagogy challenged my assumptions about the power dynamics between lecturers and students and the broader university culture. A social justice perspective seeks not only individual growth but also equity, inclusion, and empowerment in educational environments. Strengths-based pedagogy inherently affirms diverse identities and backgrounds, recognising that all students bring valued traits to the learning space.

A comprehensive framework for change that promotes both academic achievement and individual well-being can be obtained by combining social justice and strengths-based approaches.

The synergistic model guiding this study is illustrated in Fig. 3.1. By recognising and utilising individual resources for development, strengths-based treatments lay the groundwork for bringing students' and educators' varied potential to light. The theory of transformative learning justifies and means profound transformation, encouraging critical introspection and shifts in perspective as people confront preconceived notions and consider novel options. A systematic and methodical approach to this transformation is provided by Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, which leads participants step-by-step through the process of characterising experiences, assessing results, and creating plans for positive action. Meanwhile, social justice grounds the process in an ethical imperative, ensuring that transformation is oriented toward equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of all participants, explicitly addressing the need for just and accessible educational outcomes. Together, these frameworks create a mutually

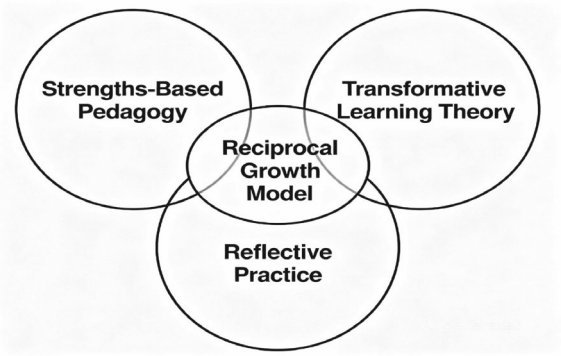


Fig. 3.1 Synergistic model. *Source* authors' own, with assistance of perplexity AI

reinforcing system wherein strengths-based activities initiate reflective, transformational processes, structured reflection refines and extends these insights, and resultant growth cycles back to inform a classroom culture that prioritises equity and inclusion, thus fully operationalising social justice as a core principle of daily academic practice.

3.3 Methodology

This research investigated reciprocal educator–student growth arising from a strength-based intervention informing reflective teaching within a national Teaching Advancement programme. A self-study design locates the practitioner–researcher as both participant and primary data source, adopting an interpretivist epistemology: knowledge is co-constructed through situated reflection and dialogic exchange rather than being discovered as an objective fact (Tolich, 2010; Lassonde & Galman, 2019). Given the focus on meaning change and professional practice, the study intentionally combines two complementary conceptual resources, Mezirow's TLT and a staged reflective procedure derived from Gibbs' reflective cycle, so that analytic claims can speak to both the micro-processes of reflection and more profound shifts in participants' meaning perspectives (Aubrey et al., 2015; Gibbs model operationalised via contemporary applications; Hashim et al., 2023; Ocampo et al., 2025). This section describes the design, context, data sources, and the integrated analytic strategy that maps Gibbs' stages onto Mezirowian indicators of transformation.

3.3.1 Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative self-study was selected because it privileges practitioner knowledge and supports iterative changes. The researcher's position as an insider provides

access to detailed information about classroom practices, which enables the study of teaching methods and their direct effects on teacher and student learning (Hawley, 2010; Lassonde & Galman, 2019). The researcher employed self-study techniques in conjunction with dialogic enquiry, involving TAU group members and critical friends, to achieve multiple viewpoints and minimise the influence of a single perspective.

This design is appropriate for the twin aims of (a) tracing how intentionally enacted character-strengths strategies generate reflective sequences in practice and (b) judging whether those sequences constitute instrumental adjustments or perspective transformations for educators and learners.

3.3.2 Context and Participants

The study took place within the TAU programme, where the lead researcher, who was also a participant, taught a scheduled cohort of 103 first-year students in Human Resource Management 1. All cohort members were invited to participate; participation was voluntary and subject to informed consent from the participants. The research team also included critical friends (colleagues experienced in reflective practice research) who provided ongoing peer debriefing and independent classroom observations. Students' participation was anonymised and separated from the summative assessment to preserve ethical integrity.

3.3.3 Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The study used multiple complementary qualitative artefacts across enactment–reflection cycles to enable triangulation and depth of data. Researcher sources included Gibbs-patterned reflective journals, annotated lesson plans that specified targeted character strengths, and selected audio-visual segments for stimulating recall. Student artefacts comprised anonymised reflective logs, short essays on character-strength activities, and course project reports that evidenced the enactment of the principles. Dialogic data consisted of semi-structured student questions, stimulated recall interviews with educators, and post-session debriefs with critical friends. Observational and documentary sources included field notes, programme materials, and pre- and post-reflective surveys with specific items. Data collection followed an iterative cycle of teaching, reflecting, collecting, interrogating, adjusting, and re-implementing, aligned with action research.

3.3.4 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's dual role as an educator and investigator was explicitly acknowledged and treated as a source of insight rather than a bias to be eliminated. Reflexive practice was systematic; the researcher maintained meta-reflexive memos documenting assumptions, emotional responses, interpretive choices, and conflicts that emerged during the analysis (Jamieson et al., 2023). Critical friends reviewed reflexive memos and preliminary interpretations to identify alternative readings and reduce the likelihood of confirmatory bias. This reflexivity is integral to credibility in self-study, where subjectivity is harnessed, interrogated, and documented (Lassonde & Galman, 2019).

3.3.5 Analytic Framework: Integrating Gibbs' Reflective Stages with Mezirow's Transformative Indicators

The analytic strategy intentionally integrated Gibbs' stepwise reflective structure (description → feelings → evaluation → analysis → conclusion → action plan) as presented below (Fig. 3.2), the elicitation and micro-coding scaffold, with Mezirow's TLT providing the macro-interpretive criteria for identifying genuine perspective transformation (Aubrey et al., 2015; Christie et al., 2015; Taylor, 2000) (Fig. 3.3). Contemporary studies that utilise Gibbs to surface reflective moves and Mezirow to interpret depth informed the approach (Hashim et al., 2023; Ocampo et al., 2025). In practice, the two frameworks functioned together: Gibbs structures the reflective data so that sequences are visible, and Mezirow's concepts (disorienting dilemma, critical reflection on premises, communicative reflection, and enacted transformation) guide judgement about whether reflective sequences amount to instrumental learning or to perspective change.

3.3.6 Operational Coding and Stages

The analysis used an iterative, theory-informed protocol aligning Gibbs's reflective micro-processes with Mezirowian transformational indicators across multiple sources. Familiarisation and descriptive coding established factual episode elements and flagged disorienting dilemmas where practice conflicted with expectations or values. Affective and evaluative coding captured emotions—surprise, discomfort, and moral concern—recognised as catalysts for deeper reflection. Conclusion and action mapping tracked intended and enacted changes, treating sustained implementation of redesigned practices as evidence of embodied instrumental shifts. Cross-actor reciprocity mapping linked teacher actions to disorienting student experiences, subsequent critical student reflection, altered participation, and reciprocal

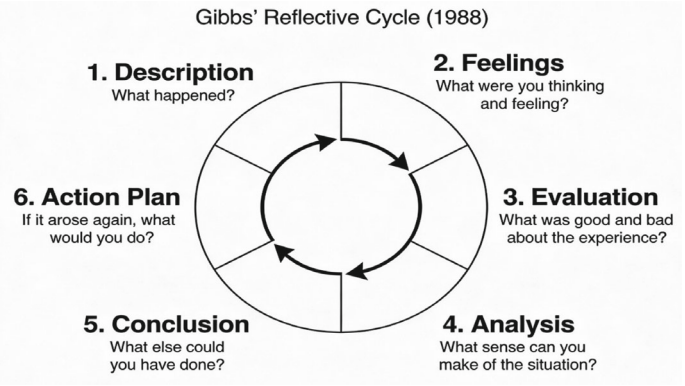


Fig. 3.2 Gibbs reflective cycle. *Source* authors' own, with assistance of perplexity AI

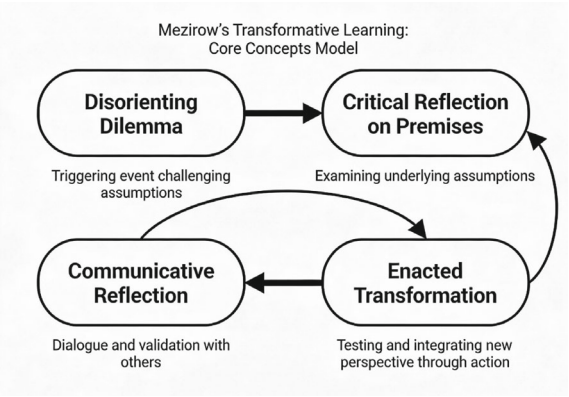


Fig. 3.3 Mezirow transformation learning theory. *Source* authors' own, with assistance of perplexity AI

teacher adaptation. Together, these stages traced how emotional and cognitive disturbances catalysed communicative reflection and practical transformation, while the protocol supported systematic identification, coding, triangulation, and claims about transformative learning across various educational settings.

3.3.7 Coding Procedures and Analytic Rigour

A codebook was developed that explicitly documented how Gibbs' stages corresponded to Mezirowian constructs (e.g., Gibbs' "feelings" → flags for potential critical reflection; Gibbs' "analysis" → evidence of interrogation of assumptions). The codebook contained definitions, exemplar quotations and decision rules to enhance consistency and reliability.

Member-checking provisional interpretations and theme maps were shared with participants (teacher and volunteer students) and critical friends for validation and to surface alternative readings (Lassonde & Galman, 2019).

Reflexive auditing: The researcher and critical friends maintained an audit trail (including raw data references, coding iterations, and memo chronology) to support the dependability and confirmability.

3.3.8 Distinguishing Instrumental Versus Transformative Learning

A central analytic task was to differentiate between instrumental changes (practical modifications without altered meaning perspectives) and transformative learning (reframing assumptions or identity). Operational criteria included: (i) Instrumental: changes limited to technique or procedure without language indicating changed beliefs about teaching, learning, or role identity. (ii). Transformative: language indicating reinterpreted beliefs (for example, "I view assessment as part of the learning process", "I see myself as a facilitator, not as a lecturer"), sustained enactment across subsequent cycles, and evidence of communicative testing (discussion with others that leads to revised practice) (Aubrey et al., 2015; Taylor, 2000). Where possible, changes were corroborated by multiple sources (teacher journals, student reflections, and observed classroom behaviour).

3.3.9 Trustworthiness, Ethics and Limitations

Rigour was pursued through triangulation (multiple artefact types), peer debriefing (critical friends), member checking, and maintenance of a clear audit trail (Hawley, 2010). Ethical procedures included institutional ethics approval, informed consent, anonymisation, secure data storage, and explicit separation of research participation from course assessment. The methodological limitations are those typical of self-study: the findings are richly contextual and not statistically generalisable but are transferable through thick description and transparent analytic accounting (Lassonde & Galman, 2019). Reflexivity and critical friend challenges were used to mitigate the risks of researcher centrism (Jamieson et al., 2023).

3.3.10 Interpretive Integration and Reporting

The reporting strategy mirrors the integrated analytic logic: the findings are presented in two interwoven layers. First, process traces organised by Gibbs stages show how

specific classroom episodes unfolded and how reflective cycles progressed into action (micro-analytic layer). Second, interpretive accounts apply Mezirow's criteria to these traces to argue whether shifts represent surface, instrumental learning, or a more profound perspective transformation (macro-interpretive layer). Reciprocal growth is demonstrated when process traces for teachers and students converge, and when Mezirowian indicators of reframing and enacted practice appear on both sides of the pedagogical relationship. Throughout the reporting, exemplar quotations, short sequence vignettes, and reflexive memos were used to make analytic moves transparent and auditable.

3.4 Findings

Data analysis identified six key themes, three relating primarily to educator development (teacher identity and reflective practice, pedagogical innovation and instructional redesign, and leadership, agency, and social justice advocacy) and three to student development (strengths-based self-awareness and agency, students' collaboration and interpersonal growth, and academic engagement, resilience, and professional readiness).

Each theme captures a distinct dimension of growth catalysed by the Strengths Gym intervention and associated TAU activities. The subthemes detail the specific manifestations of these changes as observed in the dataset. The themes and their operational definitions are presented and analysed in the tables below. Table 3.1 focuses on educator development and Table 3.2 presents student development, with each definition clarifying the conceptualisation employed in this study.

Theme 3.1: Teacher Identity and Reflective Practice

Participation in the TAU programme and facilitation of *Strengths Gym* precipitated a substantial reconfiguration of the educators' professional identities, driven by iterative enactment–reflection cycles. Structured strength-based activities exposed classroom behaviours and student perspectives that contradicted the educator's prior teaching assumptions, creating disorienting dilemmas that initiated perspective shifts in students and prompted the educator's deep reflection. The educator's journals and field notes mapped neatly onto Gibbs' reflective cycle—describing events, expressing feelings, making evaluative judgements, analysing causes, drawing conclusions, and devising action plans—thereby scaffolding concrete pedagogical change. Exposure to VIA character strengths language and the *Strengths Gym* intervention provided practical tools, including weekly strengths intentions, structured reflection prompts, and classroom norms, which elevated the student voice. As a result, the educator transitioned from content transmitter to facilitator, prioritising student abilities, self-determination, and coping skills, and shifting from answer provider to strength-based supporter. This change was procedural, affective, and ethical, influenced by social justice scholarship within TAU, reinforcing inclusive facilitation as central to professional purpose. The process was reciprocal: student behaviours generated

Table 3.1 Fostering educator development through the strength-based intervention: themes, sub-themes, and operational definitions of the themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Operational definitions
Teacher identity and reflective practice	• Self-awareness and reflexivity • Reframing professional purpose • Ongoing reflective cycles	Educators' ongoing process of self-examination, professional self-concept formation and use of reflective inquiry
Pedagogical innovation and instructional redesign	• Educational technology and method diversification • Integration of strengths-based frameworks • Scaffolding reflective exercises	Deliberate adaptation of teaching strategies informed by reflective insights
Leadership, agency and social justice advocacy	• Inclusive leadership emergence • Influence and stakeholder engagement • Social justice pedagogy adoption	Educator's emerging leadership identity, empowerment to influence change and commitment to equity within the context of education

Table 3.2 Fostering student development through the strength-based intervention: themes, sub-themes, and operational definitions of the themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Operational definitions
Strengths-based self-awareness and agency	• Identification and articulation of personal strengths • Strengths in application to tasks • Increased confidence and ownership	Conscious identification and application of personal character strength by students
Students' collaboration and interpersonal growth	• Recognition of complementary team strengths • Trust, communication and interdependence • Problem-solving and group dynamics	Students' demonstration of teamwork, communication, and mutual respect during the learning process
Academic engagement, resilience and professional readiness	• Connection to academic goals and scaffolding needs • Career-oriented competencies and adaptability • Retention and motivation indicators	Students increased their motivation, persistence, and preparedness for professional challenges

questions, prompted small pedagogical experiments, and informed revisions, illustrating a Reciprocal Growth Model where student strengths in learning and teamwork enabled teacher innovation, which in turn fostered student development. Mechanistically, three linked components supported simultaneous educator and student growth:

data-driven reflexivity legitimised reflection through measurable outcomes; actionable language and tools made facilitation practicable; and repeated Gibbs-style cycles embedded changes into routine practice. In contexts such as South African universities, where many students enter underprepared, this facilitative, strengths-based approach creates more equitable learning opportunities and supports learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Overall, strengths-based interventions catalysed teacher reflection, reframed their professional identity, and established ongoing reflective cycles. The resulting loop—students exhibiting strengths, the teacher reflecting and redesigning, and students developing further—describes how *Strengths Gym* within TAU fosters sustained reciprocal growth for both educators and students.

Theme 3.2: Pedagogical Innovation and Instructional Redesign

The implementation of the *Strengths Gym* intervention catalysed substantial pedagogical change, reshaping teaching methods, curriculum design, and classroom activities to prioritise student growth. The VIA framework and positive psychology constructs provide a shared vocabulary and conceptual scaffold. Hence, tasks such as strength identification and reflective follow-ups became core learning activities that shaped students' approaches and assessment criteria for their peers. This reorientation enabled the educator to design assignments that foregrounded strength development rather than merely correct answers, aligning with calls to embed fundamental pedagogical principles rather than surface-level innovations. Student engagement, however, varied: while 93% reported increased self-awareness, qualitative notes and observations showed an uneven ability to connect strengths with work in terms of discipline-specific goals. In response, the educator iteratively strengthened scaffolding explicit prompts that linked the named strengths to the course objectives. These rubrics rewarded strengths-based collaboration and Gibbs-aligned reflective templates, which made the pathway from reflection to academic application clearer.

A further strand of change involves methodological diversification and the purposeful use of educational technology. Digital tools for strengths mapping, peer feedback, and asynchronous reflection extended participation, particularly for reticent students; online charts and discussion forums supported out-of-class development and evidence submission. These blended methods adhere to best practices for adaptable learning spaces, allowing educators to combine basic and advanced facilitation techniques.

Collectively, these innovations demonstrate how strength-based interventions enable teachers to create instructional methods that support concurrent teacher development and student achievement. The VIA language and *Strengths Gym* activities provided actionable tools for designing strength-focused tasks, scaffolding converted reflective practice into meaningful academic work, and technological and methodological variation increased accessibility. The redesign process followed a Reciprocal Growth dynamic—student behaviours guided teacher modifications, producing measurable student progress that spurred further redesign. Practical implications include intentionally aligning strengths activities with outcomes and assessments, providing Gibbs-based reflection templates for students unfamiliar with reflexive work, investing in professional learning to translate VIA concepts into tasks, and

ensuring institutional support (time, technology, and collaborative design) to sustain these changes, particularly in contexts where students enter underprepared.

Theme 3.3: Leadership, Agency and Social Justice Advocacy

The TAU programme catalysed an emergent form of inclusive leadership among educators that was both pedagogical and political. As the educator considered the communal learning experience, taking on supervisory roles within TAU became less about formal position-holding and more about demonstrating classroom behaviours that highlight dignity, voice, and shared respect. This enactment of leadership was evidenced in concrete actions: redesigning group tasks to surface complementary strengths, deliberately inviting quieter or first-generation students into roles of responsibility, and publicly advocating for assessment practices that recognised collaborative and strength-based contributions. The educator's narrative indicates that she found herself stepping up to convene discussions about inclusion and assessment changes because of her exposure to the *Strengths Gym* intervention. The intervention thus enabled her to envision equitable practice could look like. This confession illustrates how facilitation practice translates into the educator's ability to teach with purpose and clear goals in mind, as opposed to passively reacting to what is happening during a learning event. These findings align with scholarship that views innovation pedagogy as inherently connected to new forms of professionalism, where educators shape learning environments responsively (Halder, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

The second closely interwoven outcome was the adoption of social justice pedagogy. Thus, exposure to ideas within the TAU, particularly those associated with Bali's framing of pedagogical equity, sharpened the educators' sensitivity to systemic barriers and repositioned classroom design as a site of social advocacy. Strengths Gym provided an operational vehicle for this shift: VIA language and strengths-based activities made it possible to surface student assets rather than deficits and to restructure interactions so that marginalised students were afforded authentic participation in the process. Describing this transition as both ethical and practical, the educator recalls requesting that students map their strengths and set intentions, revealing that the instruction was designed to accommodate both less talkative and more vocal students. The educator based his choice on reflective-identity research, which demonstrates that critical self-reflection leads to ethical changes in teaching practices (Sahling & De Carvalho, 2021; Yazan, 2022). The approach follows innovation pedagogy principles, which require designers to create solutions that serve both equity and efficacy needs (Halder, 2023; Ramya, 2023).

The intervention implemented a third component, which extended its impact to areas outside academic learning spaces. The educator's narratives demonstrate that she applied her newly acquired skills and knowledge to discuss and promote student-centred approaches on various platforms. The educator not only discussed the *Strengths Gym* activities with other participants in the TAU programme and colleagues in the department but also presented this paper as a work in progress at the Vaal University Teaching and Learning Conference in October 2025. Conversations with Colleagues, informal demonstrations of *Strengths Gym* activities, and

conference presentations to the university audience potentially created openings for integrating strengths-based, socially conscious practices across different modules in the university. Furthermore, she developed leadership skills through student progress observation and reflective practice, which enabled her to establish a small-scale initiative to test new approaches. The process of grassroots influence follows established models of pedagogical transformation, which depend on practitioners to spread new learning spaces (Sasson et al., 2022).

Analytically, these three subthemes operate together to answer the study's central question regarding how a strengths-based intervention can foster simultaneous educator and student development in a South African university context. *Strengths Gym* produced visible student enactments of capability and engagement; these enactments functioned as both moral prompts and practical evidence that motivated the educator to assume inclusive leadership, adopt social-justice pedagogical commitments, and mobilise colleagues. In turn, the educator's leadership and advocacy reshaped classroom structures and institutional conversations, creating further opportunities for student empowerment. Indeed, this mutual relationship between student development and teacher initiative creates a path which connects strength-based practice to teacher autonomy to promote student equality in educational settings where first-year students face multiple challenges.

The question that now arises is: What are the Implications of these findings for teaching and institutional practice? It is vital to take cognisance of the fact that a combination of professional development programmes with strength-based tools (for example, VIA vocabulary, *Strengths Gym* activities) and social-justice pedagogical framing can be utilised to enhance leadership inclinations that lead to inclusive classroom practice. Second, institutions should recognise and support educator-led innovation by providing time and platforms for sharing practices, as grassroots diffusion is a key mechanism for broader uptake. Third, embedding strengths-based tasks into assessment and curriculum design is necessary so that programme-level structures reinforce leadership at the classroom level; otherwise, inclusive experiments risk remaining isolated. These recommendations resonate with calls to design innovative and equitable new learning environments (Halder, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

The *Strengths Gym* intervention enabled the primary researcher to develop leadership skills through strength-based teaching methods, which, when combined with social justice principles, created teachers who could advocate for educational equity. This combination of practice and advocacy created a reinforcing loop in which student development validated teacher agency, and teacher agency expanded student access and voice, thereby demonstrating a viable route for simultaneous educator and student growth in South African higher education. To complement these findings, Table 3.2 focuses on student development, and the operational definitions clarify how these themes are conceptualised in this research.

Theme 1: Strengths-Based Self-awareness and Agency

Regarding student development, the implementation of *Strengths Gym* within the TAU programme produced clear evidence that a structured, strengths-based intervention cultivates student self-awareness and a growing sense of agency in the

students. Quantitative feedback indicated that 93% of the participating students reported improved self-awareness, 87% reported improved relationships, and 85% agreed to continue developing their strengths independently after the intervention. This broad change was corroborated in reflective journals and classroom observations, where students were able to name specific character strengths and describe how those strengths influenced their actions in learning situations. This process of discovering and sharing individual strengths produced results that align with research findings, which show that students develop reflective abilities and form connections when they identify their personal strengths (Moldenhauer et al., 2021).

In the current study, students actively identified qualities such as perseverance, cooperation, curiosity, and leadership during group projects and tests. This serves as both a cognitive anchor and an affective resource. For instance, over 90% of students reported that, following the intervention, discovering their strengths helped them identify traits they had never realised they possessed. This shift was expressed in statements such as, "Helped me realise that I am capable of many things, I used to doubt myself but it turns out that I am really an amazing, creative and smart person," and, "Before I was shy to make friends but I decided to give it a try and I currently have a couple of friends." Several students described how recognition of their strengths expanded their willingness to participate: "I now know where my strengths lie. It has helped me understand we are different and have different strengths." Such evidence demonstrates how the use of explicit strengths language both informed student choices and opened new pathways for experimentation and collaboration in the academic context.

Through the *Strengths Gym* intervention, students were guided to identify, articulate, and reflect on their character strengths in specific academic and collaborative contexts. Structured weekly activities invited students to set intentions for utilising a selected strength, such as curiosity, creativity, or a love of learning in classroom tasks or group assignments. Reflections captured in follow-up surveys and student work consistently showed that students became increasingly aware of how deliberate strengths use influenced their participation and approach to challenges in the course. For example, students described how applying identified strengths in group settings enabled them to communicate more confidently, collaborate effectively, and better appreciate the complementary abilities of their peers: "Now I have learnt to listen to their opinions no matter what"; "It has helped me to understand my unique character strengths… and I now know where my strengths lie"; "As a collective we can combine our strengths in order to do something productive." These iterative activities and reflection prompts fostered a shift from passive self-identification to active experimentation with strengths in real academic tasks, thereby supporting both personal and social development. Rather than remaining an isolated wellbeing initiative, the strengths-based approach was woven into subject learning, contributing to enhanced engagement and purposeful academic participation in the subject.

Students' increased confidence in their ability to participate, communicate, and take charge of both academic and group projects was a clear indication of their growing agency. Several students discussed how identifying and deliberately utilising their character strengths helped them make new friends, participate more freely in

group discussions, and appreciate the distinctive qualities of themselves and their peers.

For example, one participant reflected, "Before I was shy to make friends, but I decided to give it a try and currently have a couple of friends." Another stated, "It has helped me utilise my character strengths to enhance interpersonal relationships." Students attributed their willingness to listen to others, take initiative, and contribute actively to teamwork directly to the strengths-based approach: "I now know where my strengths lie … as a collective we can combine our strengths to do something productive." While leadership and coordination did not always emerge formally, qualitative feedback consistently indicated that strength recognition nurtured self-efficacy and more active peer engagement. Importantly, these visible shifts in student behaviour became catalysts for the educator's own reflective practice, feeding the Reciprocal Growth Model central to this study. Observing students applying their strengths inspired further redesign of classroom activities to support autonomy, fostering an ongoing cycle of mutual development between students and educators.

Together, these findings address the central research question by demonstrating that the *Strengths Gym* fosters student self-understanding and agency in ways that are reciprocally linked to teacher practice. When students can identify, apply, and reflect on their strengths, they not only improve their task performance and participation but also generate an empirical and moral impetus for educators to adapt their pedagogy to facilitate and promote equity. Therefore, the implications for teaching are concrete: instructors should integrate explicit strengths-language and regular, scaffolded reflection into course activities, align strengths tasks with assessment criteria to enhance perceived relevance, and provide simple self-monitoring tools (e.g. weekly intention logs) to sustain practice—strategies that are supported by both strengths- and innovation-pedagogy literature (Halder, 2023; Ramya, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022). Additionally, creating structured opportunities for students to assume leadership roles within tasks can amplify both individual agency and group functioning, a benefit particularly salient in contexts with a high proportion of first-generation students.

Strengths Gym fostered a cluster of student outcomes, including more apparent self-awareness, pragmatic application of strengths to learning tasks, and enhanced confidence and ownership, which together constitute a developmental pathway. Student achievements create a dynamic relationship between teacher reflection and instructional redesign, illustrating how the strengths-based intervention in TAU leads to simultaneous growth in both teachers and students in South African universities.

Theme 2: Collaborative Competence and Interpersonal Growth

This theme illustrates how students modified their teamwork methods, social interactions, and problem-solving skills in response to the interventions. Across class observations, reflective journals, and post-intervention feedback, students reported and demonstrated a growing capacity to recognise complementary abilities within teams, build trust and interdependence, and manage group processes more productively. These interpersonal developments did not occur as incidental byproducts; they emerged directly from the structured strengths activities that foregrounded assets rather than deficits, providing clear, observable markers that teachers could

use to refine their facilitation in real time. Through activities that required them to identify and share their VIA character strengths, groups discovered different skills and allocated roles among themselves according to their skill sets, with greater intentionality.

Students transitioned from task distribution based on convenience or hierarchy to assignments grounded in identified strengths, where one student described themselves as strong in organisation, another claimed creativity, and teams deliberately combined these orientations to plan and execute their projects. One student reflected, "I realised my teammate's creativity balanced my planning—together our work improved," a sentiment echoed in multiple reflective entries. Previous studies have confirmed that this pattern exists in other strengths-based curricula which use direct strengths identification to enhance relationship development and leadership abilities (Moldenhauer et al., 2021). In the TAU context, the practical consequence was improved team cohesion and a more strategic use of members' capacities during complex tasks.

Concomitant with the recognition of complementary strengths was a notable increase in trust, communication, and interdependence, which were particularly salient for first-generation students. *Strengths Gym's* routine of weekly intentions and follow-up reflections created predictable, low-stakes opportunities for students to disclose their capabilities and receive affirming peer feedback, which reduced social risk and increased participation over time. Observational data, combined with student feedback, revealed that students modified their communication style by showing respect to one another, making space for quiet members, and utilising the expertise of team members when tackling new tasks. These findings support innovation pedagogy principles, which focus on creating learning spaces that promote fair opportunities for all students (Halder, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

For first-year students, who described many early experiences of classroom marginalisation, the structured strengths approach constituted a first meaningful experience of purposeful teamwork grounded in mutual respect, increasing their sense of belonging and willingness to contribute.

The third interrelated development comprised improvements in group problem-solving and overall dynamics. Teams that adopted strengths-aware practices moved more quickly from impasse to solution; they used strengths maps to reframe challenges (for example, treating a conflict as an opportunity to apply perspective-taking or fairness) and to distribute cognitive labour in ways that maximised efficiency and creativity. In practice, this meant more effective role negotiation, fewer prolonged disputes, and more integrative solutions to assignment problems in the future.

These shifts align with research evidence indicating that reflective tasks incorporating strengths-based approaches enhance team problem-solving abilities and leadership skills among team members (Moldenhauer et al., 2021; Ramya, 2023). Simultaneously, the analysed data showed that the groups experienced difficulties when they faced time constraints and insufficient experience. Thus, when time pressure and limited familiarity with reflective work persisted, some groups defaulted to superficial collaboration. This unevenness suggests that while strength approaches can

catalyse improved group functioning, they require deliberate scaffolding to translate interpersonal gains into consistent academic performance.

These findings demonstrate that students develop essential social abilities through strengths-based collaboration, which teachers can use to make educational adjustments. The Reciprocal Growth Model becomes apparent in this situation, as students' improved teamwork skills and their noticeable strengths lead teachers to establish new support systems. The teacher further changes and assigns task responsibilities according to a student's strength profile. The evaluation methods can also be modified accordingly. The teacher's reflection on the observed dynamics, captured through Gibbs-style cycles, led to further instructional changes that reinforced student growth, demonstrating how student and educator development proceed in tandem.

The implications for teaching derived from these findings include the need to embed explicit strengths-mapping activities into group task design, provide short, structured reflection templates that help students link strengths to task outcomes, and align assessment rubrics with collaborative and strengths-based behaviours so that interpersonal competence is formally valued. Professional development that trains educators to read and respond to strengths-based interactions will strengthen the reciprocal loop and prevent superficial adoption. Providing institutional support through time allocations for scaffolded group activities and basic digital tools for strength mapping and peer feedback tracking can maintain the achieved gains (Halder, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

Strengths Gym's advanced collaborative competence and interpersonal growth enable students to recognise complementary strengths, develop trust and interdependence, especially among first-generation learners, and improve group problem solving. These student developments, observable and interpretable by the educator, created the conditions for reciprocal pedagogical refinement and the concurrent growth of both students and teachers within the TAU programme.

Theme 3: Academic Engagement, Resilience and Professional Readiness

The *Strengths Gym* intervention yielded notable improvements in students' resilience, academic engagement, and professional readiness, with the most pronounced results observed when robust instructional scaffolding was in place. This multifaceted effect is supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, which demonstrate that students exhibit a greater ability to actively engage with academic material and utilise their personal qualities to navigate group dynamics and assignments. As one participant reflected, "Me knowing my strengths can make me a better version of myself and thrive more in life." Reports of increased confidence and agency are further corroborated by students who noted, for example, "Before I was shy to make friends, but I decided to give it a try and currently have a couple of friends" and "It has helped me to communicate more. I now understand myself, so it is easier for me to understand other people". These findings are consistent with established literature demonstrating that strengths-based interventions and collaborative group activities are effective mechanisms for fostering self-efficacy, motivation, and adaptive leadership in higher education contexts (Moldenhauer et al., 2021) Although variability in student gains remains evident, the breadth and consistency

of self-reported outcomes underscore the value of character strengths pedagogies for advancing both individual and collective development.

Ninety-five per cent of respondents acknowledged the importance of character characteristics in their future positions as human resource professionals. It was emphasised how character qualities help students prepare for professional HR work. Students discussed how they were able to see themselves as more competent and flexible workers because they discovered and utilised their talents. As one participant shared, "Me knowing my strengths can make me a better version of myself and thrive more in life," while another explained, "It helps me to compile a list of professional strengths that can be used for professional roles." The connections between self-awareness and effective teamwork, crucial for HR roles, were also evident "If you are aware of your strengths it is easier to identify the strengths of others making it easier for you to work with them as you will understand one another's qualities" Other responses explicitly linked strengths work to overcoming professional challenges, with one student noting, "You will face different difficult challenges as an HR Professional." Together, these reflections confirm that the intervention not only fostered growth in individual well-being and relational skills but also equipped students with a mindset and repertoire relevant to professional effectiveness in the HR field.

Although data analysis revealed positive trends, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, classroom observations, along with some student stories, demonstrated that students had varying abilities to utilise reflective exercises to achieve academic goals in the module. Some Students demonstrated different abilities to link their strengths-based reflections to their exam studies, teamwork responsibilities, and project development tasks. The observed differences between students align with research findings on strength measurement, which indicate that regular self-checks benefit certain students. In contrast, others require additional support to understand their monitoring activities (Krentzman & Gass, 2024). In this study, which involved all first-year students, the capacity to bridge reflective insight and academic practice depended on the clarity of instructor prompts, the availability of short reflective templates, and explicit discussions of how a named strength could be applied to meet a specific course outcome.

When scaffolds were deliberately provided, such as rubrics that rewarded evidence of strengths use, short Gibbs-style reflection prompts, and instructor modelling of how strengths map onto assessment tasks, students demonstrated improved application of strengths to academic work and greater resilience in the face of setbacks. These competencies included improved role negotiation in group projects, improved time management linked to prudence and perseverance, and more adaptive approaches to ambiguous tasks. These emerging educational approaches enable students to develop the career-ready competencies they require. Students not only learn to work together more effectively, but they also learn how to solve problems and consider different perspectives on the same issue. These skills are vital for achieving success in today's workplace. The research results confirm innovation-pedagogy theories, which support learning spaces that teach adaptable competencies through multiple

teaching methods, thereby preparing students for platform-based work challenges (Halder, 2023; Ramya, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

The data revealed multiple indicators of what would happen to students motivation and retention rates. The *Strengths Gym* programme enabled students who previously stayed away from classes due to work and family responsibilities to maintain their academic involvement. The programme established a new method for students to build feelings of belonging and competence through their work on tasks. Academic work became more accessible to students through their contributions, which simultaneously decreased their feelings of academic isolation. The research demonstrated that well-designed strength-based interventions serve as protective measures, helping students remain in university by increasing their interest in their work and enhancing their understanding of its value. Additionally, it also showed that motivational gains from these interventions will not continue unless teachers establish direct connections between programmes, assessment systems, and provide ongoing support.

Pedagogically, these findings imply several concrete adjustments are needed. First, implementing strength-based reflection requires structured support to convert reflective thoughts into academic work. This could be done through assessment-based reflective tasks, project examples, and feedback that focuses on the application of strengths. The integration of workplace scenarios into strengths activities by instructors can enhance career readiness connections through team simulation tasks, role-playing activities, and employer-developed briefs that demonstrate how students can apply their competencies. However, it is important that the intervention design is equipped with built-in monitoring and measurement systems.

These systems would track student development through self-assessment checks, peer feedback systems, and digital portfolio tracking, which minimise measurement effects (Krentzman & Gass, 2024). Finally, the successful implementation of strengths-based practice at the institutional level requires three essential elements: time for redesign, access to technology, and recognition of strengths-based practice in workload models (Halder, 2023; Sasson et al., 2022).

The Reciprocal Growth Model serves as the primary link between teacher and student development throughout all identified themes. The development of student self-awareness, practical competencies, and collaboration skills prompted teachers to examine their teaching methods, resulting in the implementation of new approaches that support inclusive leadership and advocacy (Themes 1 and 2). This process requires purposeful support systems and precise assessment methods to create lasting academic achievements and professional growth. Indeed, in the context of this study, universities need to implement strength-based support systems which connect assessment methods and career-oriented tasks. These measures could help the reciprocal model maintain student resilience and facilitate teacher development.

3.5 Conclusion

This self-study demonstrates that intentionally enacted character-strengths interventions, scaffolded through structured reflective practice, can catalyse reciprocal growth for both educators and students within the TAU programme. By aligning Gibbs-style micro-reflection with Mezirowian indicators of transformation, the study traced how iterative enactment–reflection cycles produced both instrumental improvements (pedagogical adjustments and novel activities) and, in many cases, more profound perspective shifts (reframed teacher identity, strengthened student agency, and professional readiness). Reciprocity emerged when teacher actions elicited disorienting experiences and critical reflection in students, prompting educators to re-examine their practice and effect sustained change.

Practical implications flow across three, interdependent levels. For professional development, programmes should embed structured reflective frameworks (for example, Gibbs' Cycle), require implementation and critical evaluation of strengths-based interventions in authentic contexts, and cultivate sustained communities of practice to support ongoing refinement of the intervention. For curriculum design, character strength activities should be integrated alongside disciplinary content, with scaffolded reflective exercises that accommodate students new to reflective work and explicit links to employability and professional skills. At the institutional level, policies must protect time and resources for pedagogical experimentation, recognise reflective teaching and curriculum innovation in reward structures, and prioritise equity-focused interventions that address the psychosocial needs of first-generation and marginalised learners.

Finally, it is necessary to note that the limitations of the self-study design affect statistical generalisation, although they improve contextual transferability due to detailed descriptions and clear methodological explanations. Future researchers should investigate how strengths-based teaching methods impact teacher development and student achievement outcomes over time while testing the Reciprocal Growth Model in various academic fields and educational settings. Researchers should also conduct studies across multiple sites to determine how the model works at different scales and what specific conditions limit its effectiveness in terms of transformative reciprocal learning.

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