

Character Strengths

Underpinning the model of positive education is a strengths approach. From a strengths perspective, everyone has unique abilities and capacities that come help them to flourish and perform at their best (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011). In addition to being valuable in their own right, strengths are proposed to have important benefits for wellbeing and to contribute to success in important life domains (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Therefore, while equipping students with academic skills and knowledge is important, it is also worthwhile to help students develop strengths such as love, curiosity, creativity, and persistence so that they can make valuable contributions to society (Park & Peterson, 2006a). The purpose of this summary is to review literature on strengths and to explore the utility of applying strengths in education settings. First, strengths will be defined and various strengths frameworks will be outlined. Second, research that links strengths with flourishing will be overviewed. Third, the utility and value of a strengths approach in education will be explored. Finally, discussion will focus on important considerations when using a strengths approach.

What are strengths?

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define character strengths as a ubiquitously recognised subset of personality traits that are morally valued. According to Linley and Harrington (2006), strengths are ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that come naturally and easily to a person and that enable high functioning and performance. While strengths are similar to talents, there are important differences. A strength is valued for moral and intrinsic reasons whereas talents are valued for their tangible outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Taking a sportsperson for example, hand-eye coordination and natural ability may be considered talents, whereas the persistence to practice and determination to improve may be considered strengths.

Within positive psychology there are several ways of conceptualising strengths – one of the most well researched is the Values in Action (VIA) framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). With the goal of identifying strengths that had been valued across time and cultures, Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman (2005) undertook a historical study of strengths in the traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The strengths and values were included in the VIA framework if they met the following ten criteria:

(1) the strength contributes to a good and full life; (2) the strength is valuable in its own right not just because of its outcomes; (3) the use of the strength does not negatively impact others; (4) the strength has a negative opposite; (5) the strength is relatively stable and impacts a wide range of thoughts, feelings, and actions; (6) the strength is distinct from other strengths; (7) the strength is represented in culture through paragons, stories, myths, and songs; (8) there are prodigies or role models that exemplify the strength; (9) some people do not demonstrate the strength; and (10) there are structures and institutions in society that aim to nurture and promote the strength. The result of this extensive effort was a characterisation of 24 character strengths under six virtues of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective); courage (i.e., honesty, bravery, persistence, and zest); humanity (i.e., kindness, love, and social intelligence); justice (i.e., fairness, leadership, and teamwork); temperance (i.e., forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and transcendence (i.e., appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, and religiousness/spirituality) (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA framework has been explored in adult (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, 2006) and youth samples (Park & Peterson, 2005).

Alternative approaches to the VIA framework are the Gallup StrengthsFinder and the Realise2 model. The Gallup StrengthsFinder measures strengths or talents in 34 themes (Rath, 2007). The youth version, the Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer, facilitates the identification and development of strengths in youth aged ten to fourteen by providing participants with a summary of their strengths and actions that can be used to develop them (Gallup, 2007). The Realise2 model assesses 60 attributes based on three criteria – energy, performance, and use (Linley, 2009). Based on participants' responses to a range of questions, attributes are divided into four categories: (1) realised strengths or strengths that are well-known and used often; (2) unrealised strengths or potential capacities that have not been developed fully; (3) learned behaviours that are well practised but do not feel energising or authentic; and (4) weaknesses or behaviours that do not come naturally and are not energising. Thus far there is not a youth version of the Realise2 approach.

Strengths and flourishing

Strengths are proposed to be energising to the user (Linley, 2008), valuable in their own right (Gillham et al., 2011) and beneficial to society (Park & Peterson, 2009). Furthermore, the

benefits of strengths for wellbeing have been supported by correlational and experimental research. Individuals who use their strengths have been found to report greater vitality and subjective and psychological wellbeing (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010); more progress towards their goals (Linley et al., 2010); and enhanced resilience after stressful events (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). In a randomised controlled trial of six positive psychology interventions, participants encouraged to identify their VIA strengths and to use them in novel ways experienced increased wellbeing and decreased depression compared to participants allocated to a control condition for six months after the intervention (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Similarly, in a sample of 272 adults, individuals' strengths use at baseline was found to predict wellbeing, stress, and vitality three and six months later suggesting that strengths use has benefits overtime (Wood et al., 2011). There has also been research that suggests that, of the 24 VIA character strengths, gratitude, hope, zest, curiosity, and love are most robustly associated with wellbeing (Park et al., 2004).

In addition to studies with adult samples, substantial research supports the use of a strengths approach with children and adolescents. In an exploration of the character strengths of children aged 3 to 9, Park and Peterson (2006b) found that parents' descriptions of their children's zest, love, and hope were associated with happiness. Gratitude was also associated with happiness for children aged seven and over. In a longitudinal study of 149 US adolescents, other-related strengths such as forgiveness, kindness, and teamwork and temperance strengths such as self-regulation and persistence measured at the start of year 9 were found to predict fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction at the end of year 10 (Gillham et al., 2011). Transcendence strengths such as hope and gratitude and intellectual strengths such as love of learning and curiosity predicted increased life satisfaction but were not related to depressive symptoms.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that character strengths are useful across the life span. There are several reasons why a strengths approach is so powerful. One reason is that humans experience a negativity bias, or a tendency to focus on negative stimuli more strongly than positive stimuli (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). People may be more aware of their flaws and weaknesses than their strengths. Similarly, people may be so used to acting consistently with their strengths, that they may not be aware of them thereby constituting a

blind-spot (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that taking the time to identify, explore, acknowledge, and develop strengths contributes to flourishing.

Application of strengths in schools

There has been substantial interest in applying strengths in schools (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). A benefit of using a strengths framework such as VIA is that it gives members of the school community shared language for recognising aspects of people that are valued and worthy of recognition (Park & Peterson, 2009). Indeed, while talents or aptitude in subjects or sports may be frequently acknowledged, the explicit recognition of strengths such as humility, kindness, or zest may be less common. Park and Peterson (2008) proposed that a strengths approach is particularly powerful when working with students who have a history of behavioural, learning, or emotional challenges and who may not be used to hearing about the things that they do well.

Strengths can be identified via formal or informal methods. One example of a formal method is for students to complete a structured questionnaire like the Values in Action Inventory for Youth (VIA-Y; Park & Peterson, 2006a). The VIA-Y consists of 198 questions that explore each of the 24 character strengths included in the VIA framework and can be accessed online (www.viacharacter.org). Once the survey is completed, each student is provided with feedback on their top five strengths – referred to as their signature strengths. The description of signature strengths acts as a starting point for brainstorming and exploring ways of using strengths more frequently (Park & Peterson, 2008).

Strengths can also be explored through more informal activities such as exploring best possible selves (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) or by using stories, rituals, and celebrations (Fox-Eades, 2008). Furthermore, teachers and other school staff play invaluable roles in strengths development. First, children and adolescents look up to key adults in their lives as strengths role models (Park & Peterson, 2009). In fact, in a focus group study with 459 students (aged 14 to 19), adolescents expressed a desire for role models who epitomised strengths (Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003). Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997) credit teachers with the potential to recognise talents and strengths that students may not be aware of, leading to the cultivation of areas of interest and passion. Indeed, *strengths spotting* or identifying and communicating strengths that are noticed in others is believed to have important benefits for the self and relationships (Eades, 2008; Linley, 2008).

Important considerations when working with strengths

There are important factors to consider when encouraging students to identify and develop their signature strengths. First, a strengths approach is not about avoiding weaknesses (Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009). In contrast, Park and Peterson (2008) propose that strengths can be a useful strategy for working on areas of improvement. For example, students may use their strengths of patience and determination when trying to master a challenging maths problem. Second, students should be encouraged to view all of their strengths as important – not just the ones represented in their top five signature strengths. Indeed, different strengths may be helpful in different situations and contexts (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). Therefore, a priority is helping students to consider when, how, and why certain strengths are appropriate and useful in different situations (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010). Third, it is important that students develop flexible and adaptive understandings of their strengths. Consistent with the idea of a growth mindset, rigid expectations of the self should be avoided and students should be encouraged to view all strengths as capable of being improved (Dweck, 2006).

Summary and conclusions

Strengths are natural capacities or ways of thinking and behaving that come easily to a person and that are morally valued (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to a strengths approach, each individual has unique qualities that can be used to enhance wellbeing, overcome challenges, and nurture relationships (Park et al., 2004). Strengths are important pathways to flourishing across the six domains of the model of positive education. Students who use their strengths have been found to demonstrate strong academic performance supporting their importance for student accomplishment (Austin, 2005; Park & Peterson, 2006a). Strengths are believed to enhance engagement by facilitating the progression towards self-concordant goals (Linley et al., 2010). Transcendence strengths such as hope, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty and excellence are potential routes towards purpose and meaning. Strengths of the heart such as love and gratitude facilitate strong relationships and encourage connectedness (Gillham et al., 2011). Finally, strengths are believed to be associated with physical health outcomes (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Using a strengths framework is particular

powerful in school settings as it provides members of the school community a shared language for recognising and communicating the value of others. In sum, encouraging students to identify, explore, use, and develop their strengths is believed to be a powerful strategy of helping them thrive and flourish in the present and the future.

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