Character Strengths in the Classroom:

Effectiveness of a Character Strength Curriculum in Reducing Disciplinary Incidents

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Xavier University

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  • Participants
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  • Procedure
• Results
• Discussion
  • Strengths and Limitations
  • Future Directions
Background
School-aged Mental and Behavioral Health

• 49.5% of US children and adolescents will meet criteria for a DSM-IV diagnosis by age 18
  • 50% of those affected experience onset prior to age 15

• Children with mental health issues tend to also present with behavioral + academic issues

• Positive psychology takes a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to disease prevention & mental health promotion
  • Aligned with school mental health and multi-tiered systems of support

(Csizszentmihalyi, 2000; Hopkins, 2014; Kessler et al., 2005; Merikangas et al., 2010; Seligman & Vostasnis et al., 2013)
Positive Psychology

• Individuals desire and strive to lead meaningful lives

• Primary focus is well-being, which is comprised of five pillars
  • PERMA
    • Positive emotion (i.e., happiness and life satisfaction)
    • Engagement
    • Relationships
    • Meaning and purpose
    • Accomplishment

• Character strengths underlie each pillar

(Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2011)
VIA Character Strengths

• Character encompasses morally-valued facets of personality, or strengths

• VIA Classification of Character Strengths
  • 24 positive traits possessed by everyone
  • Six overarching virtue categories

(Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Reality &amp; Excellence</td>
<td>Amazed, Wonder, Shows admiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Thankful, Feels blessed, Shows appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Positive outlook, Expecting the best, Excited about the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Playful, Brings smiles to others, Sees the funny side of things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Meaning</td>
<td>Sense of purpose, Strong beliefs, Seeks meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>Valor, Accepts challenge, Speaks up for what's right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Hard worker, Completes tasks, Overcomes barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Truthful, Genuine, Grows up to his/her own behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>Active, Enthusiastic, Energized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Loyal, Team player, Responsible to group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Cares about what's right, Treats others fairly, Respects others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Encourages others, Organizes groups, Sets good example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Caring, Compassion, Relationships are important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>Strong relationships, Understands others' thoughts and emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Nice, Caring, Generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Doesn't hold grudges, Gives second chances, Accepts others' faults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Humble, Foregoes praise, Loses your ego for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Careful, Practical, Plans ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Control</td>
<td>Disciplined, Manages feelings and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Clever, Innovative, Comes up with unique ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Open to new ideas, Explorer, Asks questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Critical thinker, Open-minded, Thinks things through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>Enjoys finding, Knowledge &amp; skills, Seeks the big picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Wise, Gives good advice, Seeks the big picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Character Strengths and Youth Outcomes

- Various strengths linked to an array of positive outcomes
- Relationship between character strengths and academic success mediated by promotion of positive classroom behavior
- Temperance and humanity strengths have been identified as being related to classroom behavior

(Shoshani & Slone, 2012; Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber & Ruch, 2012)
Positive Education

• Positive education is the application of positive psychology into the classroom/school setting

• Positive education programs often incorporate character strengths to promote student well-being
  • Identification, education, and everyday utilization of strengths

• Classroom teaching of academic and character strength curricula can maximize holistic student success
  • Research suggests positive outcomes
  • Limitations in sample size and diversity, study design, replication

(Gillham et al., 2007; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; Seligman et al., 2009; Vella-Brodrick, Rickard, Hattie, Cross, & Chin, 2015)
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Mission of positive education is aligned with SEL
  - Schools are epicenter of student success and should be holistic
  - Character strengths have become a popular framework for enhancing SEL
- Need to explore specific relationships between demographic variables and individual outcomes

(Benninga et al., 2003; Benson, 2006; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Cohen, 2006; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2002)
Mayerson Academy

- Mission of successful learning and educational development
  - Focus on schools, organizations, and neighborhoods

- Strive to encourage strengths in people, specifically character strengths, in order to improve students’ educational experiences
  - Increased motivation, classroom engagement, academic performance, and appropriate conduct

- They provide programs (e.g. TLC), professional development, and consultation (https://www.mayersonacademy.org/)
Thriving Learning Communities (TLC)

● Implemented for five years in 90+ schools in US and 5 international

● Three core features: SEL, character strengths, digital tools

● *Thriving Classroom*
  • Uses VIA character strengths as language and framework for teaching, promoting, and practicing SEL
  • Cover four of five SEL competencies; one per unit
  • Four relevant character strengths highlighter per unit
  • Two versions for 5/6 grade and 7/8 grade

(Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Graves, & Ochs, 2017)
## UNIT 2 | LEARNING MODULE TWO
DISCOVERING MY ABILITIES

### ACTIVITIES AT A GLANCE

#### THRIVING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>MATERIALS NEEDED</th>
<th>HAPPIFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexing My Strengths</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>• Activity sheet: Flexing My Strengths — Appendix C</td>
<td>Set 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If You Don’t Give Up, You Can’t Fail</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>• Video: Derek Redmond &lt;br&gt; • Character Strengths Definitions — Appendix B</td>
<td>Set 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building My Perseverance Muscle</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>• Strengths journal &lt;br&gt; • Character Strengths Poster — Perseverance</td>
<td>Set 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting by and for Kids</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>• Video (3:38): A Pep Talk from Kid President to You &lt;br&gt; • Character Strengths Definitions — Appendix B &lt;br&gt; • Strengths journal</td>
<td>Set 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### STUDENT ACTIVITIES IN HAPPIFY — Students choose one activity per set.

### TRACK 2, PART 2: A FRESH LOOK AT MYSELF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRACK 2, PART 2: A FRESH LOOK AT MYSELF</th>
<th>FOCUS OF ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Is School Gettin’ to Ya!</td>
<td>Using different strengths to manage difficult times and challenging problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Stretching Our Strengths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Problem Busters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2</td>
<td>Opportunity to establish steps in setting and following through on goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Picture This!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Success with Goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3</td>
<td>Exploration of ways to use the strength of perseverance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Using Perseverance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Where Does It Work for You?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Building the Perseverance Muscle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 4</td>
<td>Opportunity to acknowledge and name successes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Post-it Strengths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Be Your Own Hero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Your Big Proud</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls and Quizzes</td>
<td>Help students explore goal-setting, perseverance, and long-term friendships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNIT 2 | LEARNING MODULE TWO

FLEXING MY STRENGTHS

Name: ____________________________

Flexing My Strengths

Select five strengths that you think would help you get over an upset. Then think how you could “flex” each strength to feel better. For each strength you select, finish the sentence:

When I use my ______________________, I am able to ______________________.

When I use my ______________________, I am able to ______________________.

Caught Ya! Cards

Use these cards whenever you notice your students using one of the 24 character strengths. Read a couple out loud to the class at the end of the school day. Everyone benefits from strengths-spotting!

Caught Ya!

I saw ______________________ using their strength of ______________________

when ______________________.

Caught Ya!

I saw ______________________ using their strength of ______________________

when ______________________.

Way to go!

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CHARACTER STRENGTHS INSTRUCTIONAL 8X11 POSTERS

CHARACTER STRENGTHS JOURNAL

CHARACTER STRENGTHS CARD DECK
Rationale and Hypotheses
Rationale

• Current study improves upon previous studies of positive education programs

  • Larger, more diverse sample within the US
    • Increased generalizability

  • Explicit reporting of demographic data

  • Analysis of demographic differences in outcomes
Hypotheses

1. The average number of school-reported disciplinary incidents per student will significantly decrease across engagement in TLC as measured from:

- pre-TLC to end of year 2 (two time points)
- the start of year 1 to the end of year 2 (four time points)
Hypotheses

2

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
Method
Participants (Full Study)

• Students ($N = 2,141$) attending seven schools during the ‘16 – ‘17 and ‘17 – ‘18 academic years
  • Fifth ($n = 270$), sixth ($n = 429$), seventh ($n = 681$), or eighth ($n = 761$) grades
  • 51.2% female, 48.8% male
  • 63.6% qualified for free/reduced lunch
  • 51.2% White, 29.9% Black, 9.5% Hispanic, 5.7% Biracial/Multicultural, 3.6% Asian/Hawaiian/PI

• Public, private, parochial, and charter institutions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Discipline (Two time points)</th>
<th>Discipline (Four time points)</th>
<th>Discipline Across Gender</th>
<th>Discipline Across SES</th>
<th>Discipline Across Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>551</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>178 (51.1%)</td>
<td>232 (48.2%)</td>
<td>236 (51.9%)</td>
<td>236 (51.9%)</td>
<td>233 (51.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>170 (48.9%)</td>
<td>216 (51.8%)</td>
<td>219 (48.1%)</td>
<td>219 (48.1%)</td>
<td>218 (48.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>235 (42.6%)</td>
<td>260 (40.0%)</td>
<td>261 (57.4%)</td>
<td>261 (39.7%)</td>
<td>257 (57.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>316 (57.4%)</td>
<td>390 (60.0%)</td>
<td>194 (42.6%)</td>
<td>396 (60.3%)</td>
<td>194 (43.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>279 (80.4%)</td>
<td>228 (51.4%)</td>
<td>229 (50.8%)</td>
<td>229 (50.8%)</td>
<td>229 (50.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20 (5.8%)</td>
<td>152 (34.2%)</td>
<td>154 (34.1%)</td>
<td>154 (34.1%)</td>
<td>154 (34.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>10 (2.9%)</td>
<td>9 (2.0%)</td>
<td>10 (2.2%)</td>
<td>10 (2.2%)</td>
<td>10 (2.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino(a)</td>
<td>12 (3.5%)</td>
<td>36 (8.1%)</td>
<td>39 (8.6%)</td>
<td>39 (8.6%)</td>
<td>39 (8.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial/Multiracial</td>
<td>26 (7.5%)</td>
<td>19 (4.3%)</td>
<td>19 (4.2%)</td>
<td>19 (4.2%)</td>
<td>19 (4.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* There were 204 students in the first column, 206 students in the second and fourth columns, and 4 students in the third column for whom we did not have gender and/or race/ethnicity data. Results are reflective of data from schools that provided student data relevant to each particular analysis.
Procedure

• Evaluation period of 2+ academic years
  • Baseline discipline data from spring before TLC
  • Discipline data collected at beginning and end of year 1 & 2 of TLC implementation

• Discipline data reported by schools to Mayerson Academy
  • # recorded discipline incidents per quarter
Results
Results

1

The average number of school-reported disciplinary incidents per student will significantly decrease across engagement in TLC.

• Across two time points (pre-TLC, end of year 2)
  • Mean number of disciplinary incidents per student pre-TLC ($M = .45, SD = 1.59$) was significantly greater than at the end of year 2 ($M = .20, SD = .65$), $t(550) = 3.86, p < .001$.

• Across four time points (start of year 1, end of year 1, start of year 2, end of year 2)
  • Significant differences between all time points, $F(1, 649) = 50.12, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .07$
  • Significant *increases* in means from start of year 1 to end of year 1
  • Significant *decreases* in means form end of year 1 to start to year 2 and start of year 2 to end of year 2
Results

Figure 1. Change in student disciplinary incidents across four time points
Results

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Gender

- Time main effect was significant, $F(1, 453) = 106.50, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .19$
- Gender main effect was significant, $F(1, 453) = 4.83, p = .03, \eta^2_p = .01$
- Time x Gender interaction was not significant
- See Figure 2
Results

Figure 2. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and gender. Error bars represent the 95% CI.
Results

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

SES

• Time x SES interaction was significant, $F(1, 655) = 9.03$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$

• Students of higher SES demonstrated greater decreases in discipline ($M = .63$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to lower SES peers ($M = .34$, $SD = 1.15$)

• See Figure 3
Results

Figure 3. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and socioeconomic status. Error bars represent the 95% CI.
Results

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Race/Ethnicity

- Time x Race/Ethnicity interaction was significant, $F(4, 446) = 2.48$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.
- White/Caucasian-identifying students demonstrated significantly greater decreases compared to Hispanic ($MD = .52$, $p < .001$) and Asian/Hawaiian/PI-identifying ($MD = .42$, $p = .03$) students.
- Black/African American-identifying students demonstrated significantly greater decreases compared to Hispanic-identifying ($MD = .39$, $p < .001$) students.
- See Figure 4
Results

Figure 4. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and race/ethnicity. Error bars represent the 95% CI.
Discussion
Discipline and Program Implementation

• Both analyses suggest a decrease in disciplinary incidents across the first two years of TLC implementation

• Initial increase from beginning to end of year 1 may suggest a normative trend and...
  • difficulty achieving program fidelity in initial stages
  • the importance of sustained implementation

• Need for supports around program fidelity, especially at start of program

• Longer implementation may maximize effectiveness
Discipline Across Demographics

• Current study presented contradictory results to previous research
  • May be due to differences in programming goals and measurement of outcome variables

• Equality vs. equity
  • Those groups with higher initial levels of discipline made the greatest gains
  • Ability to make greater impact where greater impact is needed

Saskatchewan Health Authority (2017)
Strengths & Limitations

• **Strengths**
  • Longitudinal design
  • Large and diverse sample

• **Limitations**
  • Archival data leading to…
    • Unequal cell sizes (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, SES)
    • Reduced sample size and power due to student mobility and schools’ not providing comprehensive data
  • Adult observation and reporting of behavior vs. actual behavior
  • Lack of control group (e.g., non-TLC students)
Future Directions

• Further examine fidelity and minimum length of implementation

• Targeted curricula to maximize decreases in discipline

• Reexamine the effectiveness of TLC and other positive education programs addressing the aforementioned limitations

• Utilize longitudinal and repeated measures designs to investigate character strengths as predictors of other student outcomes (e.g., GPA, attendance)
Thank you!
References


References


References


