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## Through the lens of strength: A framework for educating the heart

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The work of Chris Peterson and his colleagues provides a context and rationale for creating a new paradigm for character education. While most character education approaches (past and present) have served the purpose of inculcating societal norms and expectations, a positive psychology-based approach seeks to help individuals identify and engage their *personal* character strengths, thereby promoting well-being. To date, research on character strengths-based classroom interventions has identified positive outcomes related to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, and accomplishment. During the past decade, a number of public and private schools have served as pioneers in this emerging field. This work has contributed to the development of (1) a theoretical framework for infusing strengths-based practices in classrooms and schools and (2) a corresponding body of practices.

**Keywords:** education; Values in Action (VIA); character strengths; strengths; positive psychology

A child is not an empty vessel to be filled, but a fire to be lit. (Rabelais)

Each of our moral, mental, and bodily powers must have its development based upon its own nature, and not based upon artificial and outside influences. (Johann Pestalozzi)

Chris Peterson's legacy has profound implications for the field of education. The creation of a scientifically derived classification of ubiquitous character strengths has helped to address fundamental questions that have long vexed educators, philosophers, and public policy makers.

For as long as there have been schools, there has been discussion about the role of schools in promoting positive character development. Educators and philosophers have long argued that schools need to educate the heart as well as the mind (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Dewey, 1909; Pestalozzi, 1818). While few would deny that schools should play *some* role in fostering positive character, identifying *which traits* should be endorsed has sometimes proven controversial. Prior to the publication of the Values in Action (VIA) Classification, in the seminal *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), any effort to endorse a particular subset of character strengths was potentially subject to charges of cultural, religious, and/or political bias. The VIA Classification, however, provides a cross-culturally relevant framework for 'educating the heart' – a common language for students, teachers, and the rest of us to understand and call forth what is best in ourselves and others.

With his colleague Nansook Park, Peterson has inspired educators to challenge conventional approaches to character education. Many traditional character education initiatives promote a *prescriptive* approach to teaching character. These programs generally define positive character in terms of some set of core character traits which are presented as the 'core values' or 'pillars' of character. Table 1 identifies four such programs, and the core values endorsed by each.

Implicit in the prescriptive approach is the view that positive character is an external construct that needs to be *instilled* within the individual (rather than an innate potential to be nurtured). Park and Peterson (2009) point out that 'most character education programs focus on rules, per se (what to do or not to do) and not on the students who are urged to follow these rules' (p. 66). The promotional literature for *Character Counts!*, the most widely used character education program in the United States, promises to help teachers to 'enforce core values' and 'instill the Six Pillars of Character by rewarding good behavior' [emphasis added] (Josephson Institute, 2013).

Neal Mayerson, chairman of the VIA Institute on Character, suggests that prescriptive character education is analogous to the process of *molding clay* (personal communication, 13 August 2012). The 'potter' (school, educator, or other authority) works to transform the 'clay' (student's character) into a predetermined form. Such approaches are widespread in character education programs, as well as other institutions that promote positive character (athletics, religion, government, etc.).

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Table 1. Examples of character education programs.

Program*	Core values endorsed by program*	Related via virtues
Character counts!	Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship	Courage, justice, humanity
Community of caring	Caring, respect, trust, responsibility, family	Courage, justice, humanity
Cool kids	Helpfulness, fairness, responsibility, perseverance, self-respect, respect for others	Courage, justice, humanity
Giraffe heroes	Caring, courage, responsibility, civic engagement	Courage, justice, humanity

Note: \*Information in left and middle column obtained from What Works Clearinghouse Character Education Topic report (2007).

In contrast to the prescriptive approach, Peterson and Park (2009) suggest that character capacities reside within us. From this perspective, the purpose of character education is not to enforce or impose, but rather to reveal, elicit, and nurture existing strengths. Instead of viewing character as a fixed and narrowly defined construct, character is seen as multifaceted, dynamic, idiosyncratic, and unique to the individual. Rather than *prescribing* a particular recipe for positive character, this approach provides a language for *describing* (and calling forth) each individual's character-related dispositions and capacities. While the 24 VIA character strengths serve as the essential building blocks of positive character, within each individual, these strengths combine and interact to create a unique character strengths profile. Within the context of this richer, more nuanced definition of positive character, the goal of character education is to help students *reveal and effectively engage their unique constellations of character strengths*.

While Mayerson relates the prescriptive approach to the process of molding clay, he compares this *descriptive* approach to the process of *planting and nurturing seeds*. No two seeds are identical; each is genetically unique and contains certain traits and potential, which may or may not ultimately be expressed, depending upon environmental factors. The gardener's task is not to determine how growth will unfold, but rather to create optimal conditions for growth and development to occur. Like an individual seed, each child possesses a unique constellation of predispositions and possibilities. Under favorable conditions, this potential will find expression. The role of the educator – like that of the gardener – is to provide favorable conditions that will stimulate, encourage, and nurture growth.

Prescriptive approaches to character education have a certain appeal, particularly with respect to ease of implementation. Shepherding all students in the direction of some predetermined ideal (e.g. the Six Pillars) is simple and straightforward. This may help to explain the proliferation of 'clay molding' character education programs.

Whatever their appeal, prescriptive approaches fall short in one important respect. In focusing on a small subset of character strengths, they promote a limited, narrowly defined view of character. Within the domain of *cognitive* abilities and talents, it is widely accepted

that each one of us may excel in certain areas and be challenged in other areas. In the three decades since the publication of Howard Gardner's seminal work *Frames of Mind* (1983), the theory of multiple intelligences has gained widespread traction in education and throughout our culture. In the field of education, the discourse about intelligence and talent has become more sophisticated and more informed. Unfortunately, the general discourse related to character education has yet to advance beyond the generic, one-size-fits-all approach.

Just as the work of Gardner and others has broadened and enriched educators' understanding of *talent capacities*, the work of Peterson and his colleagues has the potential to expand educators' understanding of *character capacities*. The VIA Classification acknowledges broad dimensions of strength that frequently go unrecognized. The range of traits endorsed by most character education programs falls within just three of the six VIA virtue clusters: *courage*, *justice*, and *humanity*. The many strengths within the *wisdom*, *temperance*, and *transcendence* virtue clusters largely fall outside of the traditional scope of character education. Table 1 illustrates this point. Bringing a VIA-based approach into the classroom serves to shine a light on, and validate, a wider range of personal attributes.

### The case for character strengths education

In the post-2001 era of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* educational policies, it has become increasingly important to demonstrate a clear and direct link between educational practice and improved academic performance. In this climate, programs that focus on character development have oftentimes gotten short shrift. Given limited resources, education leaders may focus their efforts on initiatives they believe will have an immediate impact on student achievement. Many assume that improved achievement is, at best, a distal outcome of social and emotional learning.

Heckman's (2001) ground-breaking research has served to counter the 'cognitive hypothesis,' the widespread belief that intellect is the primary determinant of success in school, in the workplace, and beyond. His findings suggest that 'non-cognitive skills' – i.e. strengths of character – are at least *as* important as cognitive skills in predicting success across multiple

domains. Duckworth and Seligman (2006) found that self-control was a more reliable predictor of academic success than IQ. In a 2009 study, Peterson and Park identified five character strengths that predicted high grade point averages: perseverance, love, gratitude, hope, and perspective.

Achievement is just one of many positive outcomes empirically linked to character strengths. In *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004), Peterson and Seligman document positive outcomes associated with each of the 24 VIA strengths. The strength of hope, for example, has been linked with a wide range of correlates, including positive relationships, lower levels of anxiety and depression, diligence, and the ability to delay gratification. The strength of self-regulation has positive correlations with achievement and secure interpersonal attachment, and negative correlations with anxiety and depression. The strength of perspective has been linked to successful aging, life satisfaction, and even-tempereness.

In addition to the literature on the *outcomes associated with specific character strengths*, there is an emerging body of research on the *benefits of using one's signature strengths* (i.e. one's core, 'go to' strengths). Use of signature strengths at work has been linked with subjective wellbeing and job satisfaction (Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). One study found that helping employees to identify and engage their signature strengths was one of three 'essential drivers' of employee engagement (along with managing emotions and finding purpose in one's work) (Crabb, 2011).

Character strengths-based school interventions have yielded a range of positive outcomes. The Positive Psychology for Youth Program was the first randomized controlled study of a positive psychology program for students (Gillham et al., 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The curriculum, designed for 9th grade students, consists of 24 lessons. More than half of the lessons focus on character strengths. Most of these lessons engage students in personal strengths exploration – identifying and applying their signature strengths, developing a target strength (selected by the student), interviewing family members about their signature strengths, etc. While the intervention had no effect on symptoms of anxiety and depression, the program did improve students' social skills, engagement in school, and learning strengths (increased levels of curiosity and love of learning). In addition, for students in core (non-Honors) language arts classes, participation in the program was linked to improved achievement. All of these outcomes held for at least two years post-intervention.

A study of the Strengths Gym program (Proctor et al., 2011) found a significant effect on students' life

satisfaction. The program – developed by Carmel Proctor and Jenny Fox Eades – provides a wide range of age-appropriate 'workouts' related to each of the 24 strengths. The program also provides an opportunity for students to identify and reflect on their own signature strengths.

The emerging research presents a compelling case for character strengths-based educational practices. Youth participants in VIA programs have demonstrated benefits related to achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.

### A framework for VIA strengths-based education

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues is the essential element that informs VIA-based education. The linguists Whorf and Carroll (1956) asserted that 'language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about' (p. 5). Within various disciplines, specialized vocabulary helps to facilitate thinking, working, and communication. The VIA Classification provides the common language and lens for understanding who we are – at good times and bad – and what it means to thrive.

While the VIA lens is believed to promote greater understanding of self and others, it may also enhance learning across the academic disciplines. For example, attentiveness to character strengths may enrich one's understanding of literature, history, the arts, and scientific investigation and discovery.

During the course of the past decade, the members of our team have worked or consulted in a diverse range of educational settings to help adults and students become more *aware* of strengths and more *deliberate* about their use of strengths in their daily lives. Drawing upon these experiences, we have identified five basic strands that seem to encompass the scope and priorities of strengths-based education:

- (1) Developing a character strengths language and lens;
- (2) Recognizing and thinking about strengths in others;
- (3) Recognizing and thinking about one's own strengths;
- (4) Practicing and applying strengths;
- (5) Identifying, celebrating, and cultivating group (classroom, school, etc.) strengths.

The five strands encompass three broad categories. Strand 1 addresses *language* (which provides a framework for common understanding). Strands 2–4 address *strengths within individuals* (self and others). Strand 5 addresses *group or institutional strengths*. We view Strands 1–4 as essential elements of any VIA-based educational program. Strand 5 is a value-added component

that extends the focus on strengths from the individual to the group level.

Below we include a sample of practices illustrative of each strand. In practice, the five strands are not separate and distinct. Many strengths-based learning activities address multiple strands simultaneously. Parenthetical notations identify the multiple strands reflected in each practice.

*Strand 1: Developing a character strengths language and lens*

- *A Best Practice: [‘Foundations of Respect’]* Prior to being introduced to the VIA Classification, each student selects an individual that he or she respects and admires. The student uses his or her own words to identify that person’s admirable qualities. The class compiles a complete list of the traits identified by each student. When students are introduced to the VIA Classification, they compare the list of 24 strengths with the class list of traits generated during this activity. There are usually many identical or close matches between the two lists. This activity reinforces the idea that character strengths are ubiquitous. (Strands 1 and 2)

*Strand 2: Recognizing and thinking about strengths in others*

- *A Best Practice: [‘Secret Strengths-Spotting’]* (This activity should occur *after* students have a basic understanding of the 24 character strengths.) Each student is assigned a ‘secret partner.’ Over the period of one week, students are asked to secretly observe their partners and record any examples of character strengths use, indicating what strengths were used, how they were used, and any evidence of positive outcomes resulting from their use. (Each student has a user-friendly template for recording these observations.) At the end of the week, students reveal their identities to their respective partners and share their observations. Each student, in turn, is also on the receiving end of this activity. During the week, another ‘secret partner’ has been observing his or her strengths. After students share and receive strengths observations with each of their partners, they reflect on the process. What was it like to observe their partner and focus on their strengths? What was it like to hear about their own strengths, through the eyes of another student? This activity builds awareness of strengths (in self and others) and, more generally, of positive events. (Strands 1, 2, and 3)

*Strand 3: Recognizing and thinking about one’s own strengths*

- *A Best Practice: [‘Strengths 360’]* The Strengths 360 activity provides an opportunity for students to receive feedback on their strengths from five people who know them in different contexts/settings: two family members, two classmates and/or friends, and one teacher (or other adult within the school setting). Each student conducts short, structured interviews, during which the interviewee identifies character strengths that he or she sees in the student. At the beginning of each interview, the student explains the VIA Classification and provides the interviewee with a list of the 24 strengths and definitions. The interviewee is asked to identify (at least) three VIA strengths that he or she sees in the student and provide examples for each. After all of the interviews are completed, students create a final project or report that reflects this ‘composite’ view of their personal strengths. This activity reinforces the importance of using multiple lenses/perspectives to identify and reflect on strengths. (Strands 1 and 3)

*Strand 4: Practicing and applying strengths*

- *A Best Practice: [‘Signature Strengths Across Settings’]* Each student identifies (1) a signature strength that he or she would like to use more often in school and (2) a signature strength that he or she would like to use more often outside of school. The student may select the same strength for both categories or choose two different strengths. The student develops a concrete plan – for a designated period of time – which identifies specific ways to apply each strength in its respective setting (inside or outside of school). The plan includes predictions about possible outcomes that may result from using the strengths (e.g. having fun, getting to know someone better, accomplishing a certain task, etc.). As the plan is implemented, students have periodic opportunities to discuss or write about their progress. They also reflect on the actual outcomes related to using the strengths, and they compare the actual outcomes to the predicted outcomes. This activity is intended to increase both use of signature strengths and awareness about the various benefits related to using one’s strengths. (Strands 1, 3, and 4)

*Strand 5: Identifying, celebrating, and cultivating group strengths (classroom, school, etc.)*



- *A Best Practice*: ['The Sum of Our Strengths'] After students in a given class or school complete the VIA Survey, they aggregate the VIA data and determine the group's signature strengths. Students and teachers conduct a 'group strengths audit'; they identify various ways that the group's signature strengths are already in use within the classroom and/or across the school. They also identify new ways to use the group signature strengths to help make the class or school a better place for everyone. They then develop and execute a plan for implementing the new strengths practices. (Strands 1–5)

### Character education's new paradigm: making it personal

The VIA Classification serves two distinct, but complementary, purposes. At the macro level, the classification frames our understanding of character in global terms. It defines the personal qualities that have inspired and ennobled humankind across time and place. At the micro level, the classification illuminates what is idiosyncratic and unique to the individual human heart. The Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing wrote: 'Each human being is intended to have a character of his own: to be what no others are, and to do what no other can do' (Channing, 1829). Peterson and his colleagues have provided a language and lens for bringing our individual character capacities into greater focus. Applying this lens to education implies an 'individualized character education based on each student's character strength profile' (Park & Peterson, 2009). Helping students to become *well versed in the content of their own character* will serve them well beyond their school years.

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