Using Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practices with gifted populations

Jennifer E Sharp
Northern Kentucky University, USA

Ryan M Niemiec
VIA Institute on Character, USA

Christopher Lawrence
Northern Kentucky University, USA

Abstract
Mindfulness and character strengths are synergistic tools that work together to cultivate well-being. Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) combines the research and practice of these constructs to enhance well-being, meaning, and engagement. In this article, research supporting how mindfulness and character strengths may benefit the gifted population is explored. Particular attention is devoted to exploring practical implications for the integration of mindfulness and character strengths together and the application to support gifted students and their teachers/parents. MBSP provides a promising avenue for addressing some of the unique challenges inherent in working with gifted students.

Keywords
mindfulness, character strengths

Lewis Terman, often hailed as the “father” of gifted education (NAGC, n.d.), published his seminal work, Genetic Studies of Genius (1925), nearly a century ago. The decades
that followed wrought a wealth of biological, psychological, and social insights into the nature, diversity, and potentiality of gifted individuals. They also produced a multitude of sometimes conflicting conceptualizations and non-standardized definitions of giftedness (Gagné, 2011; Robinson, 2002), which can complicate endeavors in and outside of the field (Pfeiffer, 2009). Given the nature of this article is to explore applications of character strengths and mindfulness within gifted education, it is necessary to provide a definition of giftedness that is clear and pertinent. As such, the authors have elected to operate from the explanation presented by the Columbus Group (1991, as cited by Gifted Development Center, n.d.):

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

The Columbus Group definition highlights the subjective experience (i.e. “personhood”) of gifted individuals sometimes deemed lacking in models focusing primarily on talent development (Tolan and Piechowski, 2013: 6). It recognizes what has been described as the lived experience of the gifted (Coleman, 2011; Cross and Cross, 2015; Peterson and Ray, 2006) and acknowledges that while gifted individuals face challenges and issues that may be created and/or intensified by their giftedness, it is important to honor their uniqueness without marginalizing them (Colangelo and Wood, 2015). That said, the utilization of a more qualitative, person-centered explanation of giftedness is in no way intended to slight the contributions of talent development models to the advancement of gifted education. In fact, the acknowledgement of and emphasis on malleable psychosocial variables included in the developmental model created by Subotnik et al. (2011) hold specific relevance for this article.

According to Subotnik et al. (2011), psychosocial variables (e.g. appropriate risk-taking, motivation, and interpersonal resilience) cut across the stages of gifted development, promoting optimal achievement while simultaneously protecting against tendencies and characteristics that may impede performance. Olszewski-Kubilius et al. (2015) stress the importance of psychosocial strength across the lifespan and indicate a need to help gifted individuals cultivate associated skills. Interpersonal encouragement plays a significant role in that process, aiding in the development and reinforcement of self-efficacy in gifted individuals, a confidence that can foster sustained internal motivation (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2015).

Students can be assisted to identify those activities and contexts in which they experience flow, where their abilities are well matched to the demands of the learning situation, and where their emotions are energized and harnessed for the task of learning. (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2015: 147)

Such assistance may be provided by influential figures throughout various domains of gifted children’s lives.
Psychosocial awareness and skills should be taught in all domains by parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors explicitly and deliberately, not left to chance. We suggest that this psychological strength training is as important as content and skill instruction and practice in a talent area. It should not be assumed that students who possess developed ability also have these psychosocial skills, nor that such skills can be generated without direct guidance and teaching. (Subotnik et al., 2011: 40)

Moreover, it is important to draw distinctions between different types of “strengths;” the differentiation of talents, skills, interests, resources, and character strengths (Niemiec, 2014) is often missed in the literature. When the gifted literature refers to strengths, this most commonly refers to talents (i.e. innate, biologically loaded abilities) or skills (i.e. proficiencies that can be developed) and not character strengths (i.e. positive personality traits that boost well-being and bring benefit to oneself and others).

The authors of this article contend that incorporating mindfulness and character strengths into gifted education may help bridge the gap between the personal growth and talent development orientations within the gifted community, reframing the discussion in a way that balances achievement and holistic development. In order to adequately explore the applications of that approach, it is necessary to explore some of the unique issues facing gifted individuals.

Challenges of the gifted

Cross and Cross (2015) identify a quartet of issues for which gifted individuals may be at a unique risk: depression, anxiety, suicidality, and unhealthy perfectionism. Research has not indicated the presence of genetic links between giftedness and greater susceptibility to mood disorders (Cross et al., 2008; Neihart, 2002, 2011; Webb et al., 2007), but the assemblage of individual, social, and environmental stressors faced by gifted individuals may contribute to the presence/manifestation of such issues (Cross and Cross, 2015). For starters, gifted students often receive contradictory messages relative to the meaning and value of giftedness (Coleman, 2011; Cross, 2012). Academic accomplishments, for example, are typically celebrated, but being “too smart” or mastering a concept “too quickly” can have an alienating effect, leaving a student feeling different from their peers (Rimm, 2002). Given “gifted students are children first” (Cross, 2012: 33), they are likely to desire social interaction. Realizing their giftedness might complicate, if not preclude them from, such interactions, can induce strong emotional responses (e.g. sadness, worry). When compounded by boredom (in the classroom), a lack of feeling understood, and a perceived inability to effect changes in their environment, these affective reactions may reach clinical levels, manifesting in anxiety and/or depression (Cross, 2012; Cross and Cross, 2015; Rimm, 2002). Carried even further, the agitation and helplessness associated with perpetually hiding one’s true self may lead to suicidality (Cross and Cross, 2015).

The mixed messages pertaining to giftedness may also be linked to perfectionism, a phenomenon that can prove beneficial (i.e. giving rise to persistence, resilience, and the ongoing pursuit of achievement) or detrimental (Schuler, 2002; Webb et al., 2007). As detailed by the literature (Cross and Cross, 2015; Greenspon, 2011; Schuler, 2002), the
motivating force behind unhealthy perfectionism is anxiety—a fear of failure that may interfere with (and, in some cases, paralyze) daily functioning. Committing cognitive processes to creating and coping with the anxiety can impair performance, which can—in turn—lead to a fear of performance, as the mere act of engaging births the possibility of failure. The phenomenon may have a social component as well (Cross and Cross, 2015; Greenspon, 2011). The encouragement, accolades, and support that gifted individuals may receive from others (e.g. parents, teachers, mentors, friends) for their skills/talents can imbue the act of performance with an added, interpersonal dimension (Cross and Cross, 2015; Greenspon, 2011; Webb et al., 2007). A test becomes more than just a test, it is a responsibility gifted individuals perceive as heavy with expectation—“I have to do well or they will be disappointed,” “Everyone believes in me; I cannot fail.” When failure equates to “anything less than perfection,” performance anxiety can become a complicated, overwhelming issue. Given the pressure that arises from performance anxiety, and given that there is evidence that character strengths can buffer the detrimental effects of psychological vulnerabilities such as perfectionism and need for admiration (Huta and Hawley, 2010), a character strengths framework is a promising approach that may serve to support gifted students and reduce their likelihood of experiencing anxiety, depression, unhealthy perfectionism, and suicidality.

Character strengths

In the last 20 years, attention has shifted in the education sphere to recognize the influence of social and emotional factors on learning. Research suggests that social and emotional skills play a role in academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Scholars suggest that noncognitive skills are as important, if not more important, than cognitive skills in predicting success in various areas of life (Goleman, 1995; Heckman, 2001). That said, there are serious limitations to the highly skill-based social/emotional learning approaches, which emphasize “what” is being learned (i.e. well-doing) and not enough on expanding character strengths and positive mindsets (i.e. well-being; Lottman et al., in press).

Until recently, there was no consensual nomenclature for research and practice with noncognitive skills. In the early 2000s, Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) led a team of 55 scientists in a groundbreaking project that looked across cultures and history to understand, research, and summarize what philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and educators had found to be the common characteristics of a life of fulfillment and flourishing. The result was the VIA Classification, a common language for character, comprised of 24 character strengths and 6 overarching virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). That was soon followed by the VIA Survey and VIA Youth Survey, psychometrically valid assessment tools that evaluate the strengths (Park and Peterson, 2006a, 2006b). Hundreds of peer-reviewed studies have subsequently been published under this umbrella of the science of character (Niemiec, 2013).

Character strengths have been found to correlate with positive classroom behavior and school achievement in primary and secondary school students (Wagner and Ruch, 2015). Character strengths interventions in the classroom have been found to reduce class friction and enhance engagement, strengths use, well-being, and class cohesion.
(Quinlan et al., 2014). Moreover, Seligman and colleagues (2005) offered support that intentional instruction in well-being is crucial in preventing depression, cultivating life satisfaction, and supporting optimal learning. Students participating in a curricular intervention focusing on the identification and application of character strengths demonstrated reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression (Brunwasser and Gillham, 2008).

Another program wove character strengths interventions into the curriculum and found those that participated in strengths-building activities had increases in life satisfaction compared to a control group that did not target character strengths (Proctor et al., 2011). The strengths of love of learning, zest, gratitude, perseverance, and curiosity are correlated most closely with satisfaction with school (Weber and Ruch, 2012). In addition, the character strengths of perseverance, love of learning, and prudence were strongly correlated with desirable classroom behavior, as rated by teachers (Weber and Ruch, 2012). These authors also found support for a path model indicating that the use of character strengths supports positive experiences and classroom behaviors, which both contribute to school success (measured by grades).

Considering the important role of interpersonal encouragement of gifted students (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2015), these students stand to similarly benefit from intentional instruction in well-being and may even be particularly responsive to it based on their unique challenges and needs. One robust finding might be particularly applicable for gifted students—the targeting of signature strengths. Traditional character education chooses a handful of specific attributes and attempts to teach all students to have more of those qualities. An alternative approach is to help each student identify their unique best qualities (i.e. signature strengths) and create an optimal environment and interactive opportunities to help students build upon these qualities (Linkins et al., 2014). Indeed, several studies across cultures now show long-term benefits to happiness and depression when individuals are asked to explore and expand the behavioral usage of their signature strengths (Gander et al., 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). This includes a study with youth that found use of signature strengths led to increases in student engagement and hope (Madden et al., 2011).

**Mindfulness**

Similar to character strengths, mindfulness approaches have also enjoyed a spike in their scientific applications in schools. Mindfulness has been described as a willingness to be open to whatever unfolds and a compassionate curiosity that is free from judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Two key components are identified as hallmarks of mindfulness: the ability to regulate one’s attention and an orientation to one’s experience that is open, accepting, and curious (Bishop et al., 2004). Thus, at the core of mindfulness lies at least two character strengths—self-regulation and curiosity. The ability to self-regulate refers to the ability to sustain attention in an intentional manner and to deliberately switch the focus of attention. This style of focused attention is associated with decreased rumination (Bishop et al., 2004). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) are psychoeducational programs that focus on teaching participants mindfulness practices and supporting the
development of skills to enhance present-centered attention and awareness (Bishop et al., 2004).

MBI are associated with reductions in perceived stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, pain, negative affect, and interpersonal sensitivity (Astin, 1997; Baer, 2003; Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2007). In addition, mindfulness is negatively associated with detrimental cognitive and emotional strategies, including thought suppression, ruminative thinking, and avoidance of unpleasant experiences (Baer et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2007). Furthermore, mindfulness is associated with increases in positive affect, self-compassion, gratitude, well-being, empathy, and connectedness with others (Baer et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2007; Rothraupt and Morgan, 2007; Shapiro et al., 1998; Shapiro et al., 2007).

There have now been a handful of meta-analytic reviews documenting positive effects of mindfulness in schools. Improvements in cognitive performance, stress, resilience, and emotional problems (Zenner et al., 2014) and anxiety and stress were found in children and adolescents (Kallapiran et al., 2015). Among only adolescents, a reduction in psychological symptoms (e.g. depression) and improvement in physiological (e.g. blood pressure) and psychosocial (e.g. social skills) variables were found (Langer et al., 2015). Despite the undeniably positive effects of mindfulness interventions in schools, we suggest caution, as a range of mindfulness interventions have been deployed and long-term follow-up evaluations have been lacking, leaving questions about what specific practices or teaching tools are most effective.

Mindfulness practices may be particularly well suited for gifted students. Mindfulness-based programs among students report a multitude of outcomes that impact learning, including improved impulse control (Valentine and Sweet, 1999), self-regulation (Saltzman and Goldin, 2008), social competence (Saltzman and Goldin, 2008), and academic performance (Beauchemin et al., 2008). Mindfulness practice in school-aged populations is also associated with reductions in aggressive behaviors (Singh et al., 2005) and decreased emotional reactivity (Valentine and Sweet, 1999).

Given the reality that some gifted students may struggle with regulating and directing their attention due to distractions in their environments and diminished self-regulation/self-management skills, mindfulness practices offer another promising approach for working with gifted populations.

The integration of mindfulness and character strengths

As evidence continues to mount in support of character strengths and mindfulness for students, we suggest the integration provides a level of depth and can solidify maintenance of the application over time. We have observed an upward positive spiral effect with these constructs in that mindful awareness can be directed to character strengths and the ensuing use of character strengths further catalyzes mindful attention (Niemiec, 2014; Niemiec et al., 2012). This effect is particularly powerful and led to the creation of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), a manualized, 8-week program that teaches participants evidence-based practices in both mutually enhancing domains (Niemiec, 2014). Two general types of integration apply. The first is strong mindfulness, which involves using character strengths to improve mindful attention, overcome
meditation barriers, and reenergize mindfulness in daily life (Niemiec et al., 2012). That is paired with \textit{mindful strengths use}, which entails using mindfulness to become aware of one’s signature strengths, catalyze strengths deployment, and offer a sensitivity to applying character strengths with savvy and balance without overuse/underuse (Niemiec, 2012).

In regard to the latter, any of the 24 character strengths can be overused or underused (Grant and Schwartz, 2011), depending on the person and situation. Each can be viewed as lying on a strengths continuum. For example, consider the character strength of curiosity: on one end of the curiosity continuum, there is an overuse of curiosity (i.e. nosiness) and on the other end, there is an underuse of curiosity (i.e. disinterest). The optimal expression or \textit{strengths zone} for curiosity lies in the center and can be described as exploring, seeking novelty, and expressing an interest (Niemiec, 2014).

In a similar manner, character strengths can be used to reframe perfectionism, one of the key adversity areas gifted students face. In one context, perfectionism might be the overuse of appreciation of beauty/excellence (e.g. the individual exudes excessive personal demands for excellent performance). In another, perfectionism emerges as an overuse of prudence due to exhaustive planning. Concurrent with these examples might be perfectionism as an underuse of perspective (i.e. seeing the big picture) or underuse of kindness (i.e. a lack of compassion toward oneself). The strengths zone represents balanced strengths use for the individual in a given context. For example, a student completing a challenging homework assignment may bring forth sufficient love of learning, perspective, and self-kindness to balance the demands of prudence, perseverance, and appreciation of beauty/excellence. It is the “clear seeing” quality of mindfulness that assists in building awareness of these overuse and underuse dynamics and takes into account the unique experience of the individual and the context. Practical applications stem from these two integration areas of strong mindfulness and mindful strengths use.

\textbf{Practical applications}

MBSP outlines a number of practices to boost strengths awareness and catalyze well-being, positive relationships, and problem management. What follows is a small sample of integration practices. These could easily be woven into parent education for application at home, or into the classroom via particular lessons/curricula, intermediate practices between lessons or independent activities. These examples reflect core themes/ideas of MBSP as well as exercises based in research.

\textit{Mindfulness of oneself.} As mentioned earlier, it is important that gifted children feel understood (Cross and Cross, 2015). When students take the VIA Survey or VIA Youth Survey (www.viacharacter.org), they learn their signature character strengths, deepening their self-understanding of what is most core to their identity. This is an initial step in spotting strengths in oneself, breaking through self-awareness blind-spots, and countering the negativity bias inherent in human beings. If these results are shared with parents, teachers, and peers, the positivity has potential to multiply. Adults and peers
can validate the results of the test for the individual and express appreciation to the individual for having and expressing these character strengths.

**Mindful strengths spotting.** An important step in shifting from what’s wrong to what’s strong is learning the “language” of character strengths. Individuals are encouraged to review and post a list of the 24 character strengths so they can familiarize themselves with the concepts (see www.viacharacter.org for handouts). Visual representation of the 24 character strengths creates an additional resource for bringing mindful attention to strengths. Teachers and parents may then point out demonstrated character strengths. Examples include “I saw a lot of bravery in you when you spoke in front of the class today about your homework assignment” and “I like how curious you are when you are asking all those questions. You’re helping all of us to learn more when you show your curiosity like that.”

**Meditation with strength.** This involves practicing formal meditation for a few minutes per day, enabling the individual to bring their attention fully to the present moment. This might entail paying attention to the colors and tastes of food being eaten, the movement of the body while walking, or the inhales and exhales of breathing. Before each meditation, the individual reviews their signature strengths and selects one strength to bring into sharper focus and use as an anchor for the meditation. For example, a student could select curiosity and bring an open and interested attitude to the sensations of breathing. Bringing one’s unique signature strengths into the experience of meditation may enhance the motivation, meaning, and energy of the experience. Incorporating character strengths into the meditation experience is also a way to boost the maintenance of it as an ongoing tool.

**Using signature strengths with perfectionism.** Some evidence suggests character strengths can play a role in buffering perfectionism, which can prevent anxiety and depression (Huta and Hawley, 2010). As such, MBSP might occupy an important role with gifted populations, providing an avenue for labeling positive qualities. This exercise invites individuals to claim their perfectionistic tendencies, but in a way that reframes them and brings balance. It involves the student journaling their thoughts about the questions below and then dialoguing with a parent, teacher, or peer group:

- In what ways does my perfectionism serve me?
- What character strengths am I using when I am demanding high standards of myself?
- Am I bringing a character strength forth too strongly (overusing it)? If yes, how might my signature strengths help me bring balance?
- Am I underusing any of my best qualities—my signature strengths? How might I enhance these qualities or use them in a different way that I typically do?

When considered through the lens of strengths overuse, students may recognize that even when perfectionism arises, their strengths are still at play. This mindful exploration
can open up the possibility for dialogue around how individuals may learn to modulate their use of strengths as well as support self-efficacy and balanced character strengths expression.

**Mindful transitioning.** This practice involves integrating a mindful pause in between two often-mundane activities. A parent, for example, might use this exercise after a meal before their child plays outside, whereas a teacher might use it in between lessons. The practice involves two simple steps: (1) mindful breathing for 10 seconds or longer and (2) a question: Which of my character strengths might I bring forth as I move on to the next thing in my day? This exercise allows the individual to honor and let go of the most recent activity and to move forward with both mindfulness and strength to the next one. In addition, we hypothesize that this fosters the flow experiences important for gifted individuals (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2015). As flow has been described as occurring when individuals are expressing their strengths (Seligman, 2002), this exercise gives students the opportunity to shift mindfully from one strengths-oriented flow experience to another.

**Strengths gatha.** A gatha is a Sanskrit term meaning song, poem, or verse. The process of developing a gatha is likely to enlist/highlight one or more character strengths (e.g. creativity, gratitude). The repetition of the gatha synchronized with breath can lead to a focused mind, creating an opportunity to return to the present moment with heightened awareness. These gathas become potentially more impactful when infused with strengths language. Niemiec (2014: 173) offers the following example of a strengths gatha:

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Breathing in, I see my potential,
Breathing out, I see my forgiveness and humility,
Remembering and using my strengths,
I grow and deepen.
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**Summary**

The issues of depression, anxiety, and unhealthy perfectionism among gifted individuals are complex; therefore, no sole intervention or strategy can address these issues alone. However, the MBSP approach provides a resource that can be utilized alongside other strategies/interventions tailored for gifted individuals. This may serve as an additional layer of support to protect gifted students from some of the problems to which they are prone as well as offer them tools that can enhance their well-being, engagement, and performance. Strengths identification and recognition paired with mindful strengths use lays the foundation for further exploration and self-awareness. When mindfulness of strengths activities is implemented intentionally and reinforced over time, mindfulness and character strengths may serve as a promising resource for gifted individuals.
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**Author biographies**

**Jennifer Sharp** is an assistant professor of counseling at Northern Kentucky University. Highlights of her professional experiences include middle school counseling, leadership of campus-based peer education programs, and advocacy and counseling for trauma survivors. Her research interests include using mindfulness-based approaches to reduce stress, prevent burnout, and improve well-being among educators, in general, and school counselors, in particular.

**Christopher Lawrence** is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling, Social Work, and Leadership at Northern Kentucky University. He earned his doctorate in counselor education and supervision at The College of William & Mary in Virginia, where he spent 2 years working at the Center for Gifted Education.
Ryan M Niemiec, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist and education director of the VIA Institute on Character, a global nonprofit that advances the science and practice of character strengths. Ryan is author of several books including: *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing*, and adjunct/visiting professor at a few universities including Xavier University (Cincinnati), University of Pennsylvania, and IE University in Madrid. He created Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice, the first manualized program for developing character strengths and positivity with mindfulness.