

THE ROLE OF THE IDENTIFICATION AND PROMOTION OF STUDENT TEACHERS' CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract Character strengths, defined as positive personality traits that are morally valued, are an important research topic in the field of positive psychology. In this study, 130 first-year student teachers participated in an online workshop, designed by the author, on identifying and promoting character strengths. Prior to the workshop, the students completed the VIA-IS survey on character strengths. After the workshop, they answered two open-ended questions for reflecting on the process of identification and promotion of their character strengths in relation to their personal and professional development. The students had the highest scores on the character strengths of Fairness, Kindness, Teamwork, Leadership, and Gratitude, and the lowest on Bravery, Self-regulation and Love of learning. The results of the qualitative analysis showed that the participants would most use Kindness, Fairness, Love, Teamwork and Humour in their future work, while they wished to further develop their Creativity, Perseverance, Courage and Self-regulation. The role of identification and promotion of student teachers' character strengths in their professional development and the professional identity formation is then discussed.

Keywords:

positive psychology, character strengths, student teachers, pre-service teachers, VIA Classification, professional development

1 Introduction

Since 2000, when positive psychology was recognized as a new domain in psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), there has been a growing body of scientific research on the factors that contribute to living a fulfilling life. Research in positive psychology focuses on the study of three main topics: positive subjective experiences (e.g., happiness, joy), positive individual traits (e.g., optimism, kindness), and positive institutions that facilitate positive experiences and positive traits (e.g., schools, educational institutions, families) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychologists recognized the need for providing a common language for understanding what is good in people, so the classification was developed as a parallel framework to medical classifications of diseases or mental disorders, which have already provided a common language to discuss mental disorders (Park et al., 2006).

One of the largest projects in the field of positive psychology was therefore the development of the VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are defined as positive personality traits that are morally valuable (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and constitute a “good character”, which is necessary for individuals and societies to thrive (Park et al., 2006). In the VIA Classification, there are six core virtues, which have been globally and historically recognized as positive and desired, therefore they are considered to be universal in time and place; these are Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. Following from these six higher-order virtues, 24 ubiquitously-recognized character strengths are organized as follows (Peterson & Seligman, 2004):

- *Wisdom and Knowledge*: Creativity, Curiosity, Judgment, Love of learning, Perspective
- *Courage*: Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest
- *Humanity*: Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence
- *Justice*: Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership
- *Temperance*: Forgiveness, Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation
- *Transcendence*: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humour, Spirituality

Research on character strengths focuses on character strengths in the general population (e.g.; McGrath, 2015b; Park et al., 2006), children and adolescents (e.g., Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006), specific populations, such as pre-service or in-service teachers (e.g., Gradišek, 2012; Gustems & Calderon 2014; Haslip & Donaldson, 2021), the assessment of character strengths (e.g., Peterson et al., 2004; Ruch et al., 2020), the empirical hierarchical structure of the VIA Classification (e.g., Brdar & Kashdan, 2010; McGrath, 2015a; Shryack et al., 2010), character strengths at work (e.g., Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2016; Peterson & Park, 2006), and character strengths interventions (e.g., Niemiec, 2018; Proyer et al., 2015; Ruch et al., 2020).

The present study focuses on the importance of the identification and promotion of character strengths of first-year student teachers, who are at the beginning of their professional development. Researchers agree that the development of a professional identity is an important component within the process of learning to become a teacher (Friesen & Besley, 2013). The author of present paper agrees with Korthagen (2004) that teachers' personal and professional selves are in interaction, and therefore argues that in the process of developing a professional identity as teachers, the personal identity of student teachers must also be emphasized and promoted. In the beginning of student teachers' process of professional development, emphasis should be put on (student) teachers as persons, and character strengths represent an important part of one's personality. In a study of teacher identity development, Friesen & Besley (2013) found that greater personal identity (and social identity) of student teachers resulted in increased professional teacher identity. These results mean that "those [student teachers] who have a well-formed sense of personal identity are more likely to be ready to begin the process of forming a professional identity" (Friesen & Besley, 2013, p. 30).

There has been much research on character strength interventions, which explored life and work outcomes (Niemiec, 2018). Research shows both internal (e.g., happiness and life satisfaction) and external (e.g., higher educational attainment) associations with the development of character strengths (Weber et al., 2016). The use of character strengths can help individuals to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals, leading to positive outcomes, including achievements and well-being (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Niemiec (2013) proposed the Aware-Explore-Apply (A-E-A) model to describe how strengths-based approaches lead to positive

outcomes: (1) *Aware*: individuals build up knowledge of their strengths; (2) *Explore*: they explore how their character strengths relate to valued outcomes in their past and current experiences; (3) *Apply*: they use their character strengths in their everyday lives. In the higher education context, this gives students opportunities to apply their strengths in the processes of learning, intellectual development, and personal excellence (Louis, 2011).

Knowledge about the VIA classification and the positive outcomes of character strengths' use is a good starting point for self-reflection in first-year student teachers. Through the (guided) process of identification of their character strengths they can become more aware of the positive aspects of their personalities and consider them in the light of their emerging teacher identities and professional development. It is important that student teachers are aware of their character strengths, especially of their signature strengths – those that they own, celebrate, frequently use, and feel fulfilled and excited when using (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The process of character strengths' identification and exploration must be carried out in an appropriate, non-judgmental and positively-oriented atmosphere, with respect to students' integrity. The reflection process within the identification and exploration of student teachers' character/signature strengths is evoked during a workshop, but it can continue to be reflected in their thoughts and actions in their private and professional lives.

1.1 Aims of the Study

The aims of the present mixed-methods study were (1) to assess student teachers' character strengths, (2) to identify students' character strengths during the workshop and direct their thoughts onto the possible use of their strengths in their professional development, (3) to collect and qualitatively analyse students' written reflections about the role of their character strengths in their professional development.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 130 first-year students from various study programs at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education: preschool education ($n = 59$), social pedagogy ($n = 25$), special and rehabilitation pedagogy ($n = 29$), and speech and language therapy and surdopedagogy ($n = 17$). There were only two male students in the sample, which reflects the typical gender structure in Slovenian educational study programs. The average age of the participants was 19.51 years ($SD = 0.66$).

2.2 Instruments

The participants completed two questionnaires.

Character strengths

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson et al., 2004) was used to measure students' character strengths. The questionnaire consisted of 240 items (10 items per character strength). The character strengths were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – not at all like me to 5 – completely like me). Example items are “I enjoy being kind to others” (Kindness), “I am always willing to take risks to establish a relationship” (Love), “I always admit when I am wrong” (Fairness), “I never quit a task before it is done” (Perseverance), “I work at my very best when I am a group member” (Teamwork). Research shows good internal reliability of the scales, test-retest reliability, and validity (Park et al., 2006; Ruch et al., 2010). In our sample, reliability coefficients ranged from .63 (Self-regulation) to .87 (Creativity). In the research a Slovenian translation (Gradišek, 2014) of the VIA-IS was used.

Character strengths and professional development

The participants were asked three open-ended questions to collect their insights into how their character strengths can contribute to their professional development:

1. Which character strengths could help you in your future work with children?
2. Which character strengths would you like to develop to become a good teacher/pedagogue?

2.2 Procedure

The students participated in a workshop on character strengths as a part of their coursework at the university. The study took place during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2021, therefore, the study-related activities (workshop and completing the questionnaires) were carried out in an online form. Prior to the workshop, the participants completed the VIA-IS questionnaire. During the 90-minute online workshop, the students (1) were introduced to the theory on character strengths and the VIA classification, (2) identified their most typical character strengths and (3) reflected on their results with a special focus on the role of character strengths in their professional development. After the workshop, they were asked to answer the open-ended questions. The data were considered anonymously.

3 Results

3.1 Student Teachers' Character Strengths

The descriptive statistics of the students' character strengths are presented in Table 1. The students showed the highest scores on the character strengths of Fairness, Kindness, Teamwork, Leadership, Gratitude, Love, Honesty, Humour, and Appreciation of beauty, where the mean scores were above $M = 4.0$. The lowest-rated character strengths were Spirituality, Bravery, Self-regulation, and Love of learning; however, all the scores were above $M = 3.0$.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics from the VIA-IS questionnaire

Character strengths	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fairness	4.32	0.44
Kindness	4.29	0.40
Teamwork	4.18	0.45
Leadership	4.17	0.45
Gratitude	4.17	0.50
Love	4.14	0.51
Honesty	4.08	0.44
Humour	4.07	0.55

Character strengths	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Appreciation of beauty	4.05	0.51
Curiosity	3.96	0.53
Zest	3.92	0.56
Judgment	3.91	0.49
Modesty	3.81	0.60
Hope	3.80	0.64
Perseverance	3.79	0.60
Social intelligence	3.77	0.50
Creativity	3.75	0.65
Perspective	3.73	0.47
Forgiveness	3.72	0.56
Prudence	3.67	0.53
Spirituality	3.58	0.84
Bravery	3.54	0.53
Self-regulation	3.51	0.51
Love of learning	3.37	0.62

3.2 Character Strengths and Students' Future Work with Children

Table 2 shows the results of a qualitative analysis of the students' responses on character strengths that could help in working with children in the future. The participating students could list several character strengths; on average, they listed 4.41 character strengths per person.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the character strengths that could help students in their future work with children, according to their responses

Character strengths	<i>f</i>
Kindness	80
Fairness	62
Love	56
Teamwork	43
Humour	42
Leadership	34
Creativity	32
Perseverance	28
Honesty	26
Social intelligence	22
Gratitude	22
Curiosity	20

Character strengths	<i>f</i>
Zest	16
Appreciation of beauty	15
Hope	13
Judgement	10
Love of learning	9
Self-regulation	7
Forgiveness	7
Prudence	7
Perspective	7
Spirituality	7
Modesty	5
Bravery	3

The most frequently mentioned character strength was Kindness. The students recognized Kindness as *“a basis for good relationships and well-being of children”*, moreover, they stressed that *“a kind and positive environment is the most encouraging for children”*. They would use their Kindness *“to make students feel relaxed around [them]”*, and *“to take care of them”*. In their opinion, Kindness is important when working with children because *“children need someone kind to help them”* – *“a loving and kind person to talk to, who they can trust with their problems”*. According to the students, if teachers are kind, *“children respond better and are more active”*. Several responses described the intertwined role of Kindness and Love, which was the third most frequently mentioned character strength regarding the students’ future pedagogical work (Table 2). For example, *“Love and Kindness are important for children to feel loved by teachers, to feel that someone cares about them, helps them, understands them and wants the best for them”*. The students also noted that in using Kindness and Love, *“we can constructively solve problems, understand each other better, respect each other and listen to each other”*. The students recognized Love as *“a basis for good relationships”* and stressed its importance for teachers: *“Without Love, one cannot (or should not) be a teacher”*.

Fairness was the second most frequently mentioned character strength that the students thought could help in their future work with children. *“You must be fair when working with children. All of them must have equal opportunities”*. They highlighted the role of teachers as role models: *“If we will be fair, children will learn how to be fair”*; *“Preschool children don’t yet understand what fairness is, therefore we must show it to them with our actions”*.

The students recognized Teamwork for teachers as a *“prerequisite for quality work with people”* and they stressed its importance for teachers: *“In our profession, we will work together with a child, his or her parents, and our colleagues. We will all share a common goal – the welfare of the child.”* Leadership is a character strength that is associated with Teamwork. The students noted that they could use their Leadership to *“assure that every member of a group feels included and to strive toward building positive relationships.”* They recognized the role of Leadership in *“having authority in a classroom”* and *“to be able to listen to every child and to consider the children’s needs”*.

The students also recognized the importance of Humour (*“It is hard to work with people if you don’t use a bit of humour. I only remember teachers who made us laugh and used humour during their teaching.”*) and Creativity for teachers (*“Creativity is my strongest character strength. It is important, because it helps me to present things differently to children, and I stimulate*

them to use their imagination and to not be limited.”). The students were aware that they *“must never give up on children” (Perseverance)*.

3.3 Character Strengths That the Students Would Like to Develop Further

The student teachers were asked what character strengths they would like to develop further in order to become good teachers/pedagogues. *Table 3* shows the frequencies of character strengths that they listed in their answers. The students could list several character strengths in their response; they listed in average 2.41 character strengths per student.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of character strengths that students would like to develop further, according to their responses

Character strengths	<i>f</i>
Creativity	37
Perseverance	34
Courage	33
Self-regulation	27
Hope	18
Social intelligence	17
Zest	16
Love of learning	15
Judgement	14
Leadership	13
Humour	10
Curiosity	9

Character strengths	<i>f</i>
Fairness	9
Honesty	8
Teamwork	8
Love	8
Forgiveness	8
Kindness	7
Gratitude	6
Prudence	5
Perspective	3
Appreciation of beauty	3
Spirituality	3
Modesty	2

The most frequently mentioned character strength that the students would like to develop further was Creativity. The students recognized the importance of creativity in their future work with children: *“I will try to think outside the box, do more activities that require creativity. I will allow myself to be more creative and will not set boundaries for myself. Creativity should be promoted and not hindered.”* In addition, they recognized the need for intentionally developing their creativity, in order to *“have new and original ideas, which [they] sometimes lack”*; some students even noticed *“a slight decline in [their] creativity over the last few years, probably because of the educational system”*.

Perseverance was the second most frequently mentioned character strength, which the students wished to develop further. One of the students wrote: *“I am not a disciplined person, but I would like to become one. Perseverance, discipline and organization would be beneficial for me. When I don’t reach my goals, I feel disappointed. This negatively affects my self-esteem and prevents me from setting new, more challenging goals.”* They recognized the need for developing their perseverance because *“[they] don’t want to give up on children’s problems if they become challenging and also [they] want to persist with their ideas and not give up”*.

More Courage could help students to *“dare to try some new pedagogical activities, methods or approaches”*, to *“stand behind [their] actions and not be afraid of every change that occurs”*. They believed that *“it is important for [them] to dare to make a change, react in a certain situation”*. The importance of reacting appropriately was also recognized in relation to Self-regulation: *“In our profession, you can find yourself in an unplanned situation and must be capable of reacting suitably.”*; *“I hardly control my emotions and I must learn this. It’s important to show emotions properly when working with children.”*

Developing the strength of Hope could help students *“to become more positively-oriented and more focused on the future”*. One student wrote that *“expecting the best and working with specific goals give meaning to [her] profession”*. According to students’ responses, their Social Intelligence needed further development because students and teachers *“must understand the grounds of certain behaviours in children instead of interpreting them in the wrong way and therefore reacting inappropriately”*.

Comparison of the Results

Finally, the ranks of character strengths were compared and analysed, which were assessed in three different ways: (1) the students’ results on character strengths, measured by the VIA-IS survey; (2) character strengths that the students’ could use in their future work with children, according to their responses; (3) character strengths that the students would like to develop in order to become good teachers/pedagogues, according to their responses.

Table 4 shows the comparison of the character strengths’ ranks.

Table 4: Comparison of ranks of character strengths according to the VIA-IS survey and the students' responses (the strengths they could use in their future work and the strengths they would like to develop further)

	VIA-IS (rank)	Strengths for future work (rank)	Strengths to develop (rank)
Fairness	1	2	13
Kindness	2	1	18
Teamwork	3	4	14
Leadership	4	6	10
Gratitude	4	10	19
Love	6	3	14
Honesty	7	9	14
Humour	8	5	11
Appreciation of beauty	9	14	21
Curiosity	10	12	12
Zest	11	13	7
Judgment	12	16	9
Modesty	13	23	24
Hope	14	15	5
Perseverance	15	8	2
Social intelligence	16	10	6
Creativity	17	7	1
Perspective	18	18	21
Forgiveness	19	18	14
Prudence	20	18	20
Spirituality	21	18	21
Bravery	22	24	3
Self-regulation	23	18	4
Love of learning	24	17	8

Note: Some of the character strengths have tied ranks, such as Leadership and Gratitude in the VIA-IS column.

The character strengths that were more typical for student teachers, according to the results of the VIA-IS, were recognized to a higher extent as strengths that students could use in their future work (e.g., Fairness and Kindness, which were ranked first and second in both cases). The student teachers would like to develop the character strengths that were not very typical for them, such as Creativity, which was ranked 17th in the VIA-IS and first regarding the wish for developing it, as well as Perseverance, which was ranked 15th in the VIA-IS and second regarding its development.

4 Discussion

The professional development of student teachers begins when they enter educational universities and begin the teacher education study programs. In the process of the professional development of teachers, we must pay close attention to the formation of the (student) teachers' professional identities because, among other factors, professional identity determines the way teachers teach (Beijaard et al., 2004). Professional identity formation is a complex process, which includes the interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences and is influenced by factors, such as personal history, social interactions and psychological and cultural factors (Lamote & Engels, 2010). A teacher as a person is so strongly interwoven with how they act as a professional that their professional identity cannot be separated from their personal identity (Lamote & Engels, 2010). Therefore, exploring the personal identities of future teachers can be a beneficial pathway towards building their professional identities. Character strengths reflect our personal identity (Niemiec, 2018), so the process of identifying character strengths can be a useful strategy for student teachers to start exploring and shaping their professional development as (future) teachers at the beginning of their teacher education.

In the study, the participants assessed their character strengths on the VIA-IS survey. The student teachers in our sample had the highest scores on Fairness, Kindness, Teamwork, Leadership, Gratitude and Love (*Table 1*). These results are similar to other studies on student teachers (Gradišek, 2012; Gustems & Calderon 2014) and reflect the strengths that are important for teachers in order to be able to establish positive relationships with students and colleagues.

Besides the perceptions on who they are as a (student) teacher, another important aspect of a teacher's professional identity includes the kind of teacher they want to be (Lamote & Engels; 2010). Therefore, after having been introduced to the VIA classification, the theory about character strengths, and their practical implications during the online workshop, the participating student teachers were invited to reflect on their character strengths in the light of their future work with children as teachers or pedagogues. Interestingly, similar strengths (as measured with the VIA-IS) were reported by the student teachers in their responses to open-ended questions. The students wrote that they would mostly use their Kindness, Love, Fairness, Teamwork and/or Humour in their future work with children (*Table 2*). It is very

positive that the student teachers in their first year of teacher education were able to reflect on their most typical character strengths and recognize the benefits of using them in their future work. It is important that the student teachers, as early as at the beginning of their professional development, are aware of and understand that it is of great importance for teachers to be kind, loving, fair and humorous in their interactions with students and to know how to work well in teams. *"Teachers' work is easier, if it is based on kind and loving relationships, intertwined with humour,"* was one of the student's responses. Another student described the importance of Kindness and Love: *"I would use the strengths of Kindness and Love in my work with children. If we are loving to children, they will love us back. I believe that our good deeds return one day. Personally, I feel good when I help someone, make someone's day with a smile, say Hello in a polite manner or wish someone to have a nice day. In my opinion, it is crucial that we raise children to be kind and good-hearted individuals."* Other character strengths were also recognized as being important. Among others, one student stressed the importance of Creativity and Curiosity, however, the teacher's role in modelling character strengths is also implicit in her response: *"Creativity and Curiosity are two wonderful character strengths that children have, but often disappear with growing up. These two character strengths help me to be able to listen to a person without judgement and to seek new solutions."*

Originating from the premise that character strengths can be developed (Niemiec, 2018; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the student teachers were asked which character strengths they would like to develop further in order to become good teachers or pedagogues. In their answers, the most frequently mentioned character strengths were Creativity, Perseverance, Courage, Self-regulation, Hope, Social Intelligence, and Zest. It is interesting to note that they listed those strengths which had lower scores in the VIA-IS survey but were found to be important in the teaching profession. The participants stressed the importance of Creativity for teachers to have new, creative and interesting ideas for children, Perseverance for not giving up in difficult situations, Courage for daring to try new teaching methods or to stand behind their actions, and Self-regulation for being able to control their emotions and responses in challenging situations in a classroom.

The student teachers' reflections on their character strengths in relation to their future work as teachers/pedagogues proved an interesting strategy for developing teacher identity. A professional (teacher) identity is strongly connected to the student teacher's personal identity, as a part of their professional development. The students

recognized the importance of several character strengths that are important for teachers. On the one hand, they were able to reflect on which of the character strengths that they already possessed could be used in their work, and also which character strengths would they need (or wish) to develop further to become good teachers. The author of present paper agrees with Lamote & Engels (2010) that student teachers should be stimulated to build on their emerging professional identities from the beginning of their professional development.

One of the main areas of research in positive psychology are positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Higher education institutions, especially educational faculties, should be (come) positive institutions, in which the development of student teachers' positive traits – character strengths – should be promoted, and experiencing the positive emotions of both student teachers and their teachers should be enabled. First-year student teachers are aware that they need to develop some of their character strengths to become good teachers, such as Creativity, Perseverance, Courage, and Self-regulation, and the university teachers should be able to support them in this process. Student teachers should learn in a supportive context, in which their character strengths will be recognized and promoted, their potentials fulfilled, and in which their professional (teacher) identities will be supported and developed from the beginning of their professional development as first-year student teachers.

The limitations of the study are linked to the method used in the study. The cross-sectional design of the study allowed us to observe the character strengths of one generation of student teachers, however, a longitudinal design would allow us to observe possible changes in their character strengths during their following years of study. Also, the possible changes in their perceptions regarding character strengths use and development in relation to their future work in the following years would be interesting to observe. Another possible limitation was the use of the self-report measure because of the risk of socially more desired responses. In future, it would be interesting to collect a larger sample of students from various educational study programs to compare their character strengths and their reflections regarding the identification and promotion of their character strengths.

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