

Recognizing and Utilizing Personal Strengths

Dr. Martin Seligman and one of his colleagues Dr. Peterson (2004) discovered that there are 24 positive personality traits that each person can possess, which they called character strengths. These strengths include traits such as kindness, bravery, leadership, creativity, curiosity and many others. Each person has a few character strengths that are particularly dominant in their personalities. According to research compiled by the Values in Action (VIA) Institute on Character (2021), when students learn their core strengths and apply them to their daily lives, they are more engaged, have greater motivation, and develop better relationships with their peers. For this activity, we encourage you to have your students take a character strengths test, such as the short, free test offered by the VIA Institute. Teach your students to identify their strengths and use them in new ways to reach individual goals. After identifying individual strengths, students can then learn to use them in a new way or apply them to a new situation. Several studies have found identifying personal signature strengths and using them in a new way each day for a week can increase happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005, pp. 416, 419). Haidt (2002) provided a list of different activities for each character strength that may provide useful ideas for your students as they brainstorm new ways to implement their strengths.

Grade Level: Upper Elementary- 12th

Materials: VIA Character Strengths test

Duration: Varies, as needed.

Implementation: 1. Have students take a character strengths, such as the one provided for free at viacharacter.org
2. Once students have completed the test, have them review the explanations of their top five character strengths.
3. Have students write examples of how or when they use those character strengths in daily life.
4. Encourage students set goals to develop additional strengths or use their top strengths more frequently

Does it work?

Several different studies encouraged students to identify their strengths and utilize them more often. An intervention for 23 boys (10-11 years old) in Australia helped these children identify their strengths through eight, 45 minute long face-to-face coaching sessions with a teacher-coach over 6 months. These sessions focused on helping students identify their strengths, identify their personal resources and “utilise these in working toward individual goals”, and coaching them through a self-regulation cycle of setting goals (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011, p. 75). This intervention led to increased self-reported measures of engagements and several qualitative benefits reported as increased positive relationship with students, created a useful dialogue, positive feedback from parents, positive classroom climate, and increased goal setting skills among students.

A similar study enrolled high school freshmen in an strengths-development program which led to increased positive academic behavior, engagement, feelings of academic self-efficacy and attendance (Austin, 2006). Dr. Seligman and his team tested a strengths curriculum that targeted identifying and using strengths over multiple 80 minute sessions and found similar positive results relating to engagement, achievement, and social skills among students (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). Similarly, 6 weekly sessions of a strengths programs for elementary students, which covered the topics: recognizing strengths, learning about activity and character strengths, the importance of strengths, and how to use them, improved students’ wellbeing engagement, class cohesions, and sense of autonomy (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron & Vella-Brodrick , 2014).

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