Chapter 2
The Importance of Good Character

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2.1 Introduction

Cultivating good character among children and adolescents has long been a ubiquitous goal of parents, educators, and theologians. Good character is morally valued by all human beings in all societies. Indeed, since the time of Aristotle, living a virtuous life (and the happiness that this brings) has been considered the ultimate good. According to Aristotle (c. 330 BCE/1925), virtue is by definition a state of character, such that those engaging in virtuous activity are considered by others to be "good people".

Character refers to a cluster of positive personality traits and behaviors that are not only morally valued, but are also at the heart of positive youth development (Park and Peterson 2009). According to research, cultivating good character reduces the possibility of negative outcomes and promotes healthy development and thriving (see Park and Peterson 2009 for a review). For example, good character has been found to predict thriving behaviors, such as school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delay of gratification, and overcoming diversity among adolescents (Scales et al. 2000). In addition, it has been demonstrated to be associated with reduced psychological, behavioral, and social problems. For example, youths with numerous personality strengths at the mean age of 16 have been demonstrated to have a decreased risk of developing personality and psychiatric disorders, educational and occupational problems, interpersonal difficulties, and violent or criminal behaviors at the mean age of 22 (Bromley et al. 2006). Similarly, it has been found to be associated with reduced problem behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence, depression, and suicidal ideation (Benson et al. 2012). Overall, research suggests that character strengths are not only important in

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their own right, but additionally promote well-being and provide a buffer against antisocial behavior, psychological disorder, the negative effects of stress, and other potential developmental risk factors.

With growing concerns over the current societal risks to positive youth development, and the noted benefits to the development and fostering of good character, character education (or moral education) has become a major focus of educators and policy makers. Increasingly, interest is growing in the formation of development programs which provide moral education designed to teach students traditional moral values, such as respect, empathy, altruism, responsibility, spirituality, and self-control (Park 2004; Damon 2004). Hence, in recent years there have been a number of initiated character education movements throughout the United States and elsewhere (Park and Peterson 2009). However, despite these efforts and the growing interest to promote character education among youth people through such programs, concerns have been raised over their effectiveness and the lack of consensual rationale for choosing which values and virtues to foster (Park 2004; Peterson and Seligman 2004). Unlike the cognitive developmental theories of moral development proposed by developmental psychologists such as Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) moral education is based on prosocial moral behaviors, such as empathy, altruism, kindness, and respect, and positive character traits, such as future mindedness, interpersonal skill, self-control, and wisdom (Park 2004; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Therefore, the focus of most character education programs is on getting students to follow rules about "what to do and what not to do", instead of focusing on the character development of the students who are urged to follow these rules (Park and Peterson 2009).

What was needed in order to guide youth development programs in promotion of the appropriate moral values and virtues to foster in youth, is a theoretical framework and classification system informed by developmental theory and research to guide the design, delivery, and evaluation of programs (Park 2004; Peterson and Park 2004; Seligman 2002; Kohn 1997).

2.2 The VIA Strengths Classification

Guided by the perspective of positive psychology, a classification and measurement system of character strengths (Seligman 2002), the *Values in Action – Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson and Seligman 2004) was developed. The VIA-IS was designed to compliment what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, *Fourth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association 1994) of the American Psychiatric Association began, by focusing on the parallel spectrum of mentality, strengths of character, that make the good life possible (Peterson and Park 2004; Seligman 2002; Steen et al. 2003). The VIA-IS provides a classification of 24 character strengths, organized under 6 broad virtues, which are ubiquitous across cultural, historical, religious, and philosophical traditions: (1) wisdom and knowledge; (2) courage; (3) love and humanity; (4) justice; (5) temperance; and (6) transcendence

(Peterson and Park 2004; Seligman 2002). This classification system, and its parallel measure for youth: the *Values in Action – Inventory of Strengths for Youth* (VIA-Youth; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Park and Peterson 2006b), provides a comprehensive means of assessing good character. Further, the VIA-Youth has many implications for use as an evaluative research tool in positive youth development interventions. In contrast to other self-report surveys the VIA-Youth, like the VIA-IS, can be scored ipsatively, thus allowing "an investigator to control for one strength when ascertaining the correlates, causes, or consequences of another" (Peterson and Park 2004, p. 443). Therefore, rather than comparing and contrasting an individual's score on one strength with that of other individuals, the VIA-Youth allows for contrast and comparison relative to a single individual's other strengths.

> For example, a researcher using the *VIA-Youth* would be able to say that spirituality has (or does not have) consequences above-and-beyond contributions of associated strengths such as gratitude or hope, a conclusion not possible if only measures of spirituality are used in a study (Park 2004, p. 49).

Further, according to Seligman (2002) each person possesses several *signature strengths* (one's top 5 strengths out of 24), or strengths of character, that are self-consciously owned. In line with the application of Aristotelian theory, it is through knowing what one's signature strengths are and using them in daily life in work, love, friendship, and in leisure that leads to the attainment of the "good life" and abundant gratification, authentic happiness, and a psychologically fulfilling life (Seligman 2002).

2.2.1 Empirical Findings

Initial examinations of character strengths among young people began with the development and validation of the VIA-Youth (Peterson and Seligman 2004). This research illuminated particular strengths of character to be associated with increased life satisfaction among both adults and children. Specifically, Park and Peterson (2006b) found that similar to the findings of adult studies (see Park et al. 2004) the strengths of hope, love, gratitude, and zest were found to be linked to greater life satisfaction among children. Further, examination of the parental strengths of character that predicted the life satisfaction of their children revealed that the same strengths of character associated with greater life satisfaction among children (i.e., hope, love, gratitude, zest) were the strongest parental predictors. Additionally, results revealed parental self-regulation to be associated with child life satisfaction (Park and Peterson 2006b). Similar findings have been reported by Park and Peterson (2006a) among young children through examination of free parental descriptions of children's personal characteristics and individual qualities. Results revealed three strengths of character to be related to happiness: love, hope, and zest. These findings diverge from previous studies in that the strength of gratitude, which is a strong predictor of life satisfaction among youth and adults, was not included. However, examination of descriptions of children aged 7 and over revealed

the expected correlation between life satisfaction and gratitude (Park and Peterson 2006a). Overall, consistent positive associations are found between the strengths of love, hope, and zest and life satisfaction among individuals of all ages.

In general there is considerable convergence when comparing the character strengths of adults and children, however there are also notable differences in the development of strengths with maturation. For example, research has shown modest convergence between parent and child strengths, especially for mother-daughter and father-son, with the greatest degree of convergence being found for spirituality (Park and Peterson 2009). However, hope, teamwork, and zest have been found to be relatively more common among youth than adults, whereas appreciation of beauty, honesty, leadership, forgiveness, and open-mindedness have been found to be relatively more common among adults than youth (Park and Peterson 2009). Additionally, data gathered from 336 adult twins drawn from the Minnesota Twin Registry have demonstrated significant genetic and non-shared environmental effects for 21 of the 24 VIA strengths, with little evidence of shared environmental contributions (Steger et al. 2007).

Unfortunately, parents and educators often try to teach children and youth the character strengths that they value, instead of recognizing the unique strengths young people already possess. Peterson (2006) has noted that research to date has demonstrated that the consequences and correlates of character strengths are positive in nature and therefore "the implication is that we should develop and use as many strengths of character as possible" (p. 157). Indeed, research has shown that mean scores for all character strengths are in the positive range among children and adolescents (Park et al. 2005). Further, as it is not assumed that character strengths "are fixed or necessarily grounded in immutable biogenetic characteristics" (Peterson 2006, p. 139), it is reasonable to assume that, if not fostered, strengths may be lost over the course of development. Identified developmental differences in the acquisition of good character highlights the importance of fostering strengths in youth in order that they remain throughout development and into adulthood.

According to research findings character strengths in youth are associated with long-term benefits to well-being. For example, Gillham et al. (2011) found that character strengths predict future well-being. Specifically, findings indicated that other-directed strengths (e.g., kindness, teamwork) predicted fewer symptoms of depression, whereas transcendence strengths (e.g., meaning, love) predicted greater life satisfaction and social support among high school students. Additional findings have also indicated that character strengths in youth are associated with a decreased risk of psychopathology. For example, Park and Peterson (2008) found the strengths of hope, zest, and leadership to be substantially related to fewer internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety disorders, whereas the strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were found to be substantially related to fewer externalizing problems, such as aggression. Moreover, relationships have also been found between character strengths and academic achievement. For example, a study conducted by Park and Peterson (as cited in Park and Peterson 2009) investigating the relationship between academic achievement and character strengths demonstrated that the character strengths of perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty,

hope, and perspective predict end-of-year student grade point average. Taken together, these results suggest that character strengths are important to long-term well-being and have a "nonintellectual" role in overall academic achievement (Park and Peterson 2009).

2.3 Applying Strengths in Education

Under the rubric of positive psychology, positive psychology interventions (PPI) have been successfully applied in educational settings and resulted in positive behavioral, social, psychological, and academic outcomes among adolescent students. Positive psychology interventions constitute intentional activities that aim to build strengths through cultivating positive feelings, behaviors, or cognitions (Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009). Such interventions and strategies come in various diverse forms and include a wide array of activities. In general, however, PPI interventions can be conceptualized as either single component PPIs that focus on one key strength, such as gratitude (e.g., Froh et al. 2008), or multi-component PPIs that integrate several positive psychology concepts (see Green and Norrish this volume). In the section that follows, curriculum based multi-component PPIs will be reviewed.

2.3.1 Curriculum Based Programs

Curriculum based multi-component PPIs are a promising approach to teaching well-being in school and have had preliminary success across multiple student outcomes. For example, the *Positive Psychology Program*, which consisted of approximately 20–25 80 min sessions delivered over 1 year, integrated learning of the 24 VIA character strengths through character strengths discussion sessions, in-class activities, real-world homework activities, and follow-up journal reflections (Seligman et al. 2009). Participating students were randomly assigned to Language Arts classes that either contained the positive psychology curriculum (positive psychology condition) or did not contain the positive psychology curriculum (control). The major goals of the program were to help students identify their signature VIA character strengths and increase the use of these strengths in their daily life. The Positive Psychology Program was demonstrated to increase enjoyment and engagement in school and improve social skills among adolescent students (see Seligman et al. 2009).

Another similar program, the *Geelong Grammar School Project* involved training 100 members of faculty in the principles and skills of positive psychology, such as resilience, strengths, gratitude, and positive communication so that they could incorporate these skills into their teaching. The program has resulted in the creation of stand alone courses in several grades, such as character strengths and positive education, supplemented by whole school practices, such as students in

the elementary school starting the day with a focus on "what went well" the day before (Fox Eades 2008). Teachers are developing their own methods of using the principles they have learned. For example, a sports coach may use a character strengths framework to debrief teams following a game (see Seligman et al. 2009 for a review).

An example of a multi-component PPI based on the VIA classification is *Strengths Gym* (Proctor and Fox Eades 2009). This program involves students completing age appropriate strengths-based exercises on each of the 24 VIA strengths through in-class activities, philosophical discussions, stories, and real-world homework activities where students can apply the concepts and skills in their own lives. Students are provided with the opportunity to self-identify with their signature strengths at the beginning of each of the three levels of the program and to re-evaluate them again before moving on to the next level. This program provides teachers with flexible lesson plans enabling them to choose activities that suit the mood and the needs of their class. Students who have participated in Strengths Gym have been demonstrated to have significantly higher life satisfaction compared to adolescents who did not participate in the program (Proctor et al. 2011).

At the primary school level, *Celebrating Strengths* (Fox Eades 2008) is an approach that takes a holistic school view of well-being. This approach is built upon the belief that a flourishing classroom requires a flourishing teacher to create the conditions in which students will flourish. This program links the VIA strengths to specific festivals and events throughout the school calendar and incorporates activities such as the strengths-based classroom (recognizing the strengths of all class members), victory logs (record books noting students' achievements), and celebrations of what went well. An evaluation of this program has indicated several positive outcomes, including: increases in children's self-confidence and motivation to achieve, improved behavior at home and school, and an overall positive impact on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development (Govindji and Linley 2008, August).

Outside of the VIA classification, the Gallup Organization's *StrengthsQuest* educational program (Clifton and Anderson 2002), originally developed for higher educational settings, has recently been extended to Kindergarten-Grade 12 education (Anderson 2005). Overall, preliminary reports from teachers and students using the program have been positive (Henderson 2005). For example, findings of a 6-week strengths-development intervention program based on StrengthsQuest in a group of 9–12-year-old American students indicated that participating students experienced benefits in academic efficacy, expectancy, positive academic behaviors, and extrinsic motivation (Austin 2006).

2.4 Conclusion

The importance of good character cannot be underscored. The cultivation of good character is a ubiquitous goal of parents and educators, providing the foundation for flourishing in all domains of life. With the advent of positive psychology there

has been renewed investigation into what constitutes good character and how to measure it. Through the development of the VIA classification system a theoretical framework, informed by developmental theory and research, now exists which can be used to guide the design, delivery, and evaluation of programs designed to cultivate character strengths among young people and facilitate increased well-being.

Empirical investigations into the relationship between character strengths and various personal, social, psychological, and behavioral outcomes indicate that character strengths play an important role across multiple life domains. Indeed, research suggests that not only do character strengths predict future well-being, social support, and academic achievement among young people, they also act as a protective factor buffering them from the negative effects of stress and the development of psychopathological conditions, such as depression and anxiety, and behavioral problems, such as aggression.

Until recently, educators had been working under a deficit-remediation education model aimed at fixing what is wrong with students by diagnosing their needs, problems, defects, and deficits (Anderson 2005). Under this model, classes, workshops, programs, and services were designed to help students improve in areas where they were lacking. However, educators and policy became dissatisfied with this model's inability to prevent problems and began to recognize the benefits of adopting a positive educational perspective committed to building strengths instead of repairing weaknesses. Indeed, the positive psychology perspective has provided the foundation for moving away from this deficit-remediation model of education and enabled the promotion of positive youth development. The positive youth development approach emphasizes the potentialities of young people and aims to encourage and foster productive activities that engage young people and enable them to show their strengths, rather than treat their weaknesses.

Under the rubric of positive psychology, and the VIA classification system of character strengths, PPI programs have been developed and applied in the school curriculum with the aim of promoting positive youth development and increasing well-being among young people. As noted by Seligman et al. (2009), school is the ideal place for well-being initiatives because young people spend most of their weekday in school and the majority of their day-to-day interactions occurring there have an impact on their well-being. To date, these PPI programs have proved to be a promising approach to cultivating good character and providing young people with the foundations they need in order to flourish throughout life. Specifically, research results have indicated that these programs increase enjoyment and engagement at school, improve social skills, increase life satisfaction, confidence, and motivation to achieve, and improve behavior and academic achievement.

In general, positive psychological interventions and character strengths-based activities have been demonstrated to lead to increased happiness and well-being among both adults and young people (Seligman et al. 2005, 2009; Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009). Nevertheless, these findings should be considered with a note of caution, as further empirical research is required in order to adequately evaluate the outcomes of PPI programs. Although findings to date are promising, and

implicate that we are moving towards the prevention of problems by adopting a positive approach to education through the application of PPIs in the curriculum, it is important that reported findings are not overemphasized until developed interventions can be thoroughly evaluated in practice.

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