

Strengths Gym: The impact of a character strengths-based intervention on the self-esteem of children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities

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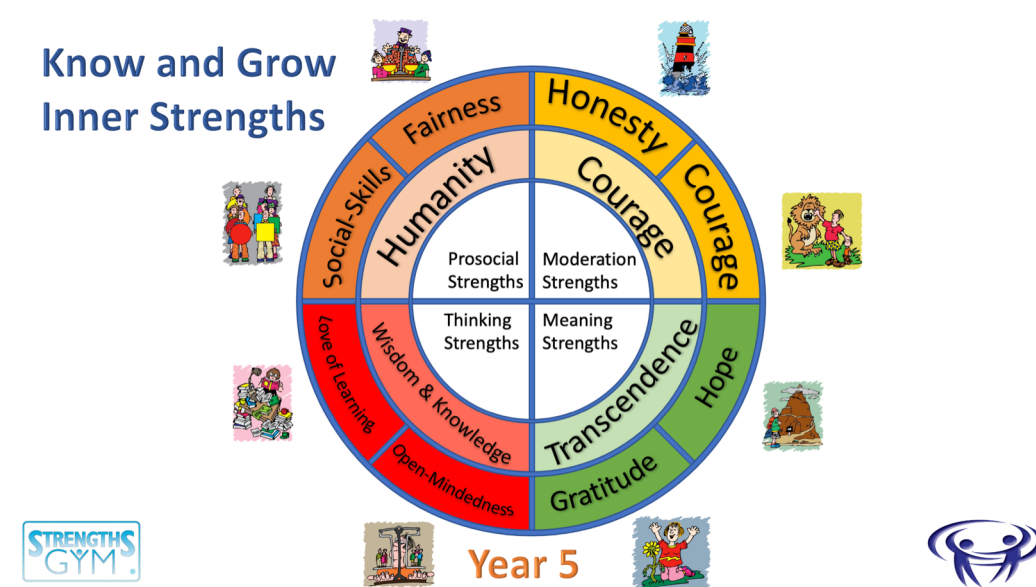
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Introduction

This study aims to measure the efficacy of the Strengths Gym programme as a character strengths intervention (CSI) when used with a younger population of students with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Further, this study aims to continue the research of Proctor et al. (2011) by investigating the impact of Strengths Gym on student life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive and negative affect.

Learned helplessness, diminished life satisfaction, and low self-esteem are linked to depression among children.

- Children who have SEND are at an increased risk of experiencing learned helplessness, diminished life satisfaction, low self-esteem, and, therefore, future mental health disorders.
- Approximately 16.6% of students are considered to have SEND (DfE, 2015, 2022).
- Children with SEND are around six times more likely to suffer from a mental health disorder than their non-SEND counterparts – with depression being the most common of these disorders (MHF, 2020).
- Character strengths interventions are positive interventions for supporting children in improving learned optimism, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.
- This work examined a potential way to support these children and their mental health.



Purpose

The purpose of the study was to test the following predictions:

1. **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant difference in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affect between SEND and non-SEND students before engagement with Strengths Gym.
2. **Hypothesis 2:** There will be a significant difference in negative affect between SEND and non-SEND students before engagement with Strengths Gym.
3. **Hypothesis 3:** All students will significantly increase in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affect following engagement with Strengths Gym.
4. **Hypothesis 4:** All students will show a significant decrease in negative affect following engagement with Strengths Gym.
5. **Hypothesis 5:** A greater significant difference will be found between pre-intervention and post-intervention scores for SEND students compared to non-SEND students.

Results

Hypothesis 1: A Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant difference between SEND and non-SEND students in life satisfaction ($U = 79.5, z = -0.686, p = .504$), self-esteem ($U = 57, z = -1.405, p = .172$), or positive affect ($U = 73.5, z = .194, p = .850$), prior to engagement in Strengths Gym.

Hypothesis 2: A Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant difference between SEND and non-SEND students in negative affect ($U = 107, z = 1.782, p = .08$) before engagement with Strengths Gym.

- Hypothesis 3:**
- There was a significant increase in life satisfaction pre-intervention ($M = 34.33, SD = 8.40$) to post-intervention ($M = 37.47, SD = 5.10$), $t(29) = -3.22, p < .01$ (two tailed).
 - There was a significant increase in self-esteem pre-intervention ($M = 31.23, SD = 5.59$) to post-intervention ($M = 33.04, SD = 5.48$), $t(25) = -2.13, p < .05$ (two tailed).
 - There was a significant increase in positive affect pre-intervention ($M = 36.08, SD = 7.68$) to post-intervention ($M = 39.08, SD = 6.58$), $t(25) = -2.27, p < .05$ (two tailed).

Hypothesis 4: There was no significant decrease in negative affect from pre-intervention ($M = 20.96, SD = 7.57$) to post-intervention ($M = 18.56, SD = 6.89$), $t(24) = 1.72, p > .05$ (two-tailed), although a small change was observed.

Hypothesis 5: No significant difference between SEND and non-SEND students was found when looking at their questionnaire scores before the intervention and after taking part in the intervention ($F(1,1) = 2.504, p > .05$).

Character Strengths Interventions

Perceived negative academic experiences can create cognitive learned helplessness patterns, significantly impacting a child's self-esteem (Castle & Buckler, 2018; Davis-Kean & Sandler, 2001). By improving a child's self-esteem and well-being, the likelihood of developing learned helplessness and depression may be decreased.

A step in raising self-esteem is challenging negative thoughts individuals believe about themselves (NHS, 2020). Indeed, the focus now is on determining efficacious school interventions that can be integrated into the classroom context to facilitate improvements in student well-being.

CSIs can support this process of challenging negative thoughts and building well-being (Schutte & Malouff, 2019). While the use of CSIs is relatively new, there is a growing body of evidence that they can support a significant increase in life satisfaction (Khanna et al., 2021; Proctor et al., 2011) as well as a decrease in depressive symptoms (Schutte & Malouff, 2019) and a significant, sustained increase in self-esteem (Toback et al., 2016).

CSI programmes are promising for supporting the SEND population, however, most research in this area has been conducted with adult samples. The lack of evidence with student populations has begun to be addressed by Proctor et al. (2011), Khanna et al. (2021) and Vuorinen et al. (2019) through the application of Strengths Gym.

Methods

Participants:

- 30 students in Year 5, aged 9-10.

Measures

- Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS)
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)
- Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Discussion

- A 7-week repeated measures intervention study investigated the impact of a CSI named *Strengths Gym* on the life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive and negative affect of 30 students aged 9 to 10 years old.
- Results indicated a significant positive increase in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affect for both SEND and non-SEND students.
- Strengths Gym could be a way forward in supporting primary school children who are developing their life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affect.
- This is of great import to educators who aim to protect their students from learned helplessness and low self-esteem and, therefore, potential mental health difficulties as they grow older. The findings of this study give cause to further research in the use of CSIs with young populations.
- Overall, results support the use of Strengths Gym as promising intervention for supporting and improving the life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affect of SEND students.

Strengths Gym

Strengths Gym (Proctor & Fox Eades, 2019) is a curriculum-based CSI for students to boost life satisfaction and well-being.

- Strengths Gym contains age-appropriate strengths-based exercises across three levels of learning (foundational understanding/vocabulary, strengths identification and use, and strengths identification and use by others).
- Students build their strengths, learn new strengths, and spot strengths in others.
- Each lesson contains Strengths Builder and Strengths Challenge exercises to encourage the development and use of strengths inside and outside of the classroom

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