

How can strength-based interventions be useful for educational psychologists working with children and young people?

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Abstract

This paper reviews educational psychology practice and strengths-based interventions in the UK. An historical and contextual overview of the development of positive psychology and strengths-based interventions is outlined. The interventions used with children and young people are introduced. In order to evaluate their effectiveness, a presentation of the evidence base includes a review of the recent literature and a critical evaluation of the findings. Based on the conclusions, recommendations for professionals are drawn and future directions are proposed to inform professional practice with children and young people.

Introduction

Positive psychology is defined as the study of what goes right in a human's life (Peterson 2006). It focuses on those things that make life worth living and adopts a perspective that life is more than avoiding problems. In terms of psychology practice, it recognises that good things as well as bad things are present in life and therefore professionals should devote their interest and time in both areas.

The theoretical background of positive psychology is heavily orientated towards people's strengths rather than their weaknesses and towards competency building rather than pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Essentially, it draws away from the shortcomings of the medical model of mental health, which focuses on the problems, and instead contributes to the notion that by focusing on positives, prevention and treatment of psychological difficulties can be done more effectively (Cowen & Kilmer 2002). Although positive psychology research in children and young people is still at embryonic levels, it has attracted considerable interest in recent decades and has produced valuable findings (Huebner et al. 2009).

With regard to school applications, the role of positive psychology is directed towards encouraging and rewarding children's strengths and talents instead of punishing them for their deficits (Linley et al., 2009). As Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggested in the revolutionary article 'Positive psychology: an introduction', the science of positive psychology tries to promote positive experiences, positive institutions and positive individual traits. The latter is highly linked to individuals' strengths, virtues and talents that can be utilised as tools to overcome difficulties and improve the overall quality of life. To date, positive psychology research has covered a variety of educational areas including consultation, development of competencies and mental health wellbeing. Regardless of the rigorous

attempts made to formulate practical applications, there are still challenges for positive psychology principles to be used and maintained in schools, especially in the long term (Clonan et al. 2004).

Defining strengths

Various attempts have been made to describe and define strengths. One particular approach describes strengths as talents that consistently help us produce high performance levels on a certain activity (Clifton & Anderson 2002). Strengths can also be defined as an innate capacity to think, feel and behave in a way that promotes successful achievements (Madden et al. 2011). Other definitions specify as strengths any given activity where the person performs at a 'near-perfect' level. Building and developing strengths requires identification of the dominant themes, particular discovery of the talents and an enrichment of those talents with extra knowledge and skills that must be actively acquired (Hodges & Clifton 2004). Nevertheless, the definition of a talent is somewhat different from the strength in the notion that talents are naturally recurring, as confirmed by the field of neuroscience; the development of the human brain is roughly organised by the age of 15, and any connections that are not regularly used tend to weaken gradually (Hodges & Clifton 2004).

Beyond the strengths factors that lie within the individual, emphasis was given to the environment and extrinsic contributors in the service of a healthy development (Barwick 2004). Support systems can be a great fundament for positive change and success and, in addition, Barwick suggests that strengths can work as protective factors which can subsequently support positive functioning. Even the most troubled individuals are believed to have significant talents, skills and resources that can be marshalled to promote recovery and development.

Further research on human strengths led to Peterson & Seligman (2004) developing the 'signature strengths', which are the top five character strengths and virtues that each person possesses. According to Madden et al. (2011), there is a tendency for individuals to feel an ownership and an intrinsic motivation to use them. Another classification is made by Clifton & Anderson (2002) where they group similar talents into themes. The five most dominant themes are referred to as 'signature themes' and, by acquiring knowledge and skills on them, individuals can form and develop their strengths.

History of strength-based approaches

It is not completely clarified when the use of strengths started gaining attention in the educational context. Elements of the importance of using the individual's positive resources rather than employing punitive methods have been evident since the 1920s. More specifically, as cited by Brendtro (2004), in 1921 a progressive educator named

Karl Wilker expressed the need to discover any deeply hidden positive and healthy elements in children. The basic principle of Wilker's philosophy was that restorative relationships worked better than punishment. Programmes focusing on moral treatment and self-governance were also introduced in the following decades, but three factors of the time inhibited their use. More specifically, alternative methods were not welcome in a culture that was strongly authoritarian, there was a lack of research on positive approaches and finally there were no existing training programmes for specialists to attend (Brendtro 2004). In the meantime, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1970) highlighted that certain needs should be met before an individual achieves their full potential. Although he did not refer to strengths nomenclature, he nonetheless recognised that self-actualisation signified that the individual would be able to utilise their personal strengths and virtues.

Until the end of the last century not much systematic work took place in the field of strength-based approaches, but then came the revolutionary speech of Martin Seligman on the first day of his presidency of the American Psychological Association in 1998. As cited by Dodge et al. (2012), he then first expressed the view that psychology was only 'half-baked'. This signified the realisation that focus had hitherto mainly been placed on how to eliminate deficits, but not necessarily support happiness and wellbeing. From this point onwards, strength-based programmes and positive psychology have become more widely acknowledged and interest in these fields has started to grow. Seeing individuals as decision-makers who have preferences, choices and the potential to become effective in various areas of their lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000) became the cornerstone for the development of strength-based approaches.

Features of strength-based approaches

At an individual level, there are three stages in strength-based development. Firstly, it is essential to identify the talent, secondly the talent should become integrated into how the individual views himself or herself, and finally behavioural change should occur (Clifton & Harter 2003). When looking for children and young people's strengths, focus is shifted to finding those competencies and characteristics that contribute to success and a satisfying life (Epstein & Sharma 1998). Furthermore, this approach is based upon the principle that all children have strengths and that by using them we can improve performance and motivation. In addition, any lack of skill is viewed as an opportunity for learning and development (Epstein et al. 2003).

Positive psychology and strength-based applications can overall relate to a wider range of areas including policy making, practice methods, individual interventions and strategies that use the strengths of individuals, families and communities (Yates & Masten 2004). This approach perceives each child and family's unique set of strengths as the tool for development and wellbeing. It adopts an unconventional point of view that uses strengths in order to fully involve the participants in the therapeutic process.

Overall, there are three characteristic elements in a strength-based intervention. Firstly, there is a great belief that each person has a level of resourcefulness and resilience which encapsulates the notion that everyone is capable of change and growth. A second element is the individuality of the solutions. Not every person has the same strengths and therefore each one has to use them differently to build their future. Finally, the environment as a

factor that determines our wellbeing is as important as innate strengths and can be used to promote better outcomes (Barwick 2004).

Strategies and practices that promote healthy development and successfully motivate children and young people can be used by schools, families and communities. Positive role models can be highly influential in building confidence and respect in children and young people. Beyond the family members, teachers can function as the inspiring adults who are genuinely interested in them. They listen to and acknowledge the difficulties of adolescence while supporting them in building their identity. Moreover, their faith in the students' strengths and their expectation that they have the capacity to succeed can be very empowering and can make individuals feel valued (O'Connell, 2006).

According to Lopez & Louis (2009), there are five core principles in strength-based education. The first principle is highlighting the need for a measurement and boosting of academic as well as behavioural achievements, such as attendance, retention and engagement in school life. Secondly, individualisation is significant for educators who need to personalise the learning content and targets. Setting unique goals for each person and providing appropriate and timely feedback clarifies what the person needs to pursue. A third principle involves the value of the wider social network which helps individuals position and empower themselves through social support. When learning to use our strengths, we should develop a capacity of generalising them in various settings. This is the fourth principle, according to which the guidance should aim to bring out the best set of skills and talents that can be used in various domains of life. Finally, the fifth principle entails that if children and young people cultivate their strengths, they will then be in a good stead of proactively seeking new experiences where they will apply their skills and knowledge.

The role of the educational psychologists

In the UK, educational psychologists (EPs) work closely with schools and are in a prominent position to offer specialised services in how to promote learning and wellbeing, and their work can be permeated by psychology principles. Above and beyond their statutory role, they have a high level of understanding of behavioural and emotional issues and, in conjunction with their capacity to work with schools, families and in a variety of settings, they are considered highly suitable for providing therapeutic interventions (Atkinson et al. 2011). As reported by Farrellet al. (2006), EPs are considered a vital and valuable resource for therapy with children and youth.

The UK Government's increasing interest in wellbeing became evident with the Education Act (DfEE 1996) which stated that local authorities were responsible for the development of mental and personal skills for children and young people. In the following decade, an emphasis on early intervention led to the conclusion that schools and early years settings are the most appropriate institutions to promote welfare (DfEE 2001). A focus on educating the 'whole' child rather than merely raising achievement in academic learning was highlighted by the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (DfES 2005), where empathy and social skills were reckoned as key elements for excellence. Alongside this initiative, the introduction of personal social health and citizenship education (PSHCE)

in schools has revealed the vital role of personal development within the educational setting.

According to the British Psychological Society (2002), EPs have a valuable responsibility to promote the development of children and young people in order to ensure positive outcomes. Beyond their work with individual children and young people, EPs work with their parents, families and teachers. Moreover, EPs should recognise that all individuals, regardless of whether or not they are directly involved with them, have needs and could benefit from the EP practice. Although they differ in terms of the nature and level of their needs, the positive development of children and young people in the school community is the EPs' forethought. Lastly, EP practice can be used, in line with the UK Government's guidelines, to narrow the gap between vulnerable populations and others (DCSF 2009).

Strength-based interventions

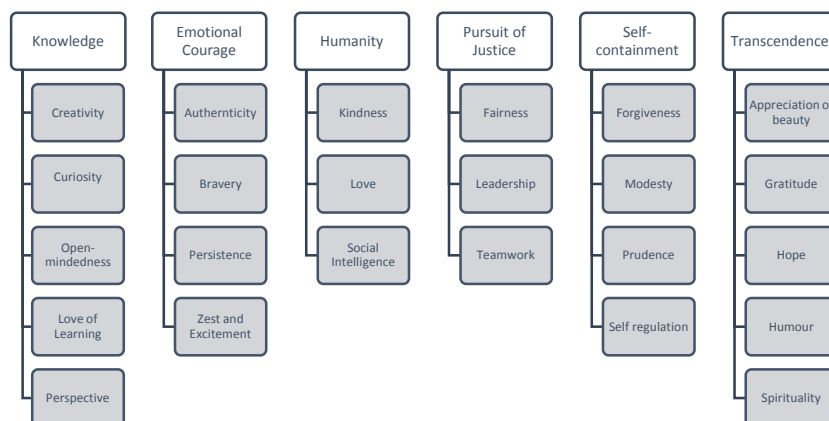
This section presents several initiatives from prominent researchers that aimed to design and use strength-based intervention programmes. These programmes are usually based on an initial assessment of the person's strengths, and then proceed to offer guidance as to how to use, develop or discover more strengths relevant to the ones identified. As outlined by Brendtro (2004), moving from a coercive to a strength-based approach involves shifting the focus from punishment and deprivation to nurturance and freedom. He identified three main domains where applications of strength-based approaches can be used and these include support at a physical, emotional and social level. To begin with, adults can physically provide protection to children and young people who might feel threatened or have had abusive experiences. A general sense of physical nurturance can contribute to their overall wellbeing and promote healthy social bonds, since children would connect to adults who meet their needs. Providing emotional support to children and youth allows empathy, trust and respect to permeate their social relationships. Moreover, building upon those strengths will help them develop a belief that they are valued by others. Finally, instead of using a socially coercive approach that would frustrate the growth needs of children, a method of support would enhance opportunities for belongingness, mastery, independence and generosity. Supportive relationships and positive values create a climate that life has purpose and meaning. Additionally, children and young people need to be provided with challenging activities that promote their

problem-solving skills, while they are given opportunities to make decisions and feel empowered about a level of control in their lives. However, building the aforementioned values is not an easy task. It requires professionals and communities to receive extensive training which would change the traditional punitive tactics and ensure consistency in all environments.

The Clifton Strengths Finder (Gallup 1999) and the StrengthsQuest (Clifton & Anderson 2002), two widely used tools, were designed for the identification and further use of strengths. They can provide valuable insights into individuals' strengths as well as offer guidance about how to utilise them. The Clifton Strengths Finder is a strengths and talents assessment tool, while the StrengthsQuest is a programme aiming to promote successful educational and personal life. American psychologist Don Clifton and his colleagues decided to start investigating what is 'right' within people and developed semi-structured interviews that were conducted with more than 2 million individuals. After a systematic review of the data, they were able to identify more than 400 types of talents. The first edition of the instrument contained 180 items which corresponded to 34 possible talent themes. Once these strengths are acknowledged and understood, individuals can be guided and can move through implications for educational and personal life. The StrengthsQuest is an instrument intended to help professionals working with students to incorporate their strength-based experiences in the classroom and in their everyday life. Children and young people can start developing and generalising their strengths by receiving guidance and knowledge on their talent themes.

Peterson & Seligman (2004) developed Values In Action, a scientifically based instrument which aims to examine wellbeing from a positive point of view. Their tool measures the 24 character strengths, which can also be divided into six broad divisions related to knowledge, emotional courage, humanity, pursuit of justice, self-containment and transcendence (Figure 1). Following this identification, a cultivation of strengths can commence in a creative and meticulous way. Individuals can be instructed to recognise and apply them on a daily basis. According to Peterson & Seligman (2004), individuals possess five 'signature strengths' out of the 24 and these should be frequently used. Identity and authenticity can be promoted through this practice which will bring better wellbeing outcomes to children and young people.

Figure 1: The six broad divisions of character strengths and the themes they include (Peterson & Seligman 2004).



A more recent programme called Strengths Gym was devised in the UK by Proctor & Fox Eades (2009). This tool is a curriculum-based approach for PSHCE and is designed to build strengths among schoolchildren. It is viewed as a collaborative approach between teachers and students, who learn together how to recognise, build upon and use their strengths. Instead of looking at risky behaviour and punitive practices, the Strengths Gym tries to enlighten individuals as to what they want and what will help them flourish. Each session examines one of the 24 strengths, as classified by Peterson & Seligman (2004), and includes a Strengths Builder and a Strengths Challenge exercise. These can be done individually, in small groups or at a whole class level. There is a degree of freedom in the activities that could be used and the instructor can choose according to what is most suitable for the particular target group. Findings so far suggest that pupils who receive this intervention show improvement in their wellbeing (Proctor et al. 2011).

The effectiveness of strength-based intervention programmes

In the last two decades a considerable amount of research and literature relevant to strengths-based programmes for children and young people has accumulated. Although many of them are based on assessment tools, great interest has been shown in how to use the identified strengths for the students' benefit.

Studies conducted in educational institutions in Chicago by the Gallup researchers (Harter 1998) from 1995 to 1997 revealed that students who were informed about their talents at the beginning of the year achieved higher grades, were late less frequently and had fewer days' absence compared to a control group. Moreover, Williamson (2002) compared first-time college students who received Strengths Finder training with a control group and concluded that the study group performed better in the end of the semester while simultaneously the long-term retention for the first group appeared to be higher than for the second group when measured one semester later.

In a pilot study held in a private primary school in Sydney (Madden et al. 2011), 38 boys aged 10–11 participated in a strengths-coaching programme aiming to promote engagement and hope. The pupils were screened prior to the coaching programme using the Beck Youth Inventory (Beck et al. 2005) and the Values In Action (VIA) Strengths Inventory for Youth (Peterson & Seligman 2004). The sessions were run by a teacher-coach who held relevant qualifications and conducted eight sessions. The programme comprised three stages. The first of these included an awareness of how the strengths identified by the VIA are used by the pupils already. In the second part, the teacher-coach encouraged the boys to use their strengths in a specific goal of their choice. Lastly, individual and systematic coaching was provided to the pupils on how to generalise the use their strengths in a variety of steps of the self-regulation cycle. The quantitative and qualitative results (the latter were obtained by the teacher-coach) revealed a significant increase in the levels of both engagement and hope for the boys. However, a number of limitations are present in this study. In particular, there was no control group, and no longitudinal measurement took place in order to check the long-term effects. Finally, the fact that the programme was run by a teacher may have affected the pupils, who may have believed that there was an expectation of progress.

Research in the UK (Proctor et al. 2011) used a sample of 319 students aged 12–14, from schools located in the Channel Islands and in Cheshire. The Strengths Gym programme was used as part of the school curriculum and had three main targets: to develop already existing strengths, to teach new strengths and to help pupils identify strengths in other individuals. The most salient finding of this study was that the Strengths Gym participants had higher life satisfaction than the control group, when controlling for baseline life satisfaction, age, gender, school and year group. Moreover, there were no statistically significant differences for the levels of self-esteem, positive affect and negative affect between the two groups. However, this study displayed some important limitations, such as assigning the participants to either group based on convenience and using solely self-report measures to assess the outcomes.

Zyromski et al. (2008) used an online intervention to develop the strengths of students from ethnic minority backgrounds. The participants were 139 pupils aged 10–12, 76% of whom were from American-Indian backgrounds. The qualitative analysis revealed that the intervention promoted the identification of personal strengths and environmental aspects which could enhance positive development, while simultaneously improving academic success. The themes expressed by students revolved around working hard, having a positive mindset and 'us[ing] good listening skills', all of which were acknowledged as key to academic success.

Day-Vines & Terriquez (2008) published an article presenting a strength-based initiative at an urban high school in California. It was targeted at African-American and Latino male students and aimed to diminish their high suspension and expulsion rates. Using the strengths-based school counselling framework, devised by Galassi & Akos (2007), 100 young people were allocated to two groups and composed a school committee that was responsible for discussing disciplinary issues. With adult help, they were encouraged to develop their accountability, leadership, resiliency, self-management and social competence, leading to an impressive 75% reduction of suspensions in the school.

Three studies utilised the Clifton Strengths Finder (Gallup 1999) and StrengthsQuest (Clifton & Anderson 2002) programmes to investigate how strength-based input would affect wellbeing and learning variables. Gillum's (2005) study examined the effect of strengths teaching on students who underperformed in maths. The sample consisted of first-year high school students (N=103) from four different classes. One class received strengths assessment, the second received strengths instruction, another received both and the control group was not exposed to any strengths approach. The study used a mixed methods design in order to reveal the effectiveness of each treatment and the students' perceptions of their strengths. The findings revealed that the group that received strengths-instruction intervention displayed greater benefits and that they actually appeared to have long-term retention of their strengths. A very interesting finding was that students in this group also seemed to put in more effort and said that they would generalise the use of strengths in other areas beyond the classroom. Limitations relevant to this study include the small sample sizes and the lack of random assignment in the groups. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that specific strengths guidance enhances effort in underperforming students.

The second research was carried out by Austin (2005). In a study comparing a strength-based and a traditional education programme, he used ninth-grade (14–15 years old) health education students (N=255) who were randomly assigned to the two learning conditions for a period of six weeks. His aim was to investigate the effect of the two different curriculums in a number of different variables including motivation, positive risk-taking, efficacy and achievement scores. The findings confirmed that students exposed to strength-based teaching were more intrinsically motivated and would take more positive academic risks. However, extrinsic motivation, achievement and expectancy levels did not differ between the two groups. The most significant limitation in this study was the assignment of the teachers to the class sessions. More specifically, teachers used in the strength-based approach were chosen because of their relationship with the students and for their caring nature, whereas the control group was taught by educators who were highly qualified to teach the course. It thus becomes obvious that the effect of the teaching style may have caused significant bias in the results of the study.

Turner (2004) assessed first-year high school students' grades, lateness in class and challenging behaviour before allocating them to weekly strength-based sessions using the Clifton Strengths Finder and the StrengthsQuest. The control group received computer word-processing training for the same amount of time. Turner reported a significant grade improvement for the treatment group in comparison to the control group, and a great reduction in challenging behaviour events for the students who had received strength-based intervention. However, two important limitations are presented in this study: the lack of random assignment of the students in the two conditions and the greatly variant pedagogical approaches used between the groups.

Conclusions

Although there is still a great need for research in the area of strengths-based interventions, the evidence allows us to draw several conclusions and proceed to recommendations for practice. In terms of EPs, the programmes available and their evidence base highlight numerous implications for practice. To begin with, the fact that strength-based interventions can be used at different levels of groups can be very useful for EPs who are trying to tailor a particular approach to the needs of a school. Depending on the target group, whether this is individual children or a whole school intervention, these programmes can be adjusted and used accordingly. Additionally, the frequency of the sessions in the majority of the studies was weekly and the length of the treatment ranged from a few weeks to a few months. EPs could provide these sessions themselves or could train other professionals to integrate these sessions into the school day.

A very profound practical implication for EPs is that particular groups can benefit from strength-based approaches. According to studies that used students from ethnic minority backgrounds, academic performance as well as suspension rates can greatly improve after strengths-based education (Day-Vines & Terriquez 2008; Zyromskii et al. 2008;). Furthermore, great benefits were shown for underperforming students (Turner, 2004; Gillium, 2005) and students who are not adequately engaged with school work (Gillum 2005; Madden et al. 2011). Intrinsic motivation and punctuality also seemed to ameliorate from such programmes (Turner 2004; Austin 2005), providing significant foundations for more successful school life.

However, the aforementioned studies used upper-primary as well as secondary-aged young people, with no early years or lower primary school samples identified. The findings in the studies are collected through self-report interviews, teacher observations and records of progress, with no parent ratings reported nor any measurement of consistency between the teacher observations and the students' reports. The majority of the limitations involve a difficulty in randomly allocating groups in the experimental and the control conditions as well as a lack of impartial allocation of the instructors to each condition. Lastly, only one study included a follow-up measurement to explore the effectiveness of the intervention in the long term.

Overall, the underpinnings of strength-based philosophy have provided a radical opportunity to shift the focus from a deficit model to a more energy-driven way of teaching and educating. The emphasis on knowledge and techniques is an empowering element which can facilitate positive change to students, teachers, families and whole communities. It can also function as a transformational tool that the educator can use to create, examine and refine the resources found in humans. EPs can be the professionals who help to reveal the greatest talents in people, and using the school setting for this purpose could work positively for the academic engagement of pupils. Lastly, bringing an optimistic and vibrant nuance to the interactions between EPs and their clients can develop better relationships that would celebrate individual characteristics. As taught by a Chinese philosopher more than two thousand years ago:

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say 'We have done this ourselves'. (Lao Tzu, 550 BC).

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