

Beyond a deficit model of strengths training in schools: Teaching targeted strength use to gifted students

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Justine Bates-Krakoff and Robert E McGrath

Fairleigh Dickinson University, USA

Karen Graves and Lynn Ochs

Mayerson Academy, USA

Abstract

Prior literature on the use of character strengths suggests that both deficiencies and excesses in the use of strengths can be problematic. While most school-based training in character strengths tends to focus on the former issue, an example is provided of a school-based program offered by the Mayerson Academy in partnership with the VIA Institute on Character that does not focus on deficiency but rather celebrates enhancing one's own personal key strengths. This program, entitled *Thriving Learning Communities*, will be implemented in 42 Cincinnati public schools this year. It aims to motivate students, as well as educators, to perform at their highest levels through encouraging increased use of character strengths. We provide an overview of the program and discuss how it may be modified by the teacher to offer a more nuanced perspective on character strengths within a gifted student population. Specifically, within a gifted classroom setting, we discuss ways in which educators can encourage gifted students to understand the importance of balancing their strengths and effectively matching their use of strengths to the situation. In addition to focusing on the use of signature or top strengths, we suggest a program that would aid gifted students in deciphering when it is most and least appropriate to use top strengths, through a dial-up/dial-down framework for targeted strength use.

Corresponding author:

Justine Bates-Krakoff, School of Psychology, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ 07666, USA.
Email: justineb@student.fdu.edu

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Many youths face significant social and emotional challenges that inhibit their success both inside and outside of the classroom (Greenberg et al., 2003). Because children in the United States spend thousands of hours in school over the course of their development, it is important for schools to attend to student social and emotional health, in addition to academic performance, in order to promote overall student success (Benningfield and Stephan, 2015). Research has shown that a positive school environment is directly linked to well-being, engagement at school, and academic performance, and can help bolster social and emotional skills (Cohen, 2006; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Dynarski et al., 2008; Marin and Brown, 2008; Meece et al., 2006; Ryan and Patrick, 2001). In addition, students in a positive school climate have shown significantly lower rates of emotional distress, violence, delinquency, substance abuse, and sexual activity (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2008).

A particularly important component in recent efforts to develop a positive school environments has been a growing interest in social and emotional learning in students (SEL; CASEL FAQ, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). SEL is a process through which youths can acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. In a review of educational research findings, Hoffman (2009) found a small but growing body of evaluation literature on SEL programs that shows improved outcomes in a variety of areas, including teacher feelings of improved competence in the classroom, improved student behavior as measured by teacher's assessments, and drops in discipline referrals, and increases in student academic achievement (Hoffman, 2009). Findings from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs suggested that they did positively contribute to healthy development of children, including mental, emotional, and behavioral health, leading to the suggestion that the SEL approach be incorporated into standard educational practice (Durlak et al., 2011). Similarly, the Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health highlighted the importance of SEL for optimal child development and school performance. Specifically, it asserted that mental health is a critical component of children's learning and general health and that fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child development must be a national priority (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). However, independent and systematic evaluations of many SEL programs are lacking, and reviews examining existing studies point to flaws in much of the evaluation research, including a lack of experimental design and self-commissioned and funded evaluations (Hoffman, 2009). This suggests that more rigorous research in this area is necessary in order to fully understand the implications of SEL programs.

In recent years, character development programs have become a popular approach to enhancing SEL (Benninga, et al., 2003; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz and Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1991; Lickona, 1993). The main goal of character education programs is to

attempt to help schools develop ethical and prosocial motivations and competencies in students (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Character can be defined as the complex set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable an individual to act as a moral agent (Berkowitz and Bier, 2005). Commonalities often seen in character education programs include the promotion of core ethical values within the school, staff modeling, classroom and school focus on caring, and schoolwide opportunities for students to practice moral action (Benninga et al., 2003). Character education, then, focuses on the development of the complete person, not solely the academic student. These programs attempt to promote the development of virtue, moral values, and moral agency in youth (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Character education largely has been viewed as a practice rather than a science (Berkowitz, 2002). Therefore, research exploring character education is needed to gain a better understanding of its implications. The first portion of this article will use a relatively recently developed character strengths-based classroom intervention program, called Thriving Learning Communities (TLC), as an example of innovative approaches to improving student social and emotional competencies in the schools.

TLC is a research-based approach to improving students' social and emotional competencies through the cultivation of personal character strengths (CASEL FAQ, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Peterson and Park, 2009; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Its broad goals are to motivate youths to "be their best selves," and to perform at their highest levels (Peterson and Park, 2009). TLC is a form of character education that focuses on celebrating and enhancing one's own personal key strengths rather than prescribing strengths to be learned or correcting deficiencies in specific strengths. Target outcomes of this program include promoting SEL, embedding SEL activities in day-to-day instruction, and increasing awareness of individual strengths. Because strengths-based school programs that support students practicing a variety of strengths have been shown to be associated with improved social skills (Peterson and Park, 2009), expected outcomes include improved life satisfaction, positive relationships, and improved school climate (CASEL FAQ, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Peterson and Park, 2009; Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

- According to the Thriving Communities Final Evaluation Report (July, 2015), TLC encompasses the following elements:
- Rather than prescribing rigid techniques for developing positive character, the TLC approach is more flexible in nature and provides schools with the opportunity to develop their own implementation plan based on their needs and resources and to determine how their current initiatives could be supported by the program.
- TLC includes a series of interactive workshops and tools designed to help schools develop a character strengths-based approach to the development of SEL skills in students.
- The TLC program aims to include competencies of character education and teaches students to use psychological characteristics and character strengths to improve their moral and prosocial awareness.

TLC nurtures the development of character through the development of five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that are integral to

the development of social and emotional learning (CASEL, Safe and Sound, 2005; Elias et al., 1997).

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.
- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- **Responsible decision making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

The TLC program currently being implemented is a partnership between three organizations: the Mayerson Academy, the VIA Institute on Character, and Happify. The Mayerson Academy is a nonprofit corporation deeply committed to energizing learners of all ages through creative, customized services and extraordinary learning experiences that bring out the best in people. The Academy was developed as a joint venture between the Cincinnati Public School District and local business leaders, with the intent of improving the quality of the city's public schools. The majority of the Academy's programs historically have been geared toward professional development for educators, both face to face and online. They now offer design, planning, and consultation services to support change processes, strategic planning, team, and organizational retreats.

The VIA Institute on Character is a nonprofit dedicated to the science of character strengths. A primary goal of the VIA is to encourage the expression of six social and moral virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence; Dahlsgaard et al., 2005) by supporting individuals in the use of character strengths, or positive traits that reflect the virtues through patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Character strengths have been defined as the psychological elements that allow individuals to display virtues or human goodness (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Through a lengthy research process, the VIA Institute has identified 24 key strengths that it suggests are universally valued, can be strengthened over time, and appear as a unique constellation within each individual (Peterson, 2006; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This combination of 24 key character strengths reflecting six social virtues is referred to as the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues.

Although people vary in their tendency to demonstrate the various strengths, it is hypothesized that each person can express any of the 24 character strengths in the VIA Classification depending on the situation. However, some strengths are easier and more natural for the individual to express, and these are referred to as the individual's signature strengths. Other strengths are believed to arise in particular situations where they are needed, and so are expressed to a lesser degree or with lower frequency. Character is not viewed as a fixed state but rather as a dynamic construct. Research on the use of the 24 character strengths has found that using one's strengths has a positive and long-lasting impact on happiness; for a literature review, see <http://www.viacharacter.org//Research-Findings>.

Happify is a for-profit gaming platform that was developed with the intent of developing online or app-based activities that increase personal happiness. Happify games are based on hundreds of studies and opinion pieces on strategies for increasing motivation, engagement, self-esteem, resilience, and resourcefulness; for a literature review, see <http://my.happify.com/research>. In particular, Happify games aim to train the brain to overcome negative thoughts. Mayerson Academy consultants have partnered with Happify to create game experiences for students in grades 5–8 designed to support the development of social and emotional learning through the lens of character strengths. The student tracks in the online Happify platform were added to the in-class TLC program in an attempt to accelerate the SEL process.

Program overview

The TLC program consists of two components. The first, *Thriving Teacher*, is a workshop for teachers who will participate in the classroom experience, with the goal of applying the character strengths to teacher learning and performance. The *Thriving Teacher* workshop begins by instructing educators about the 24 character strengths and includes a review of one's own character strengths as identified through the VIA Inventory of Strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), a measure of the 24 character strengths. Educators are made aware of how each individual's unique combination of strengths shapes their relationships, communications, and choices in life. Participants are also encouraged to recognize strengths in their colleagues.

Teachers also learn how they can use their unique constellation of strengths to optimize their work in the classroom. This process involves exploring what is possible through character strengths, activating motivation by naming personal strengths, and applying personal strengths to enhance teaching and learning. Teachers explore the possible benefits and opportunities for engaging their character strengths in the classroom and within the broader school environment.

The second component, *Thriving Classroom*, is intended to bring character strengths to student learning. Through modeling and practice, teachers help to develop students' social and emotional competencies and build a strengths-based community in their classrooms. For each unit of thriving classroom, approximately four character strengths are highlighted that can help students with the learning of that social and emotional competency. Thirteen strengths are emphasized in 5th and 6th grade, and 15 are covered in 7th and 8th grade, with an overlap of four strengths: hope, perseverance, teamwork,

and bravery. All 24 strengths are covered, ultimately, across the two guides, and the program encourage students to “dial up” and utilize all their strengths in the classroom. This process involves encouraging student engagement in strengths, activating motivation by teaching to strengths, and accelerating learning by helping students to utilize their strengths. A strengths-based approach is used in TLC to provide a framework for students and teachers to understand and recognize what is best in themselves and others. Within the context of positive character, the goal of this program is to help students to discover and understand their unique constellations of character strengths. Each unit in the *Thriving Classroom Curriculum Guide* addresses four of the five core components of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills. Decision-making, the fifth component typically found in SEL programs, is woven into activities throughout the curriculum (CASEL FAQ, 2015).

In unit 1, *self-awareness*, activities promote the acquisition of skills required for students to advance self-understanding and how their thoughts and emotions influence behavior. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and developing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism. In this unit, students also gain a basic understanding of the 24 character strengths and begin making predictions about the ones they think they use most often. They spend time “strength spotting,” increasing their understanding of how different strengths can “reveal themselves” in classmates and family members. Through participation in this set of activities, students cultivate a strengths-based vocabulary while developing an understanding of the character strengths that exist in themselves and others. This module provides students with an understanding of how they can use their strengths every day and learn to identify and communicate more clearly about their thoughts and feelings. This module focuses particularly on the strengths of kindness, hope, gratitude, and bravery.

In unit 2, *self-management*, students learn activities that address the SEL tasks of regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; learning to cope with stress; and acquiring goal-setting skills. Through participation in this set of activities and experiences, students can manage and express feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in more constructive ways. They are instructed to use personal strengths to cope with problems and stress and to make decisions and set goals. They also focus on developing an understanding of the strengths of self-control, honesty, perseverance, and love of learning.

In unit 3, *social awareness*, students partake in activities that focus on understanding social and cultural norms, taking the perspectives of others, and respecting and empathizing with others. Through participation in these experiences, students learn to use their own strengths to recognize social cues, deepen compassion, and enhance relationships. They are taught to accept differences in others and cultivate constructive relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds and respond with empathy to others in difficult situations. This unit also focuses on the strengths of fairness, social intelligence, and curiosity.

In unit 4, *relationship skills*, addresses elements of building relationship skills and provides strategies for promoting students’ competency in resolving interpersonal conflicts and building support systems. Through activities provided in this unit, teachers help guide their students improve decision-making and problem-solving skills. Through participation in these activities, students learn to use effective social skills to build

friendships and interact successfully with others and communicate their thoughts and feelings more clearly. They are educated on the responsibilities involved in being a family member, a friend, and a student while identifying the personal support systems that help them meet these responsibilities. Strengths highlighted in this unit include gratitude, humor, and teamwork to enhance important relationships.

In the fall of 2014, the Cincinnati Board of Education implemented the Mayerson Academy TLC curriculum in five schools serving 5th and 6th grade. Qualitative evaluation resulted in the conclusion that the program was effective at achieving its goals. Educators increased their knowledge and skills, learning objectives were met, workshop sessions were well received, and students' social-emotional competencies improved over the course of the program. Participants provided constructive feedback for improving future implementation of the program, emphasizing improvements in program implementation and in the Happify platform. Based on results and the district's current emphasis on the importance of SEL, the program was expanded to all 42 middle schools starting in September 2015.

Gifted education

The estimated three million gifted students in US classrooms (National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 2011) create distinctive challenges and opportunities for character education. For this discussion, we will set aside the most basic challenges in education for the gifted, for example, the lack of a consistent definition and the multidimensional nature of giftedness (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009; Cross, 2013; Reis and Renzulli, 2010; Subotnik, et al., 2011). Assuming that an adequate procedure for the identification of the gifted is feasible, the issue of interest is how programs such as TLC can and should be improved to challenge gifted students who are often at risk of becoming unmotivated (Cross, 2013).

Although various forms of character education have been gaining popularity in the United States (Sutton, 2009), the tendency in relation to specific student populations has been to focus on disadvantaged students, with very little emphasis on character education for gifted children (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Both historically, and still today, the primary focus in gifted education has been directed at academic involvement (Subotnik et al., 2011). This neglect has its potential costs. Research suggests that in order for gifted children to reach their full potential, social, and emotional aspects of giftedness must also be developed (Lovecky, 1992), and giftedness must be cultivated through teaching in specific skills (Subotnik et al., 2011).

According to Berkowitz and Hoppe (2009), many of the characteristics that gifted children demonstrate can make them particularly open to character development if it is effectively designed to meet their needs. These characteristics include being justice oriented, altruistic, idealistic, socially precocious, energetic, and empathetic. Because of their advanced intellectual abilities, gifted students are often more mature than the typical student in their capacity to evaluate moral issues (Tirri, 2011). As a result, pedagogies that focus specifically on issues of ethics and morality can be particularly useful when working with gifted students (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Such a focus is

consistent with assertions that gifted education should be concerned with responsible membership in the larger community (Subotnik, et al., 2011).

Research on social and emotional learning in gifted students suggests that gifted students have unique social and emotional needs as the result of their tendencies toward introversion, self-criticality, and anxiety over isolation resulting from their distinctive status (Jung and Gross, 2014; Plucker and Callahan, 2014). Similarly, Blackburn and Erickson (1986) suggested that although gifted students have basic emotional needs similar to those of all students, they must approach the development of strategies for fulfilling those needs from a more advanced level. In general, gifted children are thought to live in an asymmetrical relationship with other youths: while more intellectually developed than their same age peers, they may be less mature emotionally than those older individuals who are their intellectual equals (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Research has suggested that these difficulties can translate into difficulties gaining peer acceptance and with cultivating long-lasting friendships (Jung and Gross, 2014). Thus, an advanced character development program, which also contributes to social and emotional competence, could be beneficial with gifted students.

The question this raises is what an advanced character development program would entail. One potentially important component emerges from literature on the optimally effective use of character strengths and virtues. Intuitively, it is easy to see the case for the problem of strengths underuse. If certain concepts are socially acknowledged strengths, then the failure to act in ways consistent with those concepts suggests weakness. In fact, from a strengths perspective, existing character education programs can be conceptualized largely in terms of encouraging the increased recognition and use of certain types of strengths (Lopez and Louis, 2009). The implication is that there is a tendency to underuse strengths that character education is intended to correct. It should be noted that while most character education approaches have tried to instill societal norms and expectations, a positive psychology-based approach, such as TLC, seeks to help individuals identify and engage their personal character strengths, thereby promoting well-being (Linkins et al., 2015). Evidence suggests, however, that strengths and virtues largely associated with optimal well-being and performance can undermine these positive outcomes if used at levels that are too high (Grant and Shwartz, 2011). The relationship between strength use and the effectiveness of one's actions has been conceptualized as an inverted-U, with maximal effectiveness at an intermediate level of strengths use. This proposition has been repeated many times in the context of positive psychology (Carter et al., 2013; Fowers, 2008; Kaiser and Overfield 2011; Peterson, 2006; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2006). What this implies is that, when a strength is overused, which includes using it without consideration of contexts, it is no longer a strength. The concept of strengths overuse may be particularly important to consider in the context of gifted education, as high-ability youth are often perfectionistic, which can lead to the development of excessive focus in their work even when it becomes detrimental to their well-being (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). This disposition to perform perfectly, combined with persistence in areas of interest, then, may potentially lead to the overuse of strengths with gifted students. Therefore, targeted training is of the utmost importance with this population, in order to encourage the optimal use of strengths. For example, Berkowitz and Hoppe (2009) explained that gifted students are often highly self-

confident, grasp leadership roles, and are energetic. If overused, however, these positive qualities have the potential to become detrimental to gifted children. To further examine this point, Niemiec (2014) discussed some principles that illustrate how and when strengths may be overused, becoming harmful rather than helpful:

- Overuse varies by both the individual's expression (e.g. if 10 people try to express creativity at a level of 5 out of 10, the manifestation will be different for each person) and the context (e.g. expressing zest at a level of 8 out of 10 at a funeral setting is likely an inappropriate and overuse of zest, whereas this same level at a baseball game would likely be appropriate). Thus, one should strive for balance and contextual fit.
- It is more likely that individuals will overuse their signature strengths than other character strengths because signature strengths are the easiest to express and are often done so automatically with a high level of passion.
- Overuse may be identified when a strength begins to negatively affect oneself (e.g. persevering so much that it affects one's health) or others (e.g. being so zealous or energetic that it becomes annoying).
- Overuse can be managed by bringing forth other strengths. This is framed as "bringing balance" to overuse. For example, someone who regularly uses humility to take others' perspectives rather than exerting control, yet also regularly uses bravery to bring balance to situations where being too humble would not be the best choice for the highest good.

In his classic reference on the nature of virtue, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bartlett and Collins, 2007), Aristotle proposed—though the principle had been stated previously by others—that virtuous action represented some middle way between deficiency and excess, a concept now frequently referred to as the *golden mean*. Similar statements have been made about character and signature strengths, specifically, that in some situations, it is possible that individuals can overuse or underuse any of the 24 character strengths, thus rendering them less effective (Niemiec, 2014). Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) highlighted the need for wisdom to discern how different strengths may be most effective in different contexts. In situations where strengths overuse or underuse may render them less than optimal, Niemiec (2014) suggested viewing each character strength along a continuum in terms of how useful it may be in a given situation. The center of the continuum is an optimal expression of the strength, and the ends represent increasing degrees of overuse and underuse. The goal is to use character strengths in a "targeted" manner, where the target is understood as some central point in the continuum. This involves not only the wisdom to understand how to use targeted strengths but also when, or in which specific contexts, to increase or decrease their use.

Character education for the gifted must meet their level of capabilities if they are to be successful (Callahan et al., 2015; Reis and Renzulli, 2010). Research suggests that the utilization of strategies such as curriculum enhancement or modification has resulted in higher achievement for gifted students (Reis and Renzulli, 2010). These curricular modifications include approaches such as increasing the depth and complexity of ideas

presented, adding greater abstractness and ambiguity to the content, calling on more open-ended problem-solving, and encouraging the use of critical thinking skills beyond grade level (Callahan et al., 2015). We would propose that a parallel enhancement in the field of a positive psychology-based approach to character education for the gifted would be a focus on the dangers of overuse in addition to the traditional focus on the identification and increased use of character strengths. Such lessons, which could be confusing or too complex for less advantaged students, create the possibility of character education curricula that are more nuanced and subtle in their message, and therefore more engaging to the gifted student. We suggest that gifted students in particular can benefit from a character education program that focuses specifically on optimal strength use. This would involve not only identifying top strengths and how to cultivate them but also how to detect signals indicating the value of dialing them up or dialing them down in a controlled manner.

As mentioned earlier, each of the four curriculum units in the TLC program includes a basic description of the strengths introduced in that unit, as well as behaviors one may see when someone is using the strength. Within each unit, educators are instructed to engage their classes in activities that aid in introducing the character strengths to students. One activity referenced in the Thriving Classroom Curriculum Guide includes the introduction of character strengths through an engaging video. After the video, teachers are instructed to ask students to brainstorm a list of all the strengths they saw or heard the character use. Probing questions used to deepen students thinking include:

- What were you thinking as you saw these strengths being used?
- Have you ever seen someone using these strengths?
- Have you ever used these strengths? If so, how did you feel during and after using those strengths?

For gifted students, an additional element may be added to this basic definition and behavioral list. Specifically, in the context of a “targeted use curriculum,” the goal would be not only to define a strength and list the positive behaviors associated but also to be able to identify potential contexts where strengths may be overused and describe how overuse could occur. Examples can be drawn from movies, books, television, or personal or in vivo situations. Niemiec (2014) provided some questions that may be used to deepen the dialogue on strengths overuse with a gifted student population:

- At what point does the character’s/student’s strength become overused or imbalanced?
- Name examples in which the character/student finds the optimal circumstance for strength expression.
- In what ways do you similarly overuse your strengths?
- How does this create difficulty for you or others?
- Grant and Schwartz (2011) similarly proposed three important questions that may be beneficial in helping gifted students utilize targeted strengths:
 - How much of a given strength is too much?
 - Why does the focal strength or virtue have negative effects?
 - When, or in what context, does the focal strength or virtue have negative effects?

After asking these question, gifted students can be given the opportunity to identify when to increase or decrease the use of their character strengths. For example, gifted children are often perceived as overly energetic and can become unruly if not challenged with appropriate work and stimulation (Lovecky, 1992). Therefore, a gifted child who identifies zest as a signature character strength would have the opportunity to identify situations in which being energetic, or full of zest, could be helpful, and when it might be detrimental. This is important as research suggests that at high levels, zest may also have negative effects on work success and physical health (Grant and Schwartz, 2011).

Another activity referenced in the Thriving Curriculum Guide, intended to introduce character strengths to students, involves dividing the class into four groups and assigning each group six character strengths to study and then share with classmates through a short performance. Each group is instructed to take a turn acting out one of the strengths from their list while the rest of the class guesses the strength. The activity is continued until all 24 character strengths have been demonstrated.

The use of interactive activities can be particularly suited for gifted children who become bored with traditional didactic lessons (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). With a gifted student population, instructions could be expanded to include acting out the over-use of strengths. For example, module 1 of TLC introduced the character strength of kindness, which is defined as attitudes and behaviors that are marked by a pleasant temperament and concern for others. In this self-awareness unit, the strength of kindness is introduced both from the standpoint of self-compassion and from the standpoint of being kind to others. Students are taught that being kind to others has been linked to benefits in health, well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction.

Research suggests, however, that at very high levels, elements of kindness such as extreme volunteerism are predictive of lower psychological well-being because of increased overload and reduced time and energy available for other meaningful activities (Grant and Schwartz, 2011). Gifted students could be asked not only to act out the strength of kindness but also act out a time in which kindness may be detrimental. The TLC module describes that as students work on using the strength of kindness, they also will be developing their ability to show empathy and sympathy. Because most gifted children are thought to be socially sensitive and empathic (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009), it could be very important for this population to understand when this positive characteristic can actually work against them, as evidence also suggests that very high levels of empathy can be emotionally aversive and undermine prosocial behavior (Grant and Schwartz, 2011).

In module 2 of unit 3 in TLC, students explore the strength of fairness as a means of widening their perspective about peers and making balanced decisions about them. They are informed that a person who has fairness as a top strength does not let personal feelings affect their decisions about other people. This module appears to be especially relevant for gifted children, as they frequently are interested in issues of social justice and fairness (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Because gifted students have been shown to be superior in moral judgment when compared to average-ability students (Tirri, 2011), encouraging the discussion of issues of right and wrong, social injustice, and fairness on a more advanced level could enrich the targeted strength curriculum, as these are topics that typically of natural interest with gifted students (Berkowitz and

Hoppe, 2009). In order to teach fairness in the current Thriving Classroom Curriculum Guide, groups of students are asked to think about a policy or rule at school that they think could be fairer. Once they have chosen a rule or policy, they are instructed to write down why they think the rule was developed in the first place. Then, each group is asked to try to come to consensus about the reasons they feel it is unfair, and rewrite the rule or policy to make it fairer. With gifted students, this exercise could be made more advanced. Specifically, Berkowitz and Hoppe (2009) suggested that opportunities for “grappling” in peer groups with moral problems and issues could enrich the overall experience of understanding fairness. Therefore, rather than having groups come to a consensus about fairness, gifted students would likely benefit from a debate on the moral issues underlying the rule. In addition, the topic of discussion could be expanded from policies and rules within the school, to national or governmental policies.

Teamwork is one of the strengths highlighted in unit 4 of TLC. Within this unit, students are taught that people who have teamwork as a top strength excel as members of groups by doing their share and working toward the success of the entire group. They learn that good team players see value in the group’s goals and purposes, even if they are different from their own. Students learn that teamwork is linked to values such as openness and cooperation, values that support developing and maintaining relationships. Research suggests, however, that the inverted-U shaped also applies to the relationship between task conflicts and team innovation, such that teams without conflict had little reason to exchange information, which prevented them from deeply processing and developing novel ideas (Grant and Schwartz, 2011). De Dreu (2006) suggests that this is the result of the overuse of loyalty, which may lead individuals to avoid conflict, therefore disrupting creativity and innovation. Similar conclusions can be drawn about leadership. Currently, this character strength is a focus in the 7th and 8th, but not 5th and 6th grade TLC program, but may be an important strength to include for gifted students in earlier grades. Gifted students are often highly self-confident and grasp leadership roles, making them a natural fit to engage in roles of leadership, in and out of school (Berkowitz and Hoppe, 2009). Grant and Schwartz (2011) suggest an inverted-U-shaped relationship can be observed between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness. Thus, at high levels, assertive leadership can harm social outcomes by undermining the quality of interpersonal relationships. Activities that teach the character strengths of teamwork and leadership, then, lend themselves nicely to a “targeted strength curriculum.”

To provide another example of how the current curriculum may be modified, consider an example with the character strength of perseverance. In the current Thriving Classroom Curriculum Guide, students are instructed to watch a video clip that shows the use of perseverance. After students watch the clip, the educator is instructed to continue with a discussion using questions such as:

- What does it mean to “persevere”?
- How was perseverance important to the character?
- What times have you really stayed with something even though you wanted to quit?
- In what ways will you use perseverance this week?

Research has shown, however, that very high levels of persistence may undermine psychological and physical well-being by preventing individuals from disengaging from goals at appropriate times (Grant and Schwartz, 2011). In a modified curriculum, the video clip and subsequent questions would give gifted students the opportunity to understand when to dial up or dial down their strength of perseverance in order to achieve optimal usefulness. Additional questions could include those attributed Niemiec (2014) above.

Conclusions

Character education programs such as TLC are admirably suited to the task of addressing the very important issue of character development in the schools. Through a curriculum for the enhancement of character strengths that emphasizes the exploration of personal strengths and the strengths of peers, as well as develop social and emotional competencies, TLC and similar programs provide both general structure for the instructor on encouraging character development in the student body as a whole, and guidelines for individualizing the focus so that different students can develop a better sense of their signature strengths, and can use those and other strengths more effectively. What we have suggested in this article is that that combination of global and individual framework can be expanded in light of meaningful subpopulations within the school. There is particular opportunity for such expansion in the context of gifted children, where both the challenges and the opportunities are so great. Through the development of exercises focusing on the targeted use of strengths, a character education curriculum can introduce gifted students to a more nuanced understanding of character strengths as tools for effective functioning. It provides an enriched perspective in which the complexity of human interactions can be more thoroughly explored, and the gifted student can be challenged and encouraged to grow.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author biographies

Justine Bates-Krakoff obtained a BA in psychology from Rutgers University in 2009 and a MS in mental health counseling from Pace University in 2012. She is currently a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and is conducting research under the mentorship of Dr. Robert McGrath. In his positive psychology laboratory, current projects include consulting for the VIA institute on character to update current measures, as well as a meta-analytic review of positive psychology interventions.

Robert McGrath, PhD, received his PhD from Auburn University in 1984. He is a Professor in the School of Psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University, a Senior Scientist for the VIA Institute on Character, and Director of Integrated Care for the Underserved of Northeastern New Jersey. He has also authored over 250 presentations and publications.

Karen Graves, PhD received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Ohio University. She currently is the Learning and Engagement Designer at Mayerson Academy where she is instrumental in infusing character strengths language into classroom curriculum.

Lynn Ochs, MEd, received her undergrad degree from the University of Illinois and a Master's in Educational Administration from University of Houston – Clear Lake. She currently serves as the Senior Learning Designer at Mayerson Academy, responsible for the development and delivery of the Thriving Learning Communities program in schools.