

Chapter 6

Strengths-Based Approaches in the Classroom and Staffroom

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Introduction¹

As one of the founding researchers in the field of positive psychology, the application of Christopher Peterson’s substantial research has contributed to the rapid growth of positive education—or the application of positive psychology concepts and interventions in educational settings (Green et al. 2011; Rusk and Waters (2014)). The immediate resonance felt by many teachers towards taking a strengths-based approach is testament to the importance of Peterson’s empirical contribution in helping us to understand what it means to develop young people in positive ways. Clonan et al. (2004) recognized this and argued, “Schools serve as the nexus between the movement in positive psychology searching to promote positive human development and the institutions that could serve as the vehicle for this development” (p. 101).

¹ Professor Christopher Peterson died suddenly in 2013. We kept him informed of developments at St Peter’s College, Adelaide. He was always supportive and delighted to hear about the creativity of the staff and students. This Chapter is our way of capturing the impact of Chris’s research on our community for the better. It is with much gratitude we dedicate this Chapter to his memory.

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This chapter focuses upon two of Peterson's contributions, enabling institutions and strengths, as applied to schools. Specifically, we write from a practitioner lens and present a case showing the strengths-based approaches, informed by Peterson's work, used at one of Australia's leading independent schools, St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia.

We outline the rationales behind enabling institutions and strengths-based approaches, before exploring the ways in which these ideas have been used to shift classroom practice and staffroom culture at St Peter's College. We conclude with further, general ideas for how schools can become enabling institutions and adopt strengths-based approaches. We hope that the value of this chapter will encourage other schools to adopt strengths into their pedagogy and practice.

Schools as Enabling Institutions

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) foundational paper on positive psychology called for the promotion of "positive institutions" (p. 5) defined as "institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic" (p. 5). As with his peers, Peterson (2006) called for positive psychology to be applied to institutions in what he termed as 'enabling institutions'. In his conceptualization of an enabling institution, he argued that virtues should be present not only *within* the individual members of an institution but at the *collective level* so that the institution itself has 'moral character' which contributes to the goals of the institution, the fulfilment of institutional members and the betterment of the community. In his discussion of enabling institutions, Peterson (2006) identified the need for 'The Good School' (p. 284): a school that fosters academic excellence whilst contributing to moral fulfilment. Specifically, he argues that the intent of schools must include "much more than the teaching of multiplication and verb conjugation" (p. 284) and that schools must have moral goals that guide its members to be caring, responsible and productive people in society.

While Peterson acknowledged the importance of creating safe environments by embedding practices that reduce bullying, substance abuse and other unhealthy behaviours, he urged schools to go beyond this 'police department' mode (as he calls it) to put in place practices that build character, well-being and positive experiences. A positive psychology approach to mental health suggests that well-being at both the individual level and the institutional level extends along a spectrum from extremely negative to extremely positive (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), and the traditional approach of reducing negative elements of the institution (e.g. bullying) only meets half of the full spectrum of mental health (Andrews and Ben-Arieh 1999). Positive functioning is not simply surviving life by ameliorating negative conditions; it entails thriving physically, mentally, socially, and professionally. Clearly, negative outcomes should be monitored and reduced in schools but Peterson and Park (2003) aptly note, "If our interest is in the good life, we must look explicitly at indices of human thriving" (p. 144).

Along these lines, schools are starting to develop programs to promote the positive end of the well-being spectrum such as *The Positive Educational Practices Framework* (Noble and McGrath 2008), *The Values Education for Australian Schooling* program (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010), the *National School of Character Program* (Character Education Partnership), *YouCanDoit!* (Bernard and Walton 2011), and *Bounce Back!* (Noble 2003). Additionally, research coming out of The Centre for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the United States and the United Kingdom's The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, Social and Emotional Learning (SEAL) have developed programs to explicitly promote well-being of students and create school environments that enable young people to be inspired and empowered.

In addition to the policies above which are oriented at the student-level, if schools are to aspire to Peterson's ideal of an enabling institution, they need to support virtues and moral character in staff. After all, it is the school staff (teachers, administrators, assistants etc.) who create the foundation from which positive development of students is possible. At the staff level, we can apply Peterson's notion of 'The Good Workplace' (p. 286), which is a place of work that provides meaning and is characterized by a moral vision that is enacted in day-to-day practice. Peterson argued that a good workplace is one that places people "in jobs that allow them to do what they do best" (p. 289)

While teacher well-being has been a longstanding topic of research interest, Calabrese et al. (2010) and Hoy and Tarter (2011) argue that research has focused on examining problems and distress more so than it has focused on building strengths and well-being. For example, three decades of research has been devoted to the study of teacher stress (Chaplain 2008; Howard and Johnson 2004). Other prominent topics of study related to teacher well-being include anxiety, depression, frustration, and burnout (Chan 2011; Farber 1999; Kyriacou 2001; Schonfeld 1992). However, growing number of researchers are calling for the application of strengths-based approaches to staff development and well-being (Dickerson and Helm-Stevens 2011; Doveston and Keenaghan 2006; Willoughby and Tosey 2007).

Are schools enabling institutions? Scholarship in the field of education suggest that there is an interesting disconnect between the visionary, generative and growth oriented approaches to student learning that occur in classrooms, compared with the deficit-oriented, process-oriented and mechanistic way in which schools are often governed and managed from an organizational perspective. Olson (2009) asserts that schools are still fundamentally old-fashioned institutions, characterized by rigid and dehumanizing practices. Payne's (2008) review of schools, titled *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, argued that school improvement techniques are typically devoid of capacity building. As such, it seems there is a way to go before schools meet Peterson's criteria of an enabling institution.

How can school leaders create 'Good School' cultures that foster well-being in both the classroom and the staffroom? How can schools enable an environment that has virtues embodied both at the institutional level and which foster virtues in students and staff?

Character Strengths in Schools

One approach that has gained credibility, through its scientific backing, is that of character strengths. Benninga et al. (2006) argue that school curriculum can be used to “form the character of the young through experiences affecting their attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours” (p. 449). The character education movement seeks to ensure that a student’s academic abilities are developed in unison with his/her character development and the promotion of virtuous behaviours such as respect, fairness, civility, tolerance, fortitude, self-discipline, effort, and perseverance (Berkowitz and Bier 2005; Lickona 1993).

Benninga et al. (2006) found that character education was positively related to academic achievement over a three-year period across 120 elementary schools. Similarly, Bernard and Walton (2011) found that character education was significantly related to learning confidence in primary school students. Leming (2000) reported on the use of literature-based character education in 965 elementary students and found that an emphasis on matters of character throughout the English curriculum contributed greatly to achieving academic outcomes.

However, Leming (2000) argued, “there is a lack of explicit theoretical perspective for ... character education” (p. 12) and Berkowitz and Bier (2004) argued, “much of the application of character education is not informed by a scientific knowledge base” (p. 72).

If teachers are to adopt a character education approach then a theoretically informed and evidence-based character framework is required. Here, we can turn to the scientific framework and research done by Peterson and Seligman (2004) on universal human character strengths and virtues. The Values in Action (VIA) framework identifies six overarching virtues and 24 character strengths. The framework is useful because it provides teachers and students with a language to discuss what is good about the people within the school and the school culture at large.

The Strath-Haven Positive Psychology program uses Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) VIA framework and was evaluated by Seligman et al. (2009) with 347 Year 9 students who were randomly allocated to Language Arts classes that contained the positive psychology curriculum (Positive Psychology Condition) or did not contain the positive psychology curriculum (Control). Pre-test to post-test comparisons revealed that the students in the positive psychology program reported greater enjoyment and engagement in school at the end of the program. Teacher reports showed that the program improved the strengths in students related to learning and engagement in school such as curiosity, love of learning, and creativity. Teachers and parents reported improvement in social skills for those students who participated in the positive psychology curriculum. However, students in the PPI did not show any changes in their depression and anxiety.

The use of VIA character strengths framework to foster character strengths in school students has been shown to have significant effects on well-being. For example, Proctor et al. (2011) examined the impact of Strengths Gym, a character strengths-based positive psychological program that is based on the VIA framework,

on life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and self-esteem. Results revealed that adolescents who participated in the character strengths-based exercises experienced significantly increased life satisfaction and positive affect compared to adolescents who did not participate in character strengths-based exercises, controlling for baseline levels of life satisfaction, age, gender, and grade.

Madden et al. (2011) designed and evaluated a strengths-based coaching program for primary school children based upon the VIA character strengths framework and using the youth VIA survey. A within-subject design was used to evaluate the program whereby students were pre-tested on levels of hope and levels of engagement and were given the same survey at the end of the strengths-based coaching program. At post-test, students reported increases in hope and engagement suggesting that the character strengths curriculum was beneficial for students.

Although the VIA is reasonably new in terms of its infusion into school-based character education programs, the peer reviewed research is positive and fits with Peterson's call for 'Good Schools'. Anecdotal teacher feedback supports the claim that the application of the VIA reaffirms good teaching practice and provides a lexicon to thoughts and feelings about teaching and learning. The implications of Peterson's concept of enabling institution and strengths have substantial implications for schools and educators. Peterson's assumption is that schools act as a crucible for young people to develop and learn more about their strengths. The impact of a strengths-based approach is a significant statement on the way that a community views students, staff, and families. Peterson's strengths-based model provides both a conceptual and empirical framework for schools to infuse strengths into their vision, mission, policy, and practice.

As such, St Peter's College decided to be an early adopter, or best-practice school, and embed character strengths into its whole-school change initiative. The remainder of this chapter reports on the initiatives undertaken by St Peter's College to become an enabling institution.

St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia

St Peter's College was established in 1847 and is a K-12 private, boys' school (enrolment $n = 1384$) in the city of Adelaide, South Australia. The school hosts both day and boarding students, and is a non-selective school that is aligned to its Anglican values. In 2011, the Headmaster, Simon Murray, and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), in consultation with the Council of Governors, made the decision to adopt positive psychology as a key approach to underpin their new strategic direction. The school aimed to be known as a positive psychology school, and the leadership team, school council, and staff drafted a new strategic plan, with the change process announced to members of the school community.

The long-held culture of this school is focused on unlocking individual strengths and virtues, fostering well-being, as well as building lifelong engagement and



Fig. 6.1 Pivotal to the pastoral care system of St Peter’s College has been in the integration of strengths in the traditional House based system

commitment to service along with social justice, with evidence of generations of alumni who have had significant global impact, including three Nobel Laureates and 42 Rhodes Scholars. Focusing on strengths was a key philosophy underpinning the new strategic mission. This focus has assisted the implementation and inclusion of character strengths in six student-focused programs and three strengths-based approaches with staff. Figure 6.1 depicts the character strengths approach adopted by St Peter’s College. Table 6.1 shows the timelines and target group for each initiative. The school has conducted wide scale measurement of well-being of all staff and students from fifth to twelfth grade ($n = 514$), and will be continuing this measurement on a biennial basis to evaluate the effects of the character strengths programs.

Table 6.1 St Peter’s College positive education program

Year level	Program	Authors
Reception—ELC	Kimochi/St Peter’s College developed	Kimochi
Years 1–5	Bounce back!	Toni Noble and Helen McGrath
Year 6	St Peter’s College developed program—beyondblue/kidsmatter	St Peter’s College
Year 7	Personal well-being lessons for secondary schools: positive psychology in action	Ilona Boniwell
Year 8	Penn resilience program	Seligman et al. (2009)
Year 10	Strath haven positive psychology program	Seligman et al. (2009)

Student-focused Strengths-based Initiatives

To date, character strengths have been woven into six student initiatives. Some of these initiatives include the larger student body (e.g., sport; Religious Instruction and the well-being curriculum) whereas other programs have been used with smaller, specific samples (e.g. eighth, eleventh and twelfth grade English Literature, senior school student leaders and students who seek counselling). Some of the projects have been evaluated at the early stages and others will contribute to the overall well-being metrics that will be tracked annually at St Peter’s College (cf. Chap. 5).

Student Strengths-based Initiative 1: Well-being Curriculum

After 18 months planning, consultation, staff training and measurement, the St Peter’s College whole school positive education curriculum was launched. Within these numerous strengths-based programs new initiatives have emerged many spontaneously and created by Junior and Senior School staff to create meaningful activities to connect students with character strengths that are explicitly linked to the School’s culture. A handful of these initiatives included: strengths-hands where teachers ask students to write their names on a traced version of their hand with each finger representing one of their strengths; strengths trains; strengths stars; strengths trees that formed a forest of strengths in the entrance to the Junior School with trees representing different homerooms; strengths silhouettes to represent the “shadow side” of our strengths or ones that we keep in reserve and call on when adversity strikes; Australian Rules Football shirts that nominate students strengths and form a visual representation of being part of the “team” in class.

Student Strengths-based Initiative 2: A Strengths-based Approach in Sport

Sport is a central and high profile aspect of the culture at St Peter’s College. Every student is required to play at least one school sport, training sessions are held at school and all teachers are required to coach a sport. Many boys are in multiple sports teams and sport is used as an activity to form school spirit and to connect positively with teachers outside of the classroom setting.

The emphasis in sport on peak performance, athlete resilience and team flow makes sport an interesting field for the application of positive psychology. A number of influential studies show a significant relationship between sporting performance and optimism (Gordan and Kane 2002; Seligman et al. 1990). Yet the coaching of sport at St Peter’s was often occurring from a deficit based approach with coaches

focusing on correcting the weaknesses and errors of the student athletes rather than building up strengths.

In 2011–2012, the school implemented the Positive Sports Coaching (PSC) program as an innovative, evidenced-based way of coaching teams and individuals. The program is built around the science of optimism, positive feedback, process praise and character strengths. All coaching staff were put through the PSC program and student captains of all senior school sporting teams were trained in the PSC program. The focus was on looking for the positives while dealing with the negatives using an optimistic mindset.

The program equipped teacher-coaches and student-captains with strengths-based approaches for building sporting skills, team dynamics, and student well-being. A study of 27 coaches across seven sports (Scholes et al. 2013) found that using the Positive Sports Coaching program assisted the well-being and confidence of the coaches. A within-sample pre-test, post-test design was used to assess changes in positive affect, negative affect, and coaching confidence. Prior to the training, coaches were asked to complete the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988) as well as the Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES; Myers et al. 2006) and again five weeks after the training was completed. T-test analysis revealed significant increases in positive affect and coaching confidence at the end of the intervention. No shift in negative affect was found. Qualitative data was collected from the coaches who made observations such as: “PSC provided me with a range of tools and techniques to better manage and encourage my players” and “PSC built my self-esteem, I have confidence in my own abilities as a coach”.

A review of the effects of the PSC on student well-being was conducted with students of the First Football squad ($n=25$; Year 10–12) and First Soccer squad ($n=15$; Year 10–12) (Waters et al. 2011). A within group pre-test, post-test design was used to compare differences on the PANAS (Watson et al. 1988). A one-way repeated-measures MANOVA was used to test for pre-test and post-test changes in positive affect and negative affect. A significant effect for time was found ($F_{(2,28)}=3.64$, $p<0.05$). Positive affect was statistically higher post-program than pre-program (pre-program mean=37, post-program mean=41.7; $F_{(1,29)}=6.23$, $p<0.05$). There was no difference in negative affect between pre-program to post-program scores (pre-program mean=19.05, post-program mean=19.23; $F_{(1,29)}=0.51$, $p>0.05$). Qualitative data was collected from the students who made observations such as: “The coaches were more positive with us after being trained” and “I am able to see the strengths of my teammates more easily”.

Student Strengths-based Initiative 3: Character Strengths in Religious Instruction

Character strengths now form a major stream of learning in the school’s Religious and Values Education (McCall et al. 2012). The school Chaplain has focused upon the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and is exploring the explicit points of overlap between that literature and the VIA model.

In the context of Religious and Values Education, the wisdom tradition can be used to give students practical knowledge to guide their lives. However, the reality of teaching values in a school context to help students make meaningful connections between some of Jesus' wisdom based commandments and their day-to-day lives is not always easy. This is particularly so, given today's teenagers receive many competing messages from popular culture as to what "wisdom" is and how it can be embodied. Deep knowledge and appreciation of the biblical stories and themes is less widespread amongst young people today than in previous generations. Contemporary Christian educators are asking, "How can we return young people to the wisdom of the Bible?" One potential approach to reconnect students with the wisdom literature is to adopt a more appreciative, strengths-based assessment of the Bible.

A traditional approach has been to focus on the 10 commandments (Exodus 20: 1–17 and Deuteronomy 5: 4–21) and then to refer to Jesus' summary of the commandments in the two great commandments (Mark 12: 30–31; Matthew 19: 19; Luke 10: 27). Certainly, this approach has some merit. However, the 10 commandments, speaking critically from an educational point of view (and in this context only!), consist of two commandments that encourage positive practices, number three: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (although even this commandment continues with the instructions *not* to work on the Sabbath) and number four: "Honor your father and your mother", while eight commandments order us to avoid "negative" behaviour such as not to "murder", not to "commit adultery", and not to "steal".

Educationally, the question can be asked whether teaching wisdom should begin by focusing the students on what they should NOT be doing (the emphasis of 8 out of the 10 commandments) or whether there are other teaching strategies that connect students to Christianity by showing them more of the positive behaviours and practices that the Bible has outlined. Wisdom is not simply the absence of negative behaviours. People are not automatically wise simply by following the eight commandments that tell them not to steal, kill etc.). Rather, wisdom is *both* the absence of negative behaviours *combined* with the presence of positive qualities and behaviours such as discipline, respect, obedience, perspective, ethics, and love. The virtues highlighted by Peterson (2006) as making a 'Good School'.

The character strengths framework, although secular, is aligned with the Wisdom literature in Christianity in that both are based on the assumption that wisdom/virtue is desirable and that it can be developed. Using a strengths-based perspective can shift students from fear or merely following the doctrines of wisdom, towards a relationship of love and intimacy with Jesus through serving him and others by using one's unique strengths. It can move students from scriptural study to a practical wisdom that is enacted each day.

As such, the school has adopted a strengths-based approach to Religious Instruction by using three techniques:

1. Students exploring their own character strengths and how it is they can use their character strengths to serve Jesus;
2. The use of positive verse to connect students up with the positive behaviours they can adopt, as preached in the Bible, to become wise, as summarized in Table 6.2;

Table 6.2 Teaching sequence for strengths-based interventions

1.	Analyzing literature: studying characterization before learning about character strengths
2.	Learning about character strengths and completing the VIA strengths survey
3.	Discuss strengths in pairs
4.	Whole-class interactive display to share strengths: discussion
5.	Me at my best: recount paragraph for homework
6.	Application of character strengths to chosen character
7.	Analyzing literature: studying characterization with knowledge of character strengths
8.	Students wrote on another character in the second part of the assessment

3. An analysis of parables using the character strengths model and;
4. Analyzing the actions of Jesus towards others from a strengths-based perspective.

When asked to comment on the use of the VIA with his students, The Reverend Dr. Theodore McCall observed the following:

The practice of teaching students both this concept of Jesus as the embodiment of divine Wisdom, and his wise words and deeds, has been supported greatly by using strengths-based reflection exercises. The pondering of Jesus' particular strengths, followed by the identification of individual strengths in the students themselves, has led to a greater appreciation both of Jesus' individual strengths and his identity and teachings. Susie Brooke-Smith's class in the Junior School at St Peter's College was a particular success. Using strengths-based verses from the New Testament in this case, the students were able to make links between their own strengths and those of Jesus. In addition, this allowed students to see the relevance of the biblical verses to their own growth in wisdom, or, to use Rahner's phrase, 'self-transcendence'.

Student Strengths-based Initiative 4: Character Strengths in Eighth Grade English Literature

The Acting Head of English Literature at the school, Walter Barbieri, has used the VIA Character Strengths Model in his 8th grade classes to explore whether an understanding of character strengths influences students' analysis of characterization in film and fiction writing. Darren Pitt, Emily FitzSimons and Mathew White used this teaching sequence in Year 11 and 12 English classes. The teaching sequence for strengths-based intervention is outlined in Table 6.3. Firstly, students viewed Tim Burton's film: *Edward Scissorhands* and read Franz Kafka's novella: *The Metamorphosis*, two texts selected because of their artistic merit and due to their thematic congruency. Core elements of the plot, thematic motifs and characters took place in order to secure a good, though basic, understanding of the text. The students were then asked to "Write an analytical paragraph (following the Statement—Evidence—Analysis structure) on how a writer/director presents a character in their work (Fig. 6.3).

After this, the students were presented with character strengths English lessons based upon Peterson and Seligman's (2004) model designed by Walter Barbieri and Professor Lea Waters. Students completed the Youth version of the VIA

Table 6.3 Outline of strengths-based student, staff and parent initiatives

Strengths Projects	Year	Group of focus	Whole group or specific groups
Positive psychology Interest Group	2011, 2012	Staff	Specific to interest group
Positive psychology training for SLT	2011, 2013	Staff	Specific to SLT
AI Summit	2011	Staff	All staff
Positive sports coaching	2011 & 2012	Staff and students	All staff and senior school sports captains
English literature	2012	Students	8th, 11th and 12th grade
Religious instructions	2012	Students	All students in Chapel
School Captain, Vice-Captain, Prefects and House Captains	2011, 2012 2013,2013	Students	School captain, Vice-captain, house captains and prefects
Staff positive psychology training	2012 & 2013	Staff	150 staff
Student leadership summit	2012	Students	45 student leaders
National student leadership summit	2013	Students	70 student leaders
Year 7 student leadership summit	2013	Students	100 students
Staff VIA surveys	2012 & 2013	Staff	All staff
Positive education curriculum	2013	Students	ELC—year 10
Parenting and positive psychology	2013	Parents	200 parents from early learning—year 12
Strengths-based school counselling	2012 & 2013	Students	Students who need counselling services

character strengths survey; the class was given an opportunity to discuss their signature strengths in pairs, encouraged to reflect on whether they would recognize those strengths within themselves. This process was then widened and applied to the whole class. Students were asked to write their names on five stickers, the whole 24 strengths were displayed on the board and then each boy placed their name next to their five signature strengths. This allowed the students to share the process in a social and interactive way, as well as giving them an insight into specific similarities between different boys, and the group's strengths profile as a whole. This class activity was followed by a homework task, which required boys to reflect on an incident in their past which saw them display one or more of their signature character strengths. This memory was then to be recounted in writing for homework.

After these lessons, students were asked to again engage in a character analysis. Those students who had selected a character from *The Metamorphosis* now had to work on *Edward Scissorhands*, and vice versa. The class was asked to consider and list which strengths and virtues applied to their selected character, as well as to provide some evidence from the text, which justified their decisions. The task itself was slightly re-worded, in light on the fact that students were approaching it a second time, thus: "Now that you have experienced and interacted with core virtues,

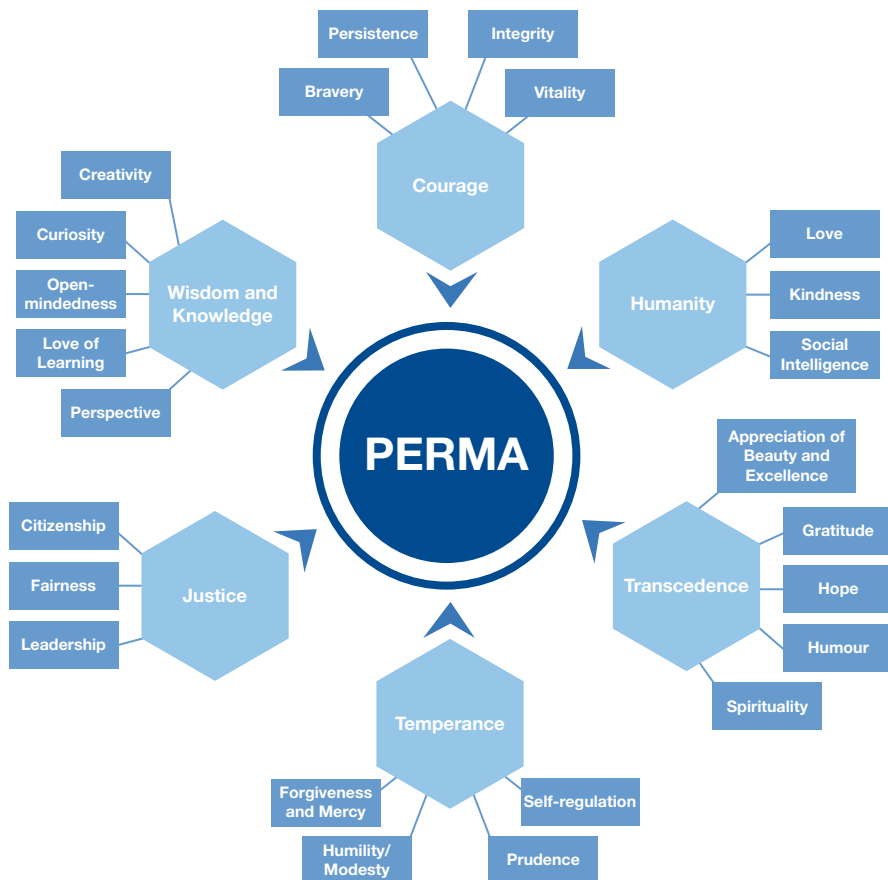


Fig. 6.2 Character strengths and virtues

character strengths, repeat the first step of your learning on characterization. Write an analytical paragraph (following the Statement-Evidence—Analysis structure) on how a writer/director presents a character in their work.”

According to blind teacher assessments, the analytical responses based on taught film and narrative texts improved after students were taught the VIA model. Comparing students’ pre and post intervention written work, the mean score increased from 13.9 to 15.9/20 when marked against the Australian Curriculum Framework. By teaching students literary skills in context of a strengths-based approach to character development, the teacher found that there was a significant impact on students’ achievement.

When asked to comment on the use of the VIA with his students, Mr. Walter Barbieri, observed the following:

... The application of the character strengths model to the study of characterization in my English class was truly powerful. Firstly, students experienced a significant expansion in their vocabulary. Many of the terms used in the character strengths model were novel to my students. Learning about these terms' meanings and identifying their own strengths profile helped students appreciate the complexity of not only characters, but people. Invariably, responses to character study after learning about the character strengths model were longer, more detailed and accurate, primarily due to the improved language students were able to use when discussing character presentation in literature.

Of course, learning about the full range of strengths gave students not only the language of emotion, but a mature understanding of numerous character qualities that they may never have considered before. If Saussure is right, then learning the vernacular of character strengths is akin to internalizing the strengths themselves. The process of self-analysis and self-knowledge undertaken when exploring character strengths saw students improve their ability to identify the emotive state of literary characters in their study. Responses once the character strengths model was taught were therefore able to demonstrate far greater complexity, nuance and insight, indicating greater depth in understanding of characterization ...

Students noted:

... When using the 24 character strengths to analyze characters in our English Literature class I found that our view of these characters' personalities has changed from 2D to a 3D perspective in how we can go into a depth, which is far more sufficient.

I think that you can relate it to your own life. If you take the test and see what your own character strengths are and then you look at any fictional character like King Lear who is such a big and powerful character; but, you can still see that maybe if he finds it hard to express love it makes you think, well where do I fit in expressing love and having love for other people

Student Initiative 5: Strengths-based Approach to Student Counselling

Character strengths play an important role in positive youth development as they act as protective factors and help mitigate psychopathology as well as enable conditions that promote flourishing (Park and Paterson 2008). The St Peter's College psychologists Zoë Alford and Dr Mike Oliver have adopted the strengths-based approach. Encouraging the growth of strengths and increasing the amount of time a student spends thinking about positive aspects of themselves and others spend less time spent thinking negative and unhelpful thoughts (Harris et al. 2007). The counsellors have found that a strengths-based approach in counselling helped to build rapport with students and created less resistance in students to seek out counselling at school. The counsellor team have worked hard to 're-language' their counselling practice and expand their vocabulary to highlight student strengths, to frame problems from a strengths perspective as well as helping student to reframe their perceived weaknesses as strengths (e.g. strengths imbedded in problematic defenses) (Harris et al. 2007).

The two school counsellors now seek to listen for strengths more explicitly (e.g. the student is likely to sound more positive, energetic and engaged), and inquire about student-perceived strengths and help the students spot their own strengths (Linley and Burns 2010). As well as this general shift in counselling orientation, the two school counsellors have adopted a number of specific strengths-based practices. When asked to reflect on the impact of a well-being approach on her role as the school's psychologist Zoë Alford noted:

Traditional assessments require me to consider the severity of threat to self—and others asking questions such as “What is the presenting issue? How are these issues affecting you? Describe your thoughts and feelings? Do you have any dark thoughts, feelings or intentions to harm yourself or others?” Once I have established that this is not a severe or immediate threat, I ask, “What are your goals? Why are you here and what do you want to achieve? What external (friends, information, family) and internal resources (strengths, coping mechanisms) can you draw upon to address this issue/concern and move forward?”

Zoë Alford said, “A well-being approach has encouraged me to consider cognitive restructuring from a strengths-perspective. When a student enters the practice and a clinical session commences, I now use CBT from a positive perspective. Previously sessions addressed what unhelpful and dysfunctional beliefs and thoughts they might have about themselves and others, and now I reframe this from strengths and positive psychology structure and ask What adaptive and helpful thoughts and beliefs do you have about yourself and others?”

She further explained that she often uses the K-10 and DASS-21 as her first step, and the DSM-5. She says, “It is about identifying the strengths with the VIA profile. I ask the student to identify what strengths they already use and what strengths are present when they are at their best. I use the VIA Strengths cards and ask the student to identify which strengths they are using at home and school and with friends. We address any strength that may be over-used and are contributing to the problem. I then ask, “How can you use your strengths in challenging situations. I believe it’s about viewing the whole spectrum of mental health and seeing the whole-person. By focusing on what’s working well and identifying strengths, those strengths can be used as resources to help people address the issue and move forward.”

Zoë Alford highlighted, “Even in their darkest hour, if it were too hard for them to see their strengths, I would ask them to tell me a story about how a person close to them (i.e. their mother or a friend) would describe their strengths. I have been influenced in the way I use assessment tools with students. For example, discussing and identifying the psychosocial and environmental resources is very important and can be used in achieving goals. I now use the DSM to acknowledge areas of weakness or impairment and then add the two questions focusing on what *IS* working and providing a clearer picture of the client (Lopez et al. 2006). I believe that the intervention I now undertake with students combines traditional approaches and is inspired by the work of Dr. Tayyab Rashid. This includes positive introductions, invites the client to identify their strengths, develop a gratitude journal, family tree of strengths, savouring assignment and putting strengths in action plan.”

Student Initiative 6: Using Character Strengths with Senior Students who hold Leadership Positions

Building Student leadership capability is central to education. Under the leadership of the School Captain and Vice-Captain, the St Peter's College student leadership group have explored leadership concepts using the VIA character strengths profile. In December 2012, John Vrodos, School Captain, and Tom McNeil, Vice-Captain, invited other student leaders to participate in a half day workshop to complete the VIA survey and used this as the starting point to co-create their leadership vision, mission and goals for the year. The school leaders reflected on their top five strengths, known as their signature strengths, and how these formed the characteristics of the team. The student leaders were invited to reflect on the following questions: (1) When do you feel that you are able to use your strengths? (2) Do you think any of your character strengths will inhibit your role as a leader? (3) How can you use your strengths to spot the strengths in others? The outcome of the student leadership strengths model enabled the team to quickly connect with each other and identify what was right with the team as well as focus on how the dominant strengths of the team could inhibit the group achieving their vision, mission, and goals. This technique enabled the student leaders to acquire vocabulary that enabled deeper self-reflection and the ability to spot strengths in their peers. Students reported that the character strengths survey enabled them to consider their roles quite differently, moving away from the operational to focus on building relationships across year levels. The success of this approach inspired the Captain and Vice-Captain to create a two and a half day National Student Leadership Summit with feedback from Professor Martin Seligman, Professor David Cooperrider, and Associate Professor Lea Waters, held in March 2013. The focus for over half-a-day asked participants to consider their strengths, the strengths of their peers and schools, and the communities they served (cf. Chap. 8).

Strengths-based Initiatives with Staff

The school has conducted three staff-based initiatives that focus on strengths: (1) Senior leadership team positive psychology training, working with VIA model and AI training; (2) an appreciative inquiry summit, and (3) all staff completing the VIA character strengths survey during positive psychology training.

Strengths-based Staff Initiative 1: Senior Leadership Team PP Training

Before training staff in the VIA Strengths model, the St Peter's College Senior Leadership Team completed training in the principles and science of positive

psychology with Professor Lea Waters. This decision was made by the Headmaster in consultation with the SLT to enable the team to lead change across the organisation effectively and to be “ahead of the curve” with staff. Given the significance of this project, the Headmaster invited the Senior Chaplain to join the SLT to complete this training.

Across three full days the SLT completed subjects that examined leading self, leading other and leading change. Each of these units were written from a strengths-based perspective. One of the most powerful exercises the team completed was to anonymously observe a team member for a period of time and write strengths-based appraisal of their peers. This was read to each of the group during one of the training sessions. The success of strengths-based reflection coincided with the SLT developing the new strategic direction for the school and was a catalyst for positive change across the organisation and in the way team members gave each other feedback.

Strengths-based Staff Initiative 2: AI Summit

In Peterson’s definition of an enabling institution, virtues are not only cultivated within institution members but are fostered at the *collective level* so that the institution itself has ‘moral character’. To this end, St Peter’s College has adopted a system-wide strengths approach where the focus is not on changing the behaviour, emotions, and cognitions of a single individual, but rather those of the school staff at large (Magyar-Moe 2009). The school undertook a whole-staff Appreciative Inquiry (AI) summit to develop the new strategic plan. Appreciative inquiry is a macro-intervention designed to create large-scale change by joining strengths across a system.

In November 2011, St Peter’s College, Adelaide, Australia, held an AI summit to elicit feedback from all staff ($n=151$) on the school’s draft strategic plan and vision “to be a world-class school where boys flourish” and its mission to provide “exceptional education that brings out the best in every boy”.

The AI summit was evaluated as an effective change management technique by school staff and a number of important self-organized groups, and change projects have emerged as a result of the AI summit. Qualitative analysis revealed that staff felt AI was a useful approach and, by tapping into the positive core of the school and their colleagues, staff felt uplifted and optimistic about the school’s new strategic agenda (Waters et al. 2012). Analysis identified six key themes suggested by staff about the AI summit: valuing the collaboration process; learning from colleagues; appreciating one’s colleagues; connecting with staff around shared values; feeling energized and passionate; and having a clearer vision of the school’s future direction.

The SLT has been committed to ensuring that the ground-up change suggestions from the AI summit have been supported as much as possible, including new opportunities for professional development and training, the creation of a new position, measurement of well-being and commitment to becoming an evidence-based institution. St Peter’s College used AI in order to encourage staff to participate in a change process that was collaborative, hopeful and optimistic, and culminated in the creation of a Culture and Organisational Development Committee comprising of 8

staff with whole school teaching and support staff representatives. This Committee was Chaired by Annette Cinnamond, Director of Human Resources and represented a macro-level strengths-based intervention that has created positive transformation in the school and fulfilment in institutional members.

Staff Strengths-based Initiative 3: Positive Psychology Training and All Staff Completing the VIA Survey

In July 2012 and January 2013, St Peter's College trained over 150 employees in a six-day positive psychology and resilience program delivered by a team from the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Following Council endorsement, in under six months this enabled significant engagement of the majority of employees including over 93% of teaching staff across the school. Over 150 employees at St Peter's College have now completed the VIA character strengths survey. This has enabled the group to understand the dominant strengths of staff and teams throughout the school. The introduction of strengths-based vocabulary has changed the way that employees engage with each other and set team goals. It has encouraged teachers and support staff throughout the school to question their management strategies as line managers, own educational practice as teacher-learners, and spot strengths in their colleagues. The impact on pedagogical discourse and practice has been substantial, as we have seen significant evidence of learning where strengths now cut across the school vertically from ELC—Year 12 and horizontally in year level.

What Does It All Mean?

In order to outline the strengths-based changes that have been undertaken at St Peter's College over the past three years, we have written about each of the initiatives separately so that teachers, school leaders and administrators can gain ideas for how to infuse character strengths in particular areas across the school and to highlight a key message that character strengths are necessary in staff programs as well as student programs. However, what we have seen occur at St Peter's College is that these separate initiatives have combined to create a cultural tipping point and the strengths-based approach is becoming a deeply embedded norm at the school (Fig. 6.2).

Did these strengths already exist in the organisation and people?

In considering these new approaches through the eyes of our students, a typical picture may be as follows: the student learns about their own character strengths, the character strengths of their fellow students and the character strengths of their



Fig. 6.3 Strengths-based approaches at St Peter's College, Adelaide

teachers through explicit well-being curriculum at a number of key year levels across the school. The student then explores the use of his strengths on the sports field as well as having his strengths identified and valued by the coach after the game; he learns about Christianity through a new lens—that of character strengths and considers how he can use his strengths to serve Jesus and the community; if he is in eighth grade he will analyze famous characters in English Literature through the VIA model; if he falls into psychological trouble the school psychologist will use traditional diagnostic models to make clinical assessment but will administer the VIA to help him explore how he can use his signature strengths to cope; if he is a senior student in a leadership position he will deeply explore his own strengths, how these can be deployed in his leadership role and what are the potential shadow side of his strengths. Given that all staff have been trained in the VIA model it is likely that there will be many informal, spontaneous strengths-based conversations in the study hall, in the school yard, drama class, debating or sporting field. Students

will have the opportunity to reflect on the character strengths of particular alumni in the School's history who have had a disproportionate impact on society, including Nobel Laureates Howard Florey, William Bragg, and Robin Warren. It may be that staff share their own profiles with students (this occurred with the eighth grade English literature class, homegroup settings, leadership development programs and well-being lessons), which creates a rapport and bonding between students and teachers. This kind of culture is highly transformational.

Beyond the student experience, the whole-school approach has emphasized the creation of an enabling institution for staff. A strengths-based approach is being modelled and supported throughout the entire fabric of the school. When teachers and school staff have high levels of social and emotional well-being, this has a positive influence on the students (Jennings and Greenberg 2009).

Measuring Well-being in Students and Staff

In Australia, measurement has now become a reality of the educational landscape. However, this discourse has primarily focused on the measurement of academic accomplishment. At St Peter's College, in order to assess the effectiveness of the above initiatives, the school has developed a multi-dimensional, whole school framework for measuring well-being, which integrates Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths scale into a battery of scales that assess Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing (Waters and White 2012; White et al. 2013). Five hundred and fourteen students and 143 staff completed the St Peter's College well-being questionnaire in 2011 and 2012. The surveys will be re-administered every two years. By directly assessing subjective perspectives of well-being across multiple domains, and by incorporating both student and staff perspectives, there is potential to change the focus and conversation toward wellness promotion at all levels of the school.

Suggestion for Future Practice in Schools

Given the natural alignment between strengths-based approaches and good teaching, and learning the most common questions teachers ask us about positive psychology is "where and how do I start?" Peterson's character strengths and virtues is an excellent way to engage teachers and students alike. Since 2009 there has been growing interest in strengths from a strategic intent level in schools. At the macro-level, a character strengths audit of staff will enable school leaders to talk about individual and team dynamics and engage in enabling conversations that celebrate team diversity.

Until educational policy writers and administrator realize what great teachers instinctively know, that a child's character is as important as his/her intellect, we argue that character strengths should be systematically adopted across the school to

bridge the gap between home and school. For example, teachers can set a family tree assignment that focuses upon character strengths. If schools encourage students to discuss family character strengths over successive generations this simple conversation could act as the vehicle to greater connection with the world of the classroom. From an organisational level, we believe that strengths-based approaches in schools could be used for:

- Student-teacher feedback on quality of teaching
- Assessment of student academic work
- The development of practices
- A method to capture the strengths of pastoral care groups
- Implicit teaching for humanities and the arts
- A vehicle for goal setting for students accomplishment
- A way to foster great positive relationships across year levels
- Individual and team appraisals and feedback
- Institutional progress against identified visions, mission and values
- Broadening and building student and staff team leadership capability
- Foster collaboration across school captains and leaders from different schools to build a strengths-based-student-leadership-movement

Conclusions and Further Questions

Christopher Peterson played a foundational role in the development of positive psychology and positive education. The application of the character strengths profile across many youth samples is testament to the scientific undertaking he led to create a system that classified what was right with human beings. Characteristically humble, in our conversations with Chris, he always delighted in hearing stories of young people who developed greater depths of self-efficacy upon learning about their strengths. The hope that schools, their staff and students could reimagine their futures as enabling institutions through a strengths-based approach energized him and reaffirmed his mission to help us appreciate that other people matter. His part in the creation of this fledgling science and its long-term applied impact cannot be underestimated. We hope that this chapter is an adequate legacy to Professor Peterson, we know that his legacy lives on in the lives of hundreds of students and staff at St Peters' College and we hope that this chapter inspires other schools to take a strengths-based approach so that Peterson's work spreads as a positive virus amongst all students.

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