Character strengths and children with special needs: A way to promote well-being all together!

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CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A WAY TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING ALL TOGETHER!

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Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed the Values-In-Action Strengths Classification in order to measure how high people score on six virtues encompassing 24 character strengths (e.g., Humanity as a virtue encompassing love, kindness, social intelligence; Knowledge encompassing creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective; Temperance encompassing forgiveness, self-regulation). Happiness increase is observed through some strengths-oriented interventions for adults (e.g. Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013).

Concerning school, a growing number of researches have shown several benefits of interventions in which pupils or students learned to identify and develop strengths (e.g., White & Waters, 2015; Shankland & Rosset, 2016). These benefits include individual as well as relationship (or group) outcomes, especially increasing children's well-being, level of positive affect, school engagement and achievement (e.g. Wagner & Ruch, 2015).

More precisely, in a randomized control experiment, Seligman and colleagues (2009) compared 347 US adolescents (aged 14-15) following either standard Language Arts classes (control group) or a Language Arts classes including discussion about character strengths, in-class and homework activities and a follow-up journal reflection (experimental group). The approximately 20–25 80-minutes sessions enhanced enjoyment and engagement in school (these results were found also two years after the end of the intervention). Moreover, evaluations of the teachers (not knowing which students participated in the intervention or the control group) indicated that this curriculum focusing on character strengths improved learning and engagement in school as well as curiosity, love of learning, and creativity. In another recent study, Quinlan and colleagues (2014) showed that after a short (six-session) program of 90 min (with a further review session one month later), 9-12-year-old pupils learned, among other things, to recognize strengths in themselves and others and to use them more often. Furthermore, intervention classes in comparison to control classes reported higher levels of class cohesion and relatedness need satisfaction, and lower scores on class friction.

Considering the benefits for relationships in the classroom, such interventions may be particularly relevant in the context of including children with special needs in the

ordinary curriculum. In this vein, Niemiec, Shogren and Wehmeyer (2017, p.15) have recently outlined the lack of research regarding character strengths programs in children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. They suggest that: "such interventions may provide a way to address issues commonly identified related to building relationships between people with intellectual disability and their peers, as people with disabilities are often cast in roles of needing help, rather than giving help, limiting reciprocal relationships (Snell & Brown, 2010). However, by creating structured ways for people with intellectual disability to use their strengths to contribute to the lives of their peers, the reciprocity of peer relationships could be enhanced. But, to our knowledge, no study has examined the positive outcomes of such interventions in inclusive setting for pupils with special needs."

Consequently, and because children with special needs are "extraordinary", we hypothesize that identifying, developing and promoting the strengths of those children may be particularly interesting in order to improve their inclusion in the classroom as well as their positive affects (such as benefits for the whole class where children with special needs are present). In this context, we proposed and pre-tested interventions based on these character strengths that aimed to reduce discrimination between children and improve class climate where everyone is recognized for what they can bring up to the group more than for their difficulties.

These interventions took place in Valais/Wallis (Switzerland), a well-known place where inclusion projects meet special education goals. Indeed, most of the children with special needs are integrated in ordinary primary schools. There is a political tendency to promote these types of approach by decentralizing the special aids in the ordinary classes. Thus, integration with the other children from the village, is sought taking into account the well-being of all the children as well as the developmental possibilities of the child with special needs (Staat Wallis, 2014). Even though this integration logic does not exactly correspond to an inclusion approach (Tremblay, 2012), the children with special needs and the other children are together in school for an important part of the week.

We introduced character strengths in a class integrating a child with Asperger syndrome (ASD). This approach was based on the following five steps proposed by Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, and Mayerson (2014, p. 3):

1) Developing a character strengths language and lens using VIA survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which allow identifying strengths rather than weakness (e.g., describing friend's strengths);
2) Recognizing and thinking about strengths in others (e.g., looking for strengths in the classroom environment);
3) Recognizing and thinking about one's own strengths (e.g., identifying three own strengths in different contexts);
4) Practicing and applying strengths (e.g., thinking about how to use one's strengths in a new way or in new contexts);
5) Identifying, celebrating, and cultivating group strengths (e.g., collecting facts about the diversity of strengths in the classroom).

At this point, we don't know if this intervention was adapted to ASD children. However, we were motivated to go into this approach in depth and to try to measure its

effects by the testimonies of the children and the teacher. ASD child said, for example: "I felt really better [after the intervention]. [...] I think I learned new ways to increase relationships with peers". Another pupil reported: "It was interesting to find good things for each child". From his point of view, the teacher doesn't see any inconvenient in going deeper in such strengths-based activities. He sees indeed compatibility with the official curriculum.

The next step is to go further and deeper in an intervention at a wider level. Following this promising pilot study and the enthusiasm of all teachers and managers who heard about the project, it was proposed to introduce in the whole school center (450 pupils less than 12 years old) the following aspects:

– Decoration of the school agenda with the 24 strengths;
– Elaboration of a game with the 24 strengths;
– Information to teachers on what are the strengths and what impact is expected;
– Linkins and collaborators' intervention (2014) in two integration classes.

The advantage of such intervention is that it (Shankland & Rosset, 2016):

– Can be put into place by individual teachers;
– Can be carried out by one teacher or several in the school;
– Can be integrated into the existing curriculum;
– Can be put into place without administrative red tape;
– Does not require extensive time to put into place;
– Can be used/adapted with students of different ages;
– Is aimed at increasing the positive instead of fixing weaknesses.

Our aim is to measure over a whole year the impact of these propositions on different dimensions of well-being (positive emotions, prosocial behavior, perception of diversity in the classroom, psychological well-being) and relatedness, in both ordinary and integrated children, as well as the quality of the integration of children with special needs (e.g., tolerance by other children, teacher's beliefs).

We expect to see the classes which had the Linkins program (2014) to make more progress than the other classes which had only the agenda with the strengths and the strengths game. Finally, a key variable is the teacher's belief in the intervention: he/she will be surely an important source of change in his/her classroom.

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