

Hope and the Practice of Character Strengths for Adolescents

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The activity of practicing Values in Action (VIA) signature strengths in new ways can increase life-satisfaction in adults and college students (Rust, Diessner & Reade, 2009; Seligman et al., 2005).

Hope, a global perception that goals can be attained (Snyder et al., 1991), is highly correlated with well-being in adults (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999) and adolescents (Ciarrochi, Heaven & Davies, 2007). The present study, as part of a larger intervention in which adolescents practiced using signature strengths, aimed to foster the development of hope in adolescents through using strengths in new ways and discussing this process with peers.



Hope is made up of two factors: agency and pathways, or *wills* and *ways*.

Agency is the extent to which a person feels he or she has the capacity to move towards that goal or the volition to get there, like the motor propelling them to get somewhere.

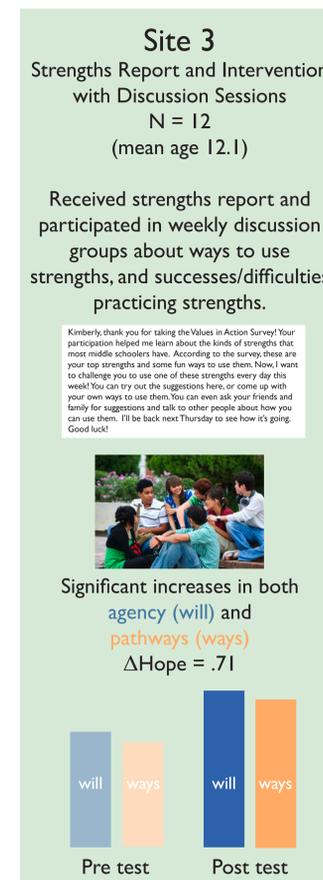
Pathways are the ways in which a person can envision moving towards a goal, like the routes on a roadmap to get somewhere (Snyder, Cheavens & Sympson, 1997).

Character Strengths



These 24 fulfilling, morally-valued, positive traits correlate with human flourishing (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).

More simply, they are the “psychological ingredients” that define virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13).



Participants were 57 middle school students ranging from 11 to 14 years old (M = 12) participating in an after-school enrichment program in Southern California.

Measures

Children's Hope Scale (CHS)
6 items including:

I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me (pathways).
Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find ways to solve the problem (agency).

Values in Action for Youth (VIA-Y)
198 items including:

I am good at knowing what people want without asking (social intelligence).
I am good at making a boring situation fun (humor and playfulness).
I believe that someone in heaven will guide me to do right thing (spirituality).
I am excited when I learn something new (love of learning).

Results

Cohen's d for change in CHS score for the discussion condition and intervention-only condition were $d = .51$ and $d = .16$ respectively, suggesting a moderate effect for the discussion condition, but minimal effect in the intervention-only condition.

The discussion condition scored significantly higher on the CHS at the end of the study than at the beginning ($t(11) = -2.938, p = .014$) as did the intervention-only condition ($t(12) = -2.201, p = .048$). The control group did not show any significant change.

Furthermore, the two CHS factors of agency (wills) and pathways (ways) were analyzed separately. In the discussion condition both the changes in agency ($t(11) = -2.063, p = .064$) and pathways ($t(11) = -3.067, p = .011$) were significant, with a slightly stronger effect for pathways than agency. In the intervention-only group the change in agency was marginally significant ($t(12) = -1.990, p = .070$) whereas the change in pathways was non-significant ($t(12) = -.928, p = .372$). There was no significant change for either factor in the control group.

* names have been changed to protect confidentiality

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Key Findings and Implications

Intervention and discussion groups increased their hope scores, the control group did not.

The **intervention with or without discussion sessions may encourage the in the development of agency**. Whereas the **discussion groups may help with the development of pathways** more effectively than the intervention alone.

Many students were **capable and enthusiastic** about using their strengths. Upon learning her strength of leadership, Vanessa* joined student government.

Limitations and Future Directions

Quazi-experimental design, thus other site-specific conditions may explain changes. Sites were geographically close and demographically similar but had **vastly different leadership and organization**. Support from teachers or group leaders may be integral to a successful intervention.

VIA-Y was too long and complex for California middle schoolers. Many didn't finish or didn't understand the vocabulary, this was consistent across conditions. A simpler and shorter version of the inventory may aid future research

Students in the intervention only condition may have **spontaneously discussed their strengths assignment** due to their close-knit climate at the site. Tomas* enthusiastically greeted the researcher at every check in with an update of the ways he had used his strengths.