

A Qualitative Study of Experienced Early Childhood Teachers Resolving Workplace Challenges with Character Strengths

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Abstract : Character strength application improves performance and well-being in adults across industries, but the potential impact of character strength training among early childhood educators is mostly unknown. To explore how character strengths are applied by early childhood educators at work, a qualitative study was completed alongside professional development provided to a group of in-service teachers of children ages 0-5 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States. Study participants (n=17) were all female. The majority of participants were non-white, in full-time lead or assistant teacher roles, had at least ten years of experience and a bachelor's degree. Teachers were attending professional development weekly for 2 hours over a 10-week period on the topic of social and emotional learning and child guidance. Related to this training were modules and sessions on identifying a teacher's character strength profile using the Values in Action classification of 24 strengths (e.g., humility, perseverance) that have a scientific basis. Teachers were then asked to apply their character strengths to help resolve current workplace challenges. This study identifies which character strengths the teachers reported using most frequently and the nature of the workplace challenges being resolved in this context. The study also reports how difficult these challenges were to the teachers and their success rate at resolving workplace challenges using a character strength application plan. The study also documents how teachers' own use of character strengths relates to their modeling of these same traits (e.g., kindness, teamwork) for children, especially when the nature of the workplace challenge directly involves the children, such as when addressing issues of classroom management and behavior. Data were collected on action plans (reflective templates) which teachers wrote to explain the work challenge they were facing, the character strengths they used to address the challenge, their plan for applying strengths to the challenge, and subsequent results. Content analysis and thematic analysis were used to investigate the research questions using approaches that included classifying, connecting, describing, and interpreting data reported by educators. Findings reveal that teachers most frequently use kindness, leadership, fairness, hope, and love to address a range of workplace challenges, ranging from low to high difficulty, involving children, coworkers, parents, and for self-management. Teachers reported a 71% success rate at fully or mostly resolving workplace challenges using the action plan method introduced during professional development. Teachers matched character strengths to challenges in different ways, with certain strengths being used mostly when the challenge involved children (love, forgiveness), others mostly with adults (bravery, teamwork), and others universally (leadership, kindness). Furthermore, teacher's application of character strengths at work involved directly modeling character for children in 31% of reported cases. The application of character strengths among early childhood educators may play a significant role in improving teacher well-being, reducing job stress, and improving efforts to model character for young children.

Keywords : character strengths, positive psychology, professional development, social-emotional learning

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