

Character Strengths Use in the Autism Classroom: An Intervention over Six Weeks to Support Teachers, Teaching Assistants and Learners

Authors : Chantel Snyman, Chrizanne van Eeden, Marita Heyns

Abstract : Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the most common disabilities in schools, with up to 50% of children displaying behaviors that challenge, bringing about demanding teaching circumstances. The teachers and teaching assistants of such learners often experience a negative impact on their own quality of life. Research globally and in South Africa about the teachers of ASD learners and teaching interventions, especially positive psychology approaches aimed at supporting learners with ASD, is limited. The primary research aim of this study was to investigate the feasibility as well as the effect of a strength-based intervention for teachers on the behavior of their learners with ASD and on the wellbeing and self-efficacy of teachers and assistants over time. This quantitative study used a pre-experimental group design with a pre-test-post-test method for the proposed school-based intervention. Teachers and teaching assistants completed the Difficult Behavior Self-Efficacy Scale, the Mental Health Questionnaire, and the short Behaviors That Challenge Checklist for learners with ASD. The six-week intervention on character strengths was delivered by the researcher as part of Teacher Staff Development. Results were generally significant on a practical level (based on practical effect sizes), which indicate that the intervention had a visible effect on behaviors that challenge. Research scores over time suggested a positive effect of the intervention in the well-being of participants and an overall positive effect on behaviors that challenge of ASD learners. Results showed that the character strengths intervention shows promise as a simple but effective intervention for teachers and teaching assistants, with positive effects for learners and teaching staff in the ASD classroom. It is recommended that this intervention should be repeated over a longer period of time and with a larger sample to determine its validity.

Keywords : autism spectrum disorder (ASD), behavior that challenge, character strengths, disabilities, self-efficacy, teachers, teaching assistants, well-being

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