On Positive Leadership Through Character Strengths for Elementary School Principal

Chen-Li Huang
Professor, Department of Education, National Taitung University
*Chih-Cheng Li (Corresponding Author)
Principal, Shih-Cyuan Elementary School, Kaohsiung City
PhD. Student, Department of Education, National Taitung University
Cheng-Yi Yen
Principal, Tjuabar Vusam Cultural Experiment School, Taitung
PhD. Student, Department of Education, National Taitung University

1. Introduction

"Good character is what we look for in leaders" (Park & Peterson, 2009, p.1). This principle underpins the rationale for exploring character strengths as a foundational aspect of leadership, particularly for school principals. Character strengths can empower school leaders to guide students and staff toward achieving the comprehensive aims of education (VIA Institute on Character, 2013). Promoting these strengths not only enhances school outcomes (Yang, 2020) but also improves the well-being of all school members (Park & Peterson, 2009). This dual benefit aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for quality education for all, as outlined by the United Nations (2015, 2020).

In today's multicultural and multi-valued society, individuals enjoy diverse freedoms and rights, necessitating respect and tolerance for varying perspectives on values, judgments, and choices. However, unchecked freedoms often lead to conflicts, which are prevalent in school settings (Hofer et al., 2007). Character strengths are valuable tools for principals to address these challenges and enhance educational outcomes. By fostering an environment where character strengths are recognized, valued, and celebrated, principals can mitigate conflicts, increase school efficiency, and promote a positive school culture conducive to sustainable development.

Positive leadership through character strengths is a crucial strategy for school principals (Louis & Murphy, 2018). This approach involves leveraging specific traits such as kindness, fairness, and resilience to create a supportive and productive educational environment. Research shows that leaders who exhibit strong character traits are more effective in motivating and guiding their teams (Coppley & Niemiec, 2021). Moreover, character strengths are integral to addressing contemporary challenges in education, including cultural diversity, ethical dilemmas, and the need for inclusive practices (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). By exemplifying positive character traits, principals can model behaviors that encourage similar attitudes and actions among teachers and students, fostering a community oriented towards mutual respect

and collective well-being.

This research aims to introduce the concept of character strengths, examine the challenges faced by elementary school principals, and interpret coping strategies through the application of character strengths. Through this exploration, we seek to provide an in-depth understanding of how positive leadership through character strengths can empower elementary school principals, transform educational settings, and contribute to the sustainable development goal of quality education (United Nations, 2015). The study will draw on existing literature and case studies to illustrate the practical implications and benefits of this leadership approach.

2. Literature Review

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology focusing on the scientific study of what makes life meaningful and thriving, while traditional psychology primarily explored mental illness and dysfunctions. For example, "While journal articles on anxiety and fear were numerous, only a handful of references on courage existed prior to 1990" (Gillham & Seligman, 1999, p. S163). Central to positive psychology are concepts such as character strengths, resilience, happiness, and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Luthar et al., 2014). In educational settings, positive psychology provides valuable insights for improving student and teacher well-being, promoting resilience, and creating a supportive learning environment (Seligman et al., 2009). The applications of positive psychology programs to cultivate positive emotions, resilience, and character strengths have been shown to boost wellbeing, relationships and academic performance (Waters, 2011).

Positive leadership, an approach grounded in positive psychology, emphasizes the cultivation of strengths, resilience, and well-being within organizations (Cherkowski et al., 2020). Leadership plays critical role of school outcomes (Dinham, 2005), positive leadership seeks to inspire and empower individuals by leveraging their inherent talents and fostering a supportive, growth-oriented environment. This leadership style is characterized by the promotion of positive emotions, meaningful engagement, and a strong sense of purpose among team members. Research has demonstrated that positive leadership not only enhances individual positive affection but also contributes to members' well-being (Kelloway et al., 2013). In educational settings, positive leadership can significantly impact teacher and student outcomes by creating a nurturing atmosphere that encourages innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement (Benito et al., 2019). By integrating principles of positive psychology,

educational leaders can foster a culture of excellence and well-being, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable educational practices and outcomes.

Character strengths is one of important approaches to implementing positive psychology in education (Niemiec et al., 2017). Character strengths, as conceptualized by Park and Peterson (2009) and further elaborated by the VIA Institute on Character (2024), are organized into six overarching virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These virtues represent the core aspects of good character and are essential for personal and collective well-being. Each virtue encompasses specific character strengths that contribute to the overall virtue.

Wisdom and Knowledge Virtue involve cognitive strengths related to acquiring and utilizing knowledge. This virtue includes strengths such as creativity, curiosity, and love of learning, which enable individuals to think critically and solve problems effectively. Courage Virtue represents emotional strengths that empower individuals to achieve goals despite adversity, encompassing bravery, perseverance, and honesty (Park & Peterson, 2009).

Humanity Virtue includes interpersonal strengths that enhance empathic and supportive relationships. These strengths, such as kindness, love, and social intelligence, foster positive interactions and community building. Justice Virtue pertains to civic strengths that uphold fairness and support healthy community life, including teamwork, fairness, and leadership.

Temperance Virtue involves strengths that protect against excess and promote self-control, such as forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation. These strengths help individuals manage their impulses and maintain balance in their lives. Transcendence Virtue includes strengths that connect individuals to the larger universe and provide meaning, such as appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.

The 24 character strengths under these six virtues form a comprehensive framework for understanding and developing good character. Each strength plays a crucial role in enhancing individual and collective well-being, making them valuable tools for leaders in educational settings (VIA Institute Character, 2024). For a detailed explanation of each character strength, see Table 1.

Table 1 Twenty-four Character Strengths

	Character Strengths	Explanations
1	Creativity	I develop original and useful ideas.
2	Curiosity	I actively seek out new experiences.
3	Judgment	I make decisions based on objectively considering various viewpoints.
4	Love of Learning	I continuously seek to deepen or expand my knowledge and skills.
5	Perspective	I offer advice using my knowledge and experiences to help others see the bigger picture.
6	Bravery	I face threats and challenges courageously despite fear.
7	Honesty	I am truthful and take responsibility for my actions.
8	Perseverance	I keep working towards my goals despite challenges.
9	Zest	I approach life with energy and enthusiasm.
10	Kindness	I consistently do nice things for others without expecting anything back.
11	Love	I maintain close, affectionate relationships
12	Social Intelligence	I effectively manage my emotions and understand those of others.
13	Fairness	I treat everyone equally and impartially.
14	Leadership	I guide groups toward common goals while maintaining good relations.
15	Teamwork	I contribute positively to team efforts.
16	Forgiveness	I forgive those who wrong me and learn from these situations.
17	Humility	I recognize my strengths without seeking attention.
18	Prudence	
19	Self-regulation	I control my emotions and behaviors.
20	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	I appreciate the beauty and others' skills.
21	Gratitude	I feel thankful for what I have and express it.
22	Hope	I am optimistic and confident about the future.
23	Humor	I bring humor into life and ease stressful situations.
24	Spirituality	I find meaning through a sense of purpose or connection to something greater.

Data revised from VIA Institute Character. (2024). The 24 character strengths.

https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths

Understanding the meanings and implications of these character strengths is vital for school principals aiming to implement positive leadership. By recognizing and cultivating these strengths within themselves and school communities, principals can create an environment that supports both academic success and personal growth. This literature review provides a foundational understanding of character strengths, setting the stage for further exploration of their application in school leadership.

3. Research Method

To achieve the research goals of introducing character strengths, exploring elementary school principals' challenges, and arguing that character strengths are effective strategies to overcome these challenges, we used a mixed-methods approach combining interviews and a narrative literature review (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). We conducted interviews with two elementary school principals with positive leadership experiences to identify their specific challenges. Principal A was interviewed five times, each session lasting 60 minutes, and Principal B was interviewed four times for 60 minutes each. The main interview questions were: "What kind of challenges have you encountered in school?" "What are your coping strategies for these challenges?" and "How can positive psychology and character strengths help you improve the efficacy of school leadership?" Follow-up questions were asked as needed after the main questions. The interviews continued until the researchers reached a point of saturation, achieving the research goals. Interviews were coded by identifiers such as IPA (Interview Principal A) followed by the interview date (e.g., IPA, 20240510), and similarly for Principal B. Shorthand notes were taken during the interviews with the interviewees' consent.

The interview data were meticulously analyzed by reading the notes, extracting core ideas, and organizing them into thematic categories. This thematic analysis provided a structured and insightful understanding of the key challenges faced by the principals and the relevance of character strengths in school leadership. By systematically categorizing the data, we were able to clearly identify critical issues and demonstrate the practical significance of character strengths in addressing these challenges.

Complementing the interviews, a narrative literature review was conducted to explore existing research on character strengths and their application in educational leadership. This review provided a theoretical foundation for our argument that character strengths are relevant strategies for overcoming identified challenges and

improving schooling outcomes. By integrating qualitative data from interviews with theoretical insights from the literature, we aimed to offer an in-depth view of how character strengths can be effectively applied in elementary school leadership.

Since this short research report was a preliminary study aimed at exploring character strengths among elementary school principals, it involved only two interviewees and had limited interview hours. Due to these constraints, the findings provide an initial insight but lack comprehensive depth. To gain a more thorough understanding of the challenges and strategies related to character strengths in elementary school leadership, a subsequent study with a larger sample size and extended interview hours is necessary. This follow-up research would help to validate the initial findings and provide a broader perspective on the efficacy of positive psychology and character strengths in enhancing elementary school leadership.

4. Research Results

Five challenges faced by elementary school principals have been identified and are discussed below.

(1) Individual Diverse Needs Surpass Partnership Teamwork

In an individualized society, "*everyone has his or her own needs, but these needs compete with each other without consensus*" (IPB, 20240424). For example, "*some parents cannot come to pick up their children on time; teachers would like to get off work on time*" (IPA, 20240503). Similarly, "*some students cannot come to school on time due to parents' regular night jobs, but teachers want to punish these students to maintain class order*" (IPA, 20240510). We value everyone's rights without fostering a partnership in the school community. Individual competing needs rarely reach a consensus or balanced perspective. "*School stakeholders lack trust in each other, leading parents to seek external intervention or legal action to resolve issues, but this approach fails when partnership relations are absent, causing endless conflicts*" (IPA, 20240510).

(2) Complex and Constance Changed School Regulations and Laws

"*In ten years, numerous educational laws have changed and been renewed frequently, making it tough for principals to understand all of them and know how to comply*" (IPB, 20240412). Examples include government procurement laws, special

education laws, gender equality laws, anti-bullying laws, and corresponding regulations, which are frequently updated to fit new conditions. "*It is difficult for principals to keep up with the latest interpretations*" (IPB, 20240503). "*Sometimes, I get confused by the latest and nuanced differences among these regulations*" (IPA, 20240419).

(3) Following Routine Regulations Without Courage to Innovation

"*In a bureaucratic system and following a routine school schedule, school members lack the flexibility to act creatively, leading to a loss of innovation*" (IPA, 20240426). Additionally, school members prefer clear guidelines for teaching, classroom management, and templates to follow with minimal effort. "*This information is easier to follow*" (IPB, 20240510). Consequently, "*We gradually lose creativity and innovation competency*" (IPA, 20240426).

(4) The Challenges of Irrational Behaviors

"*Occasionally, some irrational behaviors and events are challenging to manage*" (IPA, 20240503). These irrational behaviors often come with negative emotions, and school principals lack the tools to cope effectively. "*It is important to manage these carefully*" (IPB, 20240517). For instance, "*school members might bring negative emotions from home and transfer these to others with irrational attitudes and behaviors*" (IPA, 20240517).

(5) High Stress Without Well-being

"*I need to go to school early and stay late because many extra tasks require immediate attention, such as conflicts among school stakeholders*" (IPA, 20240510). "*Elementary school principals have busy daily schedules*" (IPB, 20240517), and it is common for them to stay late after work. "*I usually visit staff after school to appreciate their hard work and maintain good relationships, but recently I have spent more time dealing with conflicts between teachers and parents, students, or staff after school*" (IPA, 20240510). In a value-diverse and legal-oriented society, many conflicts arise, and people prefer legal actions over rational discussions. Principals spend significant time resolving these conflicts, detracting from their primary role of helping teachers and students reach their educational potential. "*These additional workloads bring high stress to my role as a principal*" (IPA, 20240517).

5. Research Discussion

The strategies of character strengths as solutions for these challenges have been suggested below.

(1) Building Teamwork Relationship

Under the virtue of justice, elementary school principals can leverage fairness and teamwork to foster a sense of partnership among school members. It is crucial for school leaders to treat all members equally, ensuring that everyone has equal basic rights while providing additional support to disadvantaged members, as advocated by John Rawls's (1999) principle of justice. For instance, Rawls's second principle emphasizes meeting the needs of students with special requirements. Implementing collaborative programs that involve teachers, students, staff, parents, and the community can cultivate teamwork and shift the focus from individual needs to the school community needs. By establishing a fair and equitable school environment, conflicts arising from individualistic demands can be mitigated, fostering a stronger sense of partnership and community.

(2) Love of Learning to Keep Up with Changes

School principals must exemplify the wisdom virtues of curiosity and love of learning to navigate the ever-changing landscape of educational laws, regulations, and societal shifts. "Where curiosity is often associated with a great deal of energy and a drive to gather information, the lover of learning is often more contemplative" (VIA Institute Character, 2024). In a rapidly evolving society, principals should be lifelong learners who continuously update their knowledge and skills to adapt to new changes. This approach not only aligns with the core competencies outlined in the Curriculum Guidelines for 12-Year Basic Education (Ministry of Education, 2014) but also positions school leaders as role models for continuous learning. By staying informed and demonstrating a commitment to learning, principals can effectively manage the complexities of changing regulations and lead their schools with confidence.

(3) Courage to Foster Creativity

Principals should embody the character strengths of bravery and creativity, as part of the virtues of courage and wisdom. They must have the courage to innovate and implement new ideas that can lead to higher educational achievements, even if these

ideas are initially unpopular. This moral bravery enables school leaders to advocate for what is right, despite potential opposition. Additionally, embracing diverse perspectives through convergent, divergent, critical, and creative thinking allows principals to adapt to changing circumstances effectively. For example, in an AI-driven society, it is imperative for school leaders to harness creative character strengths to navigate rapid societal changes and cultivate a culture where teachers and students are encouraged to use AI tools to enhance teaching and learning.

(4)　Using Social Intelligence and Love to Address Irrational Behaviors

Principals should utilize their social intelligence and love character strengths to address and mitigate irrational behaviors and events. Social intelligence enables principals to understand and empathize with others, fostering an environment where open communication is encouraged. By engaging in active dialogue and demonstrating genuine care, principals can defuse conflicts arising from irrational attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, demonstrating prudence—acting cautiously with future consequences in mind—can help principals manage these situations effectively without exacerbating the issues. Through these character strengths, school leaders can create a more harmonious and supportive school environment.

(5)　Implementing Positive Psychology to Increase Well-Being

Elementary school principals are under immense pressure, juggling responsibilities from district superintendents and addressing the needs and problems of staff, teachers, students, and parents throughout the day. To alleviate stress and enhance well-being, implementing the 24 character strengths promoted by positive psychology is a strategic approach. Positive psychology is renowned for fostering happiness, well-being, and a meaningful life. By integrating character strengths into their daily routines, school leaders can significantly improve their well-being over time.

The implementation strategy involves several steps: First, principals should enhance their character strengths through professional development. Second, they should practice these strengths consistently, transforming them into positive character traits and leadership behaviors. Third, this transformation will enhance the effectiveness of school leadership. Finally, improved leadership efficacy will reduce work-related stress and establish positive habits, leading to greater well-being and a more meaningful life for the principals as well as school members.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of character strengths as a foundation for positive leadership among elementary school principals reveals significant opportunities and challenges. School leaders face multifaceted issues, from managing diverse individual needs and navigating complex regulations to fostering creativity and addressing irrational behaviors. These challenges highlight the necessity for a robust and adaptable leadership strategy.

Character strengths offer a promising yet underutilized framework for addressing these issues. Embracing virtues such as justice, wisdom, courage, and social intelligence allows principals to build stronger, more cohesive school communities. However, applying these strengths requires more than theoretical understanding; it demands deliberate and sustained effort to integrate these traits into everyday leadership practices.

Promoting fairness and teamwork can transform school dynamics by shifting the focus from individual grievances to collective goals. Principals should treat all members equally, providing additional support to those in need to foster a sense of partnership and mitigate conflicts.

A commitment to lifelong learning is essential for navigating the complexities of constantly evolving educational landscapes. Principals who continuously update their knowledge and skills not only adapt better to changes but also serve as role models for the entire school community.

Encouraging creativity and moral bravery inspires innovation and prepares schools for the demands of an AI-driven future. Principals should advocate for what is right and implement new ideas, even in the face of opposition, to foster a culture of creativity and resilience.

Utilizing social intelligence and empathy is crucial for addressing irrational behaviors and conflicts. Principals should engage empathetically with all school stakeholders, fostering an environment of open communication and mutual respect.

Integrating positive psychology principles and character strengths into daily routines enhances well-being for both principals and school members. Prioritizing mental health and professional development, and consistently practicing character

strengths, can reduce stress and lead to a more meaningful professional life.

In conclusion, integrating character strengths into school leadership is a compelling approach to overcoming contemporary educational challenges. However, it requires a sustained commitment to personal and professional growth. Principals must proactively develop these strengths within themselves and their communities to foster a resilient, innovative, and positive school culture. The journey towards positive leadership is demanding but holds the promise of transformative impacts on educational outcomes and the well-being of all school members.

References

■　Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.

■　Coppley, J., & Niemiec, R. M. (2021). Character strengths interventions in education systems. In M. L. Kern & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of positive education (pp. 395-420)*. Springer International Publishing.

■　Crisp, R. (Ed.). (2014). *Aristotle: Nicomachean ethics*. Cambridge University Press.

■　Gillham, J. E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (1999). Footsteps on the road to a positive psychology. *Behaviour Research and Therapy 37*(1), S163-S173.

■　Green, B. N., Johnson, C. D., & Adams, A. (2006). Writing narrative literature reviews for peer-reviewed journals: Secrets of the trade. *Journal of Chiropracic Medicine, 5*(3), 101-117.

■　Hofer, M., Schmid, S., Fries, S., Dietz, F., Clausen, M., & Reinders, H. (2007). Individual values, motivational conflicts, and learning for school. *Learning and Instruction, 17*(1), 17-28.

■　Louis, K. S., & Murphy, J. F. (2018). The potential of positive leadership for school improvement: A cross-disciplinary synthesis. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE), 2*(2-3), 165-180.

■　Luthar, S. S., Lyman, E. L., & Crossman, E. J. (2014). Resilience and positive psychology. In M. Lewis, & K. D. Rudolph (Eds.), *Handbook of developmental*

psychopathology (pp. 125-140). Springer.

■　Ministry of Education. (2014). *Curriculum guideline of 12-year basic education: General guidelines.* Retrieved from https://www.naer.edu.tw/ezfiles/0/1000/img/52/129488083.pdf

■　Niemiec, R. M., Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2017). Character strengths and intellectual and developmental disability: A strengths-based approach from positive psychology. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 52*(1), 13-25.

■　Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2009). Character strengths: Research and practice. *Journal of college and character, 10*(4), 1-10.

■　Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification (Vol. 1)*. Oxford University Press.

■　Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice (Revised ed.).* Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1971)

■　Seligman, M. E., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education, 35*(3), 293-311.

■　Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Positive psychology: An introduction. In *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pp. 279-298)*. Springer.

■　United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development.* Retrieved from https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf

■　United Nations. (2020). *Stakeholder engagement & the 2030 agenda: A practical guide.* Retrieved from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2703For_distribution_Stakeholder_Engagement_Practical_Guide_REV_11SEPT.pdf

■　VIA Institute Character. (2024). *The 24 character strengths*. https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths

■　　VIA Institute on Character. (2013). *VIA pro character strengths report*. Retrieved from https://www.viacharacter.org/pdf/VIA%20Pro%20Report.pdf

■　　Waters, L. (2011). A review of school-based positive psychology interventions. *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 28*(2), 75-90.

■　　Yang, C. M. (2020). A brief discussion on using positive cards to improve the character advantages of senior elementary school students. *Taiwan Educational Review Monthly, 9*(8), 138-140.