MISSION STATEMENT

The *Journal of Research in Character Education* serves an audience of researchers, policymakers, teacher educators, and school practitioners concerned with the development of positive character in young people. Character.org defines character education as efforts to help young people develop good character, which includes knowing about, caring about, and acting on core ethical values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and respect for self and others. The editors and the Character.org view character education as a comprehensive and interdisciplinary term that reflects Character.org's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. These principles call on schools to address character education in their overall school climate, academic curriculum, extracurricular activities, interpersonal relationships, and school governance. These efforts are schoolwide and should touch every student and all school personnel. They can include both comprehensive school reform and more specific school-based efforts such as service learning, life skills education, conflict resolution and violence prevention, social and emotional learning, education for the prevention of drug/alcohol abuse, sex education, education for civic virtue and social responsibility, and the development of moral reasoning. Of clear relevance also are multicultural education, social justice education, the ethics of environmental or technology education, religious education, and the like. The Journal will publish articles that report the results of research relevant to character education, as well as conceptual articles that provide theoretical, historical, and philosophical perspectives on the field of character education as it is broadly defined above. The Journal is also interested in more practical articles about implementation and specific programs.

Directions to Contributors

All manuscripts submitted must conform to the style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), 6th Edition. Manuscripts must be typewritten, double-spaced throughout with 1" to 1.5" margins all around. Manuscripts typically should run between 15–25 pages in length, excluding references. All manuscripts should include an abstract of 100–150 words and a separate title page that includes the name(s) and affiliation(s) of the authors, as well as contact information for the lead author: address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address. Following preliminary editorial review, manuscripts are sent for blind review to reviewers who have expertise in the subject of the article. The title page will be removed before the manuscript is distributed to reviewers. To ensure anonymity in the review process, the name(s) of the author(s) should not appear in the manuscript, except in appropriate citations.

Manuscripts may be submitted by e-mail to jce@umsl.edu

TEACHING TO STRENGTHS Character Education for Urban Middle School Students

Meghan F. Oppenheimer, Claire Fialkov, Bruce Ecker, and Sanford Portnoy
Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology

Traditionally, educational practices in the United States have revolved around the identification and remediation of student deficits, with much less focus given to the identification and development of student strengths of character. A focus on strengths could equip students with the skills to not only overcome obstacles, but to flourish in the face of challenges. The present study examined well-being among urban adolescents through the use of a school-based character strengths program. Participants included 70 eighth-grade students from an urban middle school assigned to either an intervention group or a comparison group. Through a series of activities, students identified and built upon character strengths. Consistent with predictions, participants in the intervention reported an overall increase in well-being from the start to the conclusion of the 5-day intervention as measured by the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being (Kern & Steinberg, 2012). Implications for educational practice and future research are discussed.

"Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education," (King, 1947). According to Martin Luther King, Jr., the goal of education is to foster both academic learning *and* character development. In theory, King's idealistic goals align perfectly with the aims and intentions of many U.S. schools. In practice, educational institutions in the United States have placed a disproportionate emphasis on academic achievement, with significantly less emphasis being placed on the promotion of character development in schools. These achievement-focused approaches were designed with the goal of improving the American educational system and early data suggests that academic achievement among U.S. students has, in fact, risen (Aud et al., 2013). However, this increase has fallen short of the intended aims of both legislators and educators.

Despite the focus on academic achievement, a staggering achievement gap and high dropout rates continue among subsets of students. The gap in achievement is observed

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** Meghan.Oppenheimer@gmail.com

Journal of Character Education, Volume 10(2), 2014, pp. 91–105 ISSN 1543-1223

between minority students and their White counterparts as well as between poor students and their middle-class peers. As Black children are three times as likely to be raised in impoverished environments in comparison to their White peers, race and socioeconomic status combine to increase the magnitude and complexity of the achievement gap (Hart & Risley, 2005). In turn, high dropout rates are observed among minority students, as only 57% of African American and Hispanic students graduate from high school in the United States (Koebler, 2011).

In developing strategies to combat this disparity in achievement, researchers should closely examine past and present methods of intervening with adolescents in the school setting. This examination would reveal an emphasis on deficit-based approaches, resulting in a focus on treating and correcting specific problems. While this approach can be useful, it does not necessarily prepare youths to lead satisfying and productive lives (Park & Peterson, 2008). Strength-based approaches build upon the positive impact of individual resources, suggesting that those in need are the source of the solution, rather than the source of the problem. As such, impoverished youth are not pathologized as "at risk" for failure, but are instead viewed as "at promise" for success (Swadener, 2010). Strength-based practices build upon old strengths while also developing new ones, broadening the student's capacity for positive emotional states and strengths such as creativity, hope, gratitude, and spirituality. In turn, strength-based approaches can cultivate adolescents who are healthy, happy, and capable of leading meaningful and fulfilling lives (Lerner & Benson, 2003; Park & Peterson, 2008).

Given the amount of time students spend in school as well as the substantial influence schools have on individuals, families, and communities, academic institutions provide a unique setting for the application of strength-based practices. As schools begin to implement strength-based practices, calls for positive psychology in educational settings have increased, resulting in the emergence of "positive education," a focus on teaching both skills of academic achievement and well-being (Gillham et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Positive education utilizes the tenets of positive psychology within the school setting to increase the well-being of students, while simultaneously upholding a focus on academic learning already inherent within the school system. In incorporating positive psychology interventions in schools, institutions in which children and adolescents spend roughly 35 to 40 hours a week, opportunities emerge to enhance the learning and well-being of all students (Huebner & Hills, 2011). While previous studies have suggested the usefulness of positive psychology in schools, further research into the efficacy of interventions among a wide variety of populations is needed. Similarly, more research is warranted to garner a better understanding of students' unique strengths, particularly those character strengths disproportionately represented in our inner city communities. Specifically, a focus on the effectiveness of strength-based interventions in urban, adolescent populations would further contribute to the research on positive psychology.

The current study assesses the effects of a positive psychology approach through a 5-day character strengths intervention in an urban middle school setting. It was predicted that students in the character intervention group would report increased levels of well-being at the conclusion of the intervention, as well as at the 3-month follow-up, versus the comparison group. While not tested, an increase in self-reported well-being presumably would have a beneficial effect on achievement, as well-being has been previously linked to happier, more engaged, and well-connected students (Seligman et al., 2009), broader attention (Bolte, Goshcke, & Kuhl, 2003; Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), more creative thinking (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), and increased holistic thinking (Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991; Kuhl, 1983, 2000).

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 70 eighth grade students, 32 males and 38 females, from an urban middle school in Philadelphia. Participants were from three eighth-grade classes; two classes were chosen to participate in the intervention group, while the third class was delegated as the comparison group. Classes were organized by the school administration on the basis of academic performance, allocating students to a remedial class (n = 22), an average class (n = 24), and an above average class (n = 24). The remedial and above average classes were assigned to the intervention group (n = 46), while the average academic class was assigned to the comparison group (n = 24). This assignment was intentional so as to have comparable means for academic performance. Furthermore, it ensured a broad range of academic skills levels in the intervention condition.

Measures

A series of measures were utilized to explore basic demographic information, well-being, and character strengths among participants. These measures included the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being and the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth.

The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being. The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being (Kern, Benson, Steinberg, & Steinberg, 2014),[1] an assessment specific to adolescent populations, consists of 25 items that seek to explore adolescent psychological well-being through five specific factors, including engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness. According to Kern et al. (2014), (a) engagement is the capacity to become absorbed in life tasks; (b) perseverance is the ability to pursue one's goals to completion; (c) optimism is hopefulness about the future; (d) connectedness is the sense that one has satisfying relationships; (e) happiness consists of positive emotions and positive mood. Each of these elements are measured separately and contribute to an overall well-being score. Thus, well-being is construed as a combination of experiencing positive emotions, as well as actively engaging in life tasks, maintaining positive relationships, and upholding an enduring sense of purpose and hopefulness. There are five items for each area of functioning. For each item, participants used a 5-point Likert-style scale to indicate the frequency of the statement as: 1 = *almost never*; 2 = *sometimes*; 3 = *often*; 4 = *Very Often*; 5 = *almost always*. Sample questions included, "I feel passionate about the things I enjoy doing," "I am a hard worker," "I believe that I will achieve my goals," and "I laugh a lot."

The five EPOCH subscales are moderately to strongly intercorrelated, with coefficients ranging from r = .46 to r = .70 (Kern & Steinberg, 2012). In an initial study, Kern and Steinberg (2012) found moderate to strong convergent validity with the Grit scale (r = .71; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), the Children's Hope scale (r = .75; Snyder et al., 1997), the PANAS positive scale (r = .71; Wilson, Gullone, & Moss, 1998) and the Satisfaction With Life scale (r = .67; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The EPOCH measure is still in development and detailed reliability information is not yet available.

The VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth. The VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2005)[2] is a comprehensive assessment of 24 character strengths among youth ages 10 to 17. The assessment consists of 198 self-report items and participants used a 5-point Likert-style scale to indicate whether the statement is: 1 = *very much like me*; 2 = *mostly like me*; 3 = *somewhat like me*; 4 = *a little like me*; and 5 = *not like me at all*. Sample questions

included, "I love art, music, dance, or theater," "I stick up for other kids who are being treated unfairly," and "I like to think of different ways to solve problems." On average, the 198-item scale can be completed in one, 45-minute session.

Internal consistency reliabilities of the VIA-Youth subscores ranges from .72 to .91 for each scale (Park & Peterson, 2006). Test-retest reliability over a 6-month period is substantial (correlations range from .46 to .68), demonstrating good stability (Park & Peterson, 2006). Scores are skewed in the positive direction, suggesting that most youth develop components of good character. While these scores are skewed, acceptable levels of variability exist (Park & Peterson, 2006).

Procedures

Data Collection. At the onset of the study, all participants completed the demographic questionnaire, consisting of multiple choice and open-ended questions about age, gender, ethnicity, academic achievement, family structure, and religion. The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being was completed at the onset of the study, and the measure was readministered at the conclusion of the 1-week intervention and at a 3-month follow-up. During the course of the intervention, participants were also instructed to complete activities, including the VIA-Youth Survey, to further identify and explore their unique strengths. The lead researcher was solely responsible for data distribution and collection.

Character Strengths Program. The intervention group participated in a 5-day program that incorporated facets of positive psychology, namely the exploration of character strengths, while the nontreatment, control group was not exposed to this program. The lead researcher facilitated these lessons, while the classroom teacher provided assistance with classroom management, as needed. Students in the intervention group were instructed to refrain from sharing the details of their participation with students in other classes, although this could not be monitored or enforced. The 5-day program, spanning five consecutive days, consisted of a 1-hour session each day in which character strengths were identified and built upon, as is described here session by session (see Table 1).

Session One. The objectives of the first session were completion of baseline measures and introduction of positive psychology concepts to students. Specifically, at the start of the first session, students were instructed by the lead researcher to complete baseline measures, including the measure of demographic information and the EPOCH measure of well-being. Subsequently, the lead researcher provided a general introduction to positive psychology and character strengths. This introduction included the presentation of the principles of positive psychology, including components of well-being. Character strengths were also explained, and examples were provided. These examples sought to highlight the difference between being good at something, and the reasons for these abilities. For instance, a student may excel in Science because he or she is curious, possesses a love of learning, or is hardworking and never gives up. Similarly, a student may excel at athletics because he or she works well in a team, perseveres in the face of challenges, or is a strong leader. Students were instructed to begin to consider their own strengths and the manner in which they use and are affected by these strengths.

At the conclusion of the session, students completed a brief, exit activity in which they were asked to identify three good things that happened to them in the past day, and reflect on why and how these events occurred. Accordingly, this closing activity was an abbreviated version of the "Three Good Things" exercise that has been correlated with increased happiness and decreased depression among adults (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This exercise was also repeated at various points during subsequent sessions.

Session Two. The objective of the second session was for students to complete the VIA-Youth measure to assess their strengths. At the start of the second session, the lead researcher provided a brief overview of the VIA-Youth assessment and expectations for completing the assessment. Next, students used classroom computers to complete the VIA-Youth assessment. This assessment took approximately 45 minutes to complete. At the completion of the assessment, students were provided with ordered lists of their character strengths.

Upon completion of the VIA-Youth assessment, students were instructed to choose one of their signature strengths, "a strength of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 18) to use in a new way prior to the next session. This assignment was an abbreviated version of Seligman, Rashid, and Parks' (2006) intervention in which increased happiness and decreased depression were observed in adults who utilized signature strengths in a new way.

Session Three. The objective of the third session was to explore the strength of hope and the manner in which students have utilized, or observed others utilizing, this strength. Students were also challenged to situate one of their signature strengths in another individual. The third session began with students once again reflecting on three positive experiences from the day and why or how these events occurred. Subsequently, the lead researcher facilitated a classroom discussion on character strengths, primarily focusing on the strength of hope. Students were asked to consider, "What is hope?" Hope was chosen as the focus of this session due to the strong relationship optimism maintains with other components of adolescent well-being.

Following the discussion on hope, students were directed to explore their own strength of hope by answering the question, "Who gives you hope?" Students were instructed to identify an individual who exhibits the strength of hope, including family members, teachers, civic leaders, entertainers, or other icons. Next, students chose one of their signature strengths and identified an individual who clearly exhibited this strength. Students shared their reflections in small groups. At the conclusion of the session, students were instructed to use the strength of hope in a new way prior to the next session.

Session Four. The objective of the fourth session was twofold: to explore the strength of perseverance and the way in which students demonstrate this strength in their relationships and activities. To begin the fourth session, students were instructed to consider the question, "What is perseverance?" Next, the lead researcher facilitated a brief, classroom discussion on perseverance and provided examples of instances in which individuals demonstrated perseverance. Accordingly, students were instructed to explore the strength of perseverance within their own experience by answering the prompt, "What's a challenge that you have overcome using perseverance?" Students shared these reflections in small groups.

Following the perseverance exercises, students began to explore their past and current use of one of their signature strengths. Students were instructed to consider the origin of this strength and the presence or absence of the strength in family members and friends. Additionally, students created a timeline of their strength, identifying various instances in which the strength was particularly clear and evident. At the conclusion of this exercise, students were instructed to use one of their signature strengths in a new way prior to the next session.

Session Five. The objectives of the final session were to share and discuss students' strengths and complete the follow-up measure of adolescent well-being. During the fifth and final session, students began by completing the "Three Good Things" exercise. Subsequently, students gave a short (approximately 2 minutes per student) presentation on their signature strength and the manner in which they have used this strength in past and present situations, as well as ways in which they aspire to

TABLE 1
Character Strength Intervention: Activities

	Activity	*Description*
Session 1:	Opening activity	• Students completed the demographic questionnaire and EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being.
	Overview of positive psychology	• Researcher provided a brief introduction to positive psychology, well-being, and character strengths. • Students compiled a list of strengths.
	Initial student strength activity	• Students were instructed to select a character strength and reflect on the question: *How do you show this strength?*
	Closing activity	• Students completed the "Three Good Things" activity
Session 2:	Opening activity	• Researcher provided an explanation of the VIA measure.
	VIA-Youth measure	• Students completed the VIA-Youth measure.
	Closing activity	• Students identified 1 new way to use their chosen strength before the start of the next session.
Session 3:	Opening activity	• Students completed the "Three Good Things" activity.
	Hope activity	• Researcher led a discussion on the strength of hope. • Students individually reflected on the question: *Who gives you hope?*
	Signature strength activity	• Researcher led a discussion on signature strengths. • Students chose a signature strength and identified an individual who clearly exhibited the strength.
	Closing activity	• Students identified 1 new way to use their chosen strength before the start of the next session.
Session 4:	Opening activity	• Students answered the prompt: *What is perseverance?*
	Perseverance activity	• Researcher led discussion on the strength of perseverance • Students individually reflected on the question: *What's a challenge that you have overcome using perseverance?*
	Signature strength activity	• Students created a timeline of their signature strength, identifying various instances in which the strength was particularly evident.
	Closing activity	• Students identified 1 new way to use their chosen strength before the start of the next session.
Session 5:	Opening activity	• Students completed the "Three Good Things" activity.
	Strength presentations	• Students presented their signature strengths to the class, identifying their strength, strength icon, instances in which they have clearly demonstrated their strength, and plans to use their strength in the future.
	Closing activity	• Students completed the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being

use the strength in the future. The lead researcher moderated the discussion. After the presentations, students were instructed to reflect further on how their signature strengths could be used in new ways. At the end of the session, students completed the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being. Students were also thanked for their participation.

Three-Month Follow-Up. Three months after the conclusion of the intervention, the lead researcher readministered the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being.

Teacher Participation. Prior to the onset of the study, the lead researcher met with eighth grade teachers to provide these educators with background information regarding positive psychology and character development. The specific details of the intervention were also shared with teachers, and they were asked to support the researcher by monitoring student behavior and providing assistance to students when needed. Additionally, the lead researcher worked with teachers to develop ways to incorporate strength-based language into the intervention groups' classroom curriculum. For instance, math teachers were instructed to use strengths in word problems; History teachers were encouraged to use character strengths to discuss cultures and leaders; and English teachers were aided in identifying and discussing the strengths of a novel's protagonist. Teachers were encouraged to incorporate strength-based language into the curriculum until the conclusion of the study, 3-months after the original onset.

RESULTS

Participant Data Analysis

The mean age of the 70 eighth grade student participants (32 males, 38 females) was 13.07 (*SD* = .35). All of the students primarily identified as Black/African American (non-Hispanic) (n = 70; 100%), and several students (n = 14; 20.0%) also selected additional ethnic backgrounds, including Puerto Rican (n = 5; 7.1%), Caucasian (n = 3; 4.3%), Latino/Hispanic (n = 1; 1.4%), and "Other" (e.g., Haitian, Caribbean, Jamaican, and Trinidadian) (n = 5; 7.1%). Participants' primary ethnicities were consistent with the school's population, in which 95% of students identify as Black, 3% identify as multiracial, and 2% identify as Hispanic. Approximately 80% of the school's population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Comparison of the two intervention classes revealed no significant differences in well-being at the baseline ($t(44) = .78$, $p = 0.44$), so the two intervention groups were analyzed as a single group. In total, 46 students were in the intervention group and 24 students were in the comparison group.

Data Analysis

Character Strengths. The character strengths chosen by the intervention group are presented in Table 2. Students' top five strengths were considered to be "signature strengths." As previously noted, signature strengths are those strengths of character that an individual regularly demonstrates (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For the purpose of the present study, signature strengths were considered to be the top five strengths for each individual as determined by the VIA-Youth measure. The most common signature strengths were gratitude (n = 25; 54.3%), humor (n = 25; 54.3%), hope (n = 23; 50.0%), spirituality (n = 23; 50.0%), and appreciation of beauty (n = 17; 40.0%). Individual character strengths are considered components of particular virtues on the VIA. Notably, all of these signature strengths are within the transcendence virtue, i.e., strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning. Additionally, curiosity (n = 16; 34.8%), teamwork (n = 14; 30.4%), and creativity (n = 13; 28.3%) were also common strengths. The least common signature strengths were forgiveness (n = 0; 0.0%), social intelligence (n = 2; 4.3%), prudence (n = 2; 4.3%), self-regulation (n = 2; 4.3%), kindness (n = 2; 4.3%), love (n = 3; 6.5%), love of learning (n = 3; 6.5%), and honesty (n = 3; 6.5%). Of these least common strengths, forgiveness, prudence, and self-regulation fall into the temperance virtue, which are strengths that protect from excess. Social intelligence, kindness, and love comprise the humanity virtue, and are interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others. In choosing one signature strength to explore and develop, students most often chose hope (n = 8; 17.4%), humor (n = 8; 17.4%), or creativity (n = 7; 15.2%).

Well-Being. Self-reported well-being using the EPOCH was assessed at the start and conclusion of the study. To determine if the results were sustained over time, the well-being measures were also collected at a 3-month follow-up.

An ANOVA with repeated measures was utilized to compare well-being in the intervention and comparison groups over time (see Table 3). A main effect of the repeated measure of well-being was found ($F(2, 136) = 6.730$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$), while there was no observed interaction between time and class

TABLE 2
Top Five Character Strengths Endorsed by Students in the Intervention Group

Virtue	*Character Strength*	*Participants (%)*
Wisdom	Creativity	28.3
	Curiosity	34.8
	Open-mindedness	13.0
	Love of learning	6.5
	Perspective	10.9
Courage	Honesty	5.6
	Bravery	19.6
	Perseverance	23.9
	Zest	17.4
Humanity	Kindness	4.3
	Love	6.5
	Social intelligence	6.5
Justice	Fairness	21.7
	Leadership	10.9
	Teamwork	30.4
Temperance	Forgiveness	0.0
	Modesty	4.3
	Prudence	4.3
	Self-regulation	4.3
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty	37.0
	Gratitude	54.3
	Hope	50.0
	Humor	54.3
	Spirituality	50.0

TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Student Well-Being at T1, T2, and T3 ($N = 70$)

Time	*Class*	*M*	*SD*
Time 1	Intervention	100.35	9.63
	Comparison	106.12	11.00
Time 2	Intervention	106.54*	10.10
	Comparison	108.13*	12.80
Time 3	Intervention	103.17	11.46
	Comparison	108.42	8.18

Note: *Denotes significant within groups from Time 1 to Time 2 at the $p < 0.05$ level.

($F(2, 136) = 2.05$, $p = 0.13$). Further analysis showed a statistically significant difference in well-being between groups from Time 1 to Time 2 ($F(1, 68) = 7.80$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$), and a statistically significant interaction between well-being and intervention and comparison groups from Time 1 to Time 2 ($F(1, 68) = 4.45$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$). A difference in well-being was not observed between groups from Time 1 to Time 3 ($F(1, 68) = 3.57$, $p = 0.06$) or Time 2 to Time 3 ($F(1, 68) = 1.76$, $p = 0.19$).

TABLE 4
Means and Standard Deviations by Gender of Student Well-Being at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 ($N = 70$)

Time	*Class*	*Gender*	*M*	*SD*
Time 1	Intervention	Male	101.25	18.807
		Female	99.68	10.33
	Comparison	Male	101.75	9.57
		Female	110.50	10.93
Time 2	Intervention	Male	106.35	12.70
		Female	106.69	7.80
	Comparison	Male	105.83	9.46
		Female	110.42	15.54
Time 3	Intervention	Male	102.15	12.18
		Female	103.96	11.06
	Comparison	Male	105.42	6.36
		Female	111.42	8.93

An ANOVA with repeated measures with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was utilized to compare well-being and gender in the intervention and comparison groups over time (see Table 4). This analysis revealed a main effect ($F(1.93, 130.94) = 9.55$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$). An interaction between group and gender at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 was not observed ($F(2, 136) = 0.45$, $p = 0.59$). While statistical analysis suggests that gender does not appear to influence well-being ($F(1, 68) = 0.871$, $p = .35$), additional consideration should be given to gender, as a closer investigation revealed noticeably higher well-being scores among females in the comparison group.

Regarding the individual components of well-being, the mean scores for perseverance ($F(2, 90) = 11.23$ $p < 0.001$) and optimism ($F(2, 90) = 15.27$, $p < 0.001$) within the intervention group significantly differed at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 (see Table 5). Both perseverance and optimism significantly increased from Time 1 to Time 2 ($p < 0.001$); however, these scores significantly decreased from Time 2 to Time 3 ($p = 0.002$). Significant differences in optimism from Time 1 to Time 3 were not observed ($p = 0.22$). No differences were found in the mean scores for engagement ($F(2, 90) = 2.12$, $p = 0.13$), connectedness ($F(2, 90) = 1.18$, $p = 0.31$), or happiness ($F(2, 90) = 2.12$, $p = 0.13$). Consistent with predictions, significant differences within the comparison group were not observed for engagement ($F(1.51, 34.76) = 0.76$, $p = 0.44$), perseverance ($F(2, 46) = 1.26$, $p = 0.29$), optimism ($F(1.79, 41.14) = 1.76$, $p = 0.19$), or connectedness ($F(1.74, 39.97) = 0.06$, $p = 0.92$). Taken together, while increases were observed in overall well-being, perseverance, and optimism within the intervention group from Time 1 to Time 2, there was no significant change in well-being among the comparison group.

An independent-samples t test was conducted to compare well-being in the intervention and comparison groups. Analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in well-being at the baseline ($t(68) = -2.27$, $p = 0.03$); the well-being of the comparison group was significantly higher than the well-being of the intervention group (see Figure 1). Analysis did not reveal a statistically significant difference between groups at Time 2 ($t(68) = -0.57$, $p = 0.57$) or Time 3 ($t(68) = -1.99$, $p = 0.05$). Thus, while the comparison group had a higher

TABLE 5
Components of Student Well-Being at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 ($N = 70$)

Time	*Class*	*Gender*	*M*	*SD*
Time 1	Intervention	Engagement	18.67	2.73
		Perseverance	17.96	2.99
		Optimism	19.37	3.03
		Connectedness	22.96	2.18
		Happiness	21.39	2.90
	Comparison	Engagement	20.46	2.75
		Perseverance	19.42	3.11
		Optimism	21.13	2.38
		Connectedness	23.58	1.59
		Happiness	21.54	3.36
Time 2	Intervention	Engagement	19.65	3.37
		Perseverance	19.78*	3.11
		Optimism	21.76*	2.51
		Connectedness	23.26	2.36
		Happiness	22.09	3.15
	Comparison	Engagement	20.79	2.84
		Perseverance	20.17	3.33
		Optimism	21.92	2.52
		Connectedness	23.50	2.25
		Happiness	21.75	3.77
Time 3	Intervention	Engagement	19.17	2.92
		Perseverance	18.87	2.99
		Optimism	20.28*	2.90
		Connectedness	22.74	2.79
		Happiness	22.11	3.09
	Comparison	Engagement	20.25	2.40
		Perseverance	20.12	2.66
		Optimism	21.79	2.27
		Connectedness	23.63	1.77
		Happiness	22.63	2.53

Note: *Denotes significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

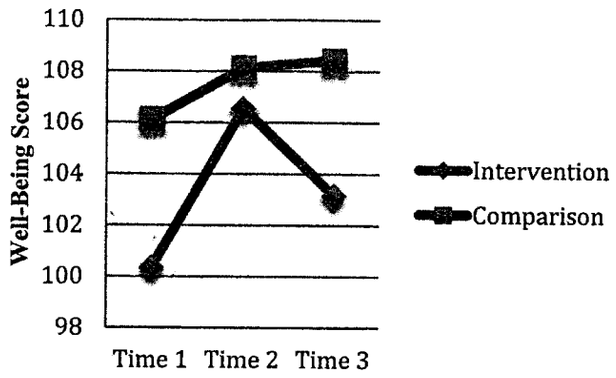

Figure 1. Well-being scores at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3.

well-being score than the intervention group at baseline, this difference dissipated due to the large increase in the intervention group scores at Time 2.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with predictions, participants in the intervention group reported an overall increase in well-being from the start to the conclusion of the intervention (Time 1 to Time 2). Inconsistent with predictions, the scores of participants in the intervention group did not remain elevated at the 3-month follow-up. The results indicate that the initial intervention worked as designed, increasing the well-being of students in the intervention group, but interventions that have a lasting effect on student well-being seem to require additional focused attention and practice.

These findings have several implications regarding character strengths and well-being in an urban school setting. They support previous findings that indicate the introduction and teaching of character strengths in the school setting is related to increased student well-being (Seligman et al., 2009). Well-being is linked to a wide assortment of positive outcomes among school-aged youth, including increased academic achievement, greater student engagement and enjoyment, and improved behaviors among students (Rashid, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). Thus, the observed increase in student well-being within the present study holds promise as a model for interventions intended to enhance the achievement of urban, minority adolescents.

These findings also support previous findings that have identified schools as settings for change. On average, students spend approximately 30 to 35 hours per week in school, totaling almost 15,000 hours by the time of high school graduation (Rutter & Maughan, 2002). Given the amount of time that students spend in school during their formative years, schools are positioned to foster both academic growth and character development, and previous research has demonstrated the ability for schools to act as a setting for change (Clonan et al., 2004; Huebner & Hills, 2011; Smith, Boutte, Zigler, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). This study supports efforts to design and implement character education programs in schools. In building upon students' character strengths, schools might be able to create happier, more engaged students resulting in possible increases in academic achievement and improvements in behaviors. For example, the Penn Resiliency Program was designed and implemented in an effort to increase students' ability to manage daily stressors and problems by promoting optimism, flexibility, assertiveness, creativity, decision-making, and other coping and problem-solving skills to students (Seligman et al., 2009). Implemented in diverse settings, Penn Resiliency Program has been found to reduce and prevent symptoms of depression among children and adolescents (Brunwasser, Gillham, & Kim, 2009) and to reduce feelings of helplessness and increase optimism (Brunwasser et al., 2009).

The present study also built upon previous research by investigating the link between the implementation of a character strengths program in an urban school and an emerging model of adolescent well-being and flourishing. Specifically, this study employed the EPOCH model of adolescent well-being, which values engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness in student well-being, within an urban, school-based character intervention program. The results indicate that character strength programming has an effect on the perseverance, optimism and overall well-being of urban, Black youth. The implications from these findings suggest that a school-based character strengths program can impact well-being and flourishing among urban, Black adolescents. In sum, a link between the introduction of character strengths and increased well-being among urban, Black adolescents was observed, providing further evidence for the utilization of positive psychology teaching applications with diverse, youth populations.

This study also examined specific components of adolescent well-being, as defined by engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness. Consistent with predictions, students in the intervention group reported increases in perseverance and optimism. Inconsistent with predictions, these students did not demonstrate an increase in engagement, connectedness, or happiness. Students in the comparison group did not report increased components of well-being over time.

These results indicate that the components of well-being that were directly taught to students (i.e., perseverance and optimism) resulted in elevated scores. Lessons on perseverance and optimism were integrated into the intervention due to their strong relationship with other components of adolescent well-being. Perseverance was also chosen as a topic of focus due to its connection to increased academic achievement and decreased behavioral problems, two important factors in a school setting. The results of the study suggest the "teach-ability" of at least two components of well-being, the character strengths of optimism and perseverance.

In addition to well-being, the current study also explored specific character strengths endorsed by participants. Accordingly, participants in the intervention group completed the VIA-Youth measure to identify students' 24 character strengths that fall into six virtue categories—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the general population, the most prevalent character strengths are kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment (Park et al., 2006). Among youth, the most common strengths are gratitude, humor, and love (Park & Peterson, 2008). In this study, the most common signature strengths were gratitude, humor, hope, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty and excellence.

In considering the character strengths most frequently endorsed by students in this study (i.e., gratitude, humor, hope, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty), the most striking finding is that these five strengths comprise the transcendence virtue, which consists of strengths that provide meaning through connection to the larger universe. Given the inherent complexity in finding meaning within the universe, the transcendence virtue is not common among the general youth population. Yet, this virtue was common among participants in this study. When observed among adolescents, transcendence strengths have been found to be predictive of well-being and life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2011; Shoshani & Slone, 2012).

This finding suggests a capacity for students in this study to transcend beyond present experience, allowing these individuals to rise above the here and now to maintain hope for a better future. This finding is particularly relevant as urban youth face many inherent, environmental challenges, including issues of physical safety and violence, inadequate housing and resources, social and economic inequality, and issues related to other daily stressors (Tolan, Sherrod, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). Additionally, rates of academic failure and school dropout are disproportionately higher among youth that are raised in urban, impoverished settings (Seidman, Aber, & French, 2004). Within the transcendence virtue, humor, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty and excellence are connected to successful recovery from challenges, including physical illness and trauma (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Given this finding, the use of strengths in the transcendence virtue may be adaptive to growth and development for urban youth, aiding these youth in overcoming adversity by developing a set of resilience skills. Specifically, these strengths facilitate transcendence from the here and now to allow students to remain focused on a positive outcome. Accordingly, further exploration into the use of specific transcendence strengths (e.g., humor, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty and excellence) in facilitating posttraumatic growth in urban, minority adolescents is warranted.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study observed the link between character education and well-being in a school setting, it was subject to certain limitations. First, the duration of the present study was limited to a 1-week intervention. This short period was sufficient to yield positive effects at its conclusion, but not to sustain those effects to follow-up. Future studies should further explore the link between sustained engagement in character strength activities and well-being among urban adolescents to determine if students who continue to practice using their strengths will demonstrate long-term, positive effects in their well-being. Future research should also continue to assess the relationship between student engagement in character strength programming and academic achievement among urban adolescents.

Second, it is possible that the presence of the researcher, a novel experience for students, influenced responses. For reasons both of eliminating this possible confound and of extending the duration of character education well beyond one week, teachers and other personnel present in the natural school setting should be used as the intervention agents. In the current study, the lead researcher was responsible for planning and teaching the lessons on character strengths. When the study ended, explicit lessons on character strengths also ended, as the teachers did not conduct these on their own. This has future research implications as well; subsequent research should continue to explore the link between character education and well-being of urban students when lessons of character strengths are both implemented by classroom teachers and sustained over time. Future research should also measure the extent to which teachers continue to utilize character strength curricula in their classrooms.

In addition to the findings observed within the intervention and comparison groups, it is also important to note that a difference was observed between the well-being of each group at the start of the intervention. Further analysis uncovered noticeably higher well-being scores among females in the comparison group when compared to the males in the comparison group, and the males and females in the intervention group. The cause of the baseline difference between well-being of the females in comparison group is unknown, as students were matched on demographic variables, including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religiosity. Future research might explore this unexpected finding of higher well-being among female urban youth.

Future studies should also employ additional statistical analyses of demographic factors, including gender. These analyses might provide insight into the development of gender-specific interventions for urban youth. It may also be beneficial to explore the link between character education and well-being when faced with challenges often present in urban environments, including poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of resources.

Concluding Comments

As demonstrated by the present study, a school-based character intervention program can lead to a short-term increase in levels of well-being among urban, Black adolescents. Accordingly, the implications of these findings extend beyond urban adolescents in inner-city schools, to youth in educational institutions throughout the country. As increased well-being is linked to many positive outcomes, it is no longer acceptable for schools to solely focus on academic achievement.

NOTES

1. At the time of the study, the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being was in development and consisted of 25 items. The measure now consists of 20 items.

2. At the time of the study, the VIA-Youth measure consisted of 198 self-report items. Shortly after the completion of the study, a shorter version

of the VIA-Youth was released, consisting of 96 self-report items.

REFERENCES

Aud, S., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Kristapovich, P., Rathbun, A., Wang, X., & Zhang, J. (2013). The condition of education 2013 (NCES 2013-037). *U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics.* Retrieved August 31, 2013 from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013037.pdf

Bolte, A., Goshcke, T., & Kuhl, J. (2003). Emotion and intuition: Effects of positive and negative mood on implicit judgments of semantic coherence. *Psychological Science, 14,* 416–421.

Brunwasser, S. M., Gillham, J. E., Kim, E. S. (2009). A meta-analytic review of the Penn Resiliency Program's effect on depressive symptoms. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 77*(6), 1042–1054.

Clonan, S. M., Chafouleas, S. M., McDougal, J. L., & Riley-Tillman, T. C. (2004). Positive psychology goes to school: Are we there yet? *Psychology in the Schools, 41*(1), 101–110.

Diener, E., Emmons, R., Larsen, J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*(1), 71–75.

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1087–1101.

Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology, 2,* 300–319.

Fredrickson, B. L., & Branigan, C. (2005). Positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. *Cognition & Emotion, 19,* 313–332.

Gillham, J., Adams-Deutsch, Z., Werner, J., Reivich, K., Coulter-Heindl, V., Linkins, M., … Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). Character strengths predict subjective well-being during adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(1), 31–44.

Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2004). The early catastrophe, *Education Review, 77*(1), 100–118.

Huebner, E. S., & Hills, K. J. (2011). Commentary: Does the positive psychology movement have legs for children in schools? *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(1), 88–94.

Isen, A. M., Daubman, K. A., & Nowicki, G. P. (1987). Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52,* 1122–1131.

Isen, A. M., Rosenzweig, A. S., & Young, M. J. (1991). The influence of positive affect on clinical problem solving. *Medical Decision Making, 11,* 221–227.

Kern, M. L., & Steinberg, L. (2012). *EPOCH: An initial validation study.* Unpublished manuscript.

Kern, M. L., Benson, L., Steinberg, E., & Steinberg, L. (2014). *The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being.* Unpublished manuscript.

King, M. L. (1947). The purpose of education. *Morehouse College: Maroon Tiger.*

Koebler, J. (2011). National high school graduation rates improve. *U.S. News and World Report.* Online. Retrieved January 16, 2012

Kuhl, J. (1983). *Motivation, Konjlikt, und Handlungskontrolle* [Motivation, conflict, and action control]. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.

Kuhl, J. (2000). A function-design approach to motivation and self-regulation: The dynamics of personality system and interactions. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 111–169). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lerner, R. M., & Benson, P. I. (2003). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice.* New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). *Values in Action Inventory (VIA) of Character Strengths for Youth* [Measurement Instrument]. Retrieved from http://www.viacharacter.org.

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2006). Moral competence and character strengths among adolescents: The development and validation of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth. *Journal of Adolescence, 29,* 891–910.

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2008). Positive psychology and character strengths: Application to strengths-based school counseling. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 85–92.

Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). Greater strengths of character and recovery from illness. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 1,* 17–26.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press and Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Rashid, T. (2009). Positive interventions in clinical practice. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session, 65*(5), 461–466.

Rutter, M., & Maughan, B. (2002). School effectiveness findings, 1979–2002. *Journal of School Psychology, 40,* 451–475.

Seidman, E., Aber, J. L., & French, S. E. (2004). The organization of schooling and adolescent development. In K. I. Maton, C. J. Schellenbach, B. J. Leadbeater, & A. L. Solarz (Eds.), *Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths-based research and policy* (pp. 233–250). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Seligman, M. E. P., 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. P., Rashid, T., & Parks, A. C. (2006). Positive psychotherapy. *American Psychologist,* 774–789.

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60,* 410–421.

Shoshani, A., & Slone, M. (2012). Middle school transition from the strengths perspective: Young adolescents' character strengths, subjective well-being, and school adjustment. *Journal of Happiness Studies,* 1–19.

Smith, E. P., Boutte, G. S., Zigler, E., Finn-Stevenson, M. (2004). Opportunities for schools to promote resilience in children and youth. In K. I. Maton, C. J. Schellenbach, B. J. Leadbeater, & A. L. Solarz (Eds.), *Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths-based research and policy* (pp. 213–231). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Snyder, C. R., Hoza, B., Pelham, W.E., Rapoff, M., Ware, L., Danovsky, M., … Stahl, K. J. (1997). The development and validation of the Children's Hope scale. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 22,* 399–421.

Swadener, B.B. (2010). "At risk" or "at promise"? From deficit constructions of the "other childhood" to possibilities for authentic alliances with children and families. *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies, 3*(1), 7–29.

Tolan, P. H., Sherrod, L., Gorman-Smith, D., & Henry, D. (2003). Building protection, support, and opportunity for inner-city children and youth and their families. In K. I. Maton, C. W., Schellenbach, B. J. Leadbeater, & A. L. Solarz (Eds.), *Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths-based research and policy* (p. 193–211). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Wilson, K., Gullone, E., & Moss, S. A. (1998). The youth version of the positive and negative affect schedule: A psychometric validation. *Behaviour Change, 15,* 187–193.