Character Education to Address Elementary Students' Emotional and Behavioral Development: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

Most states now require some form of character education to be taught to students in the United States. At the same time, school personnel are encouraged to use evidence-based practices to best support their students' needs. A current character education program based in positive psychology – The Positivity Project (P2) – is experiencing massive uptake in schools across the nation, but to date there is no experimental research available on the program. The current study includes a quasi-experimental design to investigate the relationship between fourth-grade students' exposure to the P2 curriculum and changes in their teacher-reported emotional and behavioral problems. Results indicated that compared to a control group, students experiencing the P2 program demonstrated significantly greater reductions in their externalizing ($g = .6$) and internalizing ($g = .7$) behaviors across the first half of the school year. Future research needs are proposed.

Keywords: character education, positive psychology, behavior problems, intervention

1. Introduction

Schools in the United States are increasingly being held accountable to students' social-emotional learning (SEL), given the realization that these competencies are critical to students' educational and post-secondary outcomes (Garwood, 2022; Jeynes, 2019). Multiple meta-analyses have documented the benefit of SEL interventions to not only emotional and behavioral development, but also students' academic achievement (Taylor et al., 2017). The disruption to students' SEL development brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the need for schools to attend to these competencies in their students (Zieher et al., 2021). There is no shortage of research-based SEL programs from which to choose for use with students. Indeed, programs such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Greenberg et al., 2001) and Second Step (Low et al., 2016) are often implemented by schools across the United States as they seek to improve young children's SEL outcomes. Fewer programs are available that focus on students' character strengths (i.e., character education [CE]). However, the majority of states in the nation now require some form of CE be taught to students (Jeynes, 2019).

1.1 Character Education

There is significant overlap in CE and SEL programming, in that both focus on students' so-called soft skills; however, there are also some key distinctions between the two approaches. Whereas SEL focuses on skills and attitudes, CE emphasizes values (Elias et al., 2007). In other words, CE is concerned with "right thinking" and "knowing the good", while SEL centers on problem-solving (p. 168). Essentially, CE enables students to be effective members of society by instilling in them the ways of behaving and thinking that help people to reach their goals in life (Peterson & Selieman, 2004). Berkowitz and Bier (2005) published the first comprehensive review of CE in the school-based literature, including 73 studies spanning 1945-2004. Their results indicated that when CE is implemented in elementary school, the positive effects last into high school and even extend into the post-secondary world. A recent meta-analysis by Jeynes (2019), spanning 45 years of research and 40 individual studies, found significant overall effect sizes (Cohen's *d*, beta weights) for CE programming on student outcomes in the following domains: academic achievement (.29), behavior (.30), reading (.45). mathematics (.42), and social skills (.25-.73). Given these promising outcomes, schools may be in search of effective CE programming to support their students. Recently, a new CE program – the Positivity Project (P2) – has been experiencing significant uptake by schools across the United States.

According to the website (https://posproject.org), the P2 program was first implemented by one elementary school with 480 students in the 2015-2016 school year. For the 2022-2023 school year, the P2 program has now been implemented by over 800 partner schools with nearly 500,000 students in 27 states. Despite its rapid growth, there remains no experimental research on the program. The massive uptake of P2 across the United States calls for an empirically sound investigation of the CE program. Furthermore, the theoretical foundation undergirding the P2 program – positive psychology – is also growing in popularity among educational intervention researchers (see Raley et al., 2021).

1.2 Positive Psychology to Inform Character Education

Table 1. 24 Character Strengths from Positive Psychology within P2

Virtue	Strength
Wisdom and Knowledge	• Creativity
	• Curiosity
	• Open-mindedness
	• Love of Learning
	• Perspective
Courage	• Bravery
	• Persistence
	• Integrity
	• Enthusiasm
Humanity	• Love
	• Kindness
	• Social Intelligence
Justice	• Teamwork
	• Fairness
	• Leadership
Temperance	• Forgiveness
	• Humility
	• Prudence
	• Self-control
Transcendence	• Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
	• Gratitude
	• Optimism
	• Humor
	• Purpose

Rather than the traditional approach to educational practice of assessment and intervention on pathology, the theory of positive psychology asserts the primary focus should be to maximize the unique positive character strengths that exist within all people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other words, positive psychology is concerned with what happens when things go right, rather than wrong (Sheldon & King, 2001). Within the field of positive psychology, there are 6 overall human values that include 24 unique character strengths (see Table 1 for list of these values and strengths included in the P2 curriculum). Strengths are "pre-existing qualities that arise naturally, feel authentic, are intrinsically motivating to use, and energizing" (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010, p. 151). Positive psychology does not ignore the negative; instead, it emphasizes the positive so that when things go wrong, the person is able to overcome obstacles (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other

words, maximizing one's strengths of character helps to minimize the disruption to one's life related to psychological or environmental challenges (Diener, 2009; Terjesen et al., 2004). Positive psychology is not meant to replace other educational or psychological paradigms regarding wellbeing; on the contrary, it is intended to be a supplement to those theories (Niemic et al., 2017). Identifying and accentuating students' areas of strength may allow researchers and practitioners to design effective practices to support students' educational needs (Raley et al., 2021).

1.3 Positive Psychology and Students with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties

Much of what is done in the school-based intervention literature revolves around a model of identifying a problem with a student, diagnosing its underlying cause, and then providing intervention to remediate the difficulty (i.e., the medical model; Massoumeh & Leila, 2012). This approach is especially true for students who exhibit externalizing (e.g., aggression, non-compliance) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) behaviors in schools (i.e., emotional and behavioral disorders [EBD]; Maag & Katsiyannis, 2008). Typically, throughout history, EBD has been seen as a disorder for children to overcome. A deficit model approach was often undertaken, wherein students' struggles came to define them, which resulted in undue stigma (Farmer, 2013). As a result, schools began adopting three-tiered models of intervention – most commonly referred to as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) in the behavior realm – to support students with EBD (Mitchell et al., 2019). The use of PBIS has become widespread across the United States, but despite its ubiquitous nature in schools, PBIS does not specifically address students' character strengths.

1.4 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between exposure to the P2 character education program and elementary students' teacher-reported externalizing and internalizing behaviors. We focused on behavior problems for two reasons. First, we wished to avoid overprescribing the outcome variable by simply measuring changes in students' character strengths over time. Second, we sought to determine whether an CE intervention informed by positive psychology could indeed address student difficulties and not just build on pre-existing strengths. One research question guided the design and data analysis for this study: Does exposure to the P2 character education program result in a significant decrease in elementary students' externalizing and internalizing behaviors?

2. Method

2.1 Setting and Participants

The study took place in two neighboring, rural school districts in a northeastern state in the 2022-23 school year. Each district had one public elementary school and both schools were in the same low-income county, with 57% of the respective students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. One school had five fourth grade classrooms and the other school had three fourth grade classrooms. The total sample ($N = 160$) included the following

demographics: 50.6% female, 4.4% diverse (i.e., not White), 11.8% receiving special education services, and 3.8% English language learners. Demographic and descriptive data for the 160 participants, separated by treatment and control group, is available in Table 1. Based on results from *t*-tests and chi-square difference tests, there were no significant differences between students in the intervention and control groups.

Table 1. Demographic and Descriptive Data for Sample by Group Assignment

Item	*n*	Treatment (*N* = 82)	*n*	Control (*N* = 78)
Sex (%)				
Female	40	48.78	41	52.56
Male	42	51.22	37	47.44
Race (%)				
Diverse	4	4.88	3	3.85
Non-Diverse	78	95.12	75	96.15
Special Education (%)				
Yes	10	12.20	9	11.54
No	72	87.80	69	88.46
English Language Learner (%)				
Yes	3	3.66	3	3.85
No	79	96.34	75	96.15
Externalizing Behaviors, *M* (*SD*)	82	4.80 (1.14)	78	4.74 (1.38)
Internalizing Behaviors, *M* (*SD*)	82	3.38 (1.08)	78	3.19 (1.05)

Note. No significant differences between groups on any variables (all p-values > .05)

2.2 Baseline Equivalency and Attrition

We examined baseline equivalence for the treatment and control groups using the pretest externalizing and internalizing behaviors scores. The What Works Clearinghouse 5.0 Evidence Standards (WWC; 2022) require that equivalence, defined as standardized mean differences less than .25 standard deviation units, should be established using pretest scores from the same measure or domain of the outcome. Based on pretest means and standard deviations, we established equivalence for both externalizing (g = 0.05) and internalizing (g = 0.18) behaviors. We also included pretest scores, along with student demographics (no significant differences between groups), as covariates in our analyses for statistical baseline adjustment. The treatment (*n* = 82) and control (*n* = 78) groups experienced similar levels of attrition form pre- to post-test. Three students (3.6%) in the treatment group and two students (2.5%) in the control group were no longer present by post-test. All five students were white students who were not receiving special education services and who were not English language learners.

2.3 Design

To investigate the effects of the P2 character education program on fourth grade students' externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, we implemented a pre/post quasi-experimental design examining existing data. Both schools were self-identified as PBIS schools. At Tier 1, both schools implemented evidence-based practices regarding classroom and behavior management (e.g., token economies, group contingencies) to explicitly teach behavioral expectations. Tier-2 supports were evident in both schools in the form of small group supports for targeted students, such as social skills groups and peer tutoring practices. At the Tier-3 level, students in both schools experienced one-on-one interventions, such as behavior contracts, to support those students who were not responding to secondary supports. Both schools had PBIS teams responsible for analyzing data collected from teachers, which included systematic screening data (see Measures). These data were collected three times per year - fall (September), winter (December), and spring (May) - and served as the existing data for the study. Based on current school practices, the eight fourth-grade classrooms across the two schools were divided in the following way: one school (School 1) had both treatment and control classrooms and the other school (School 2) had only control classrooms. School 1 included four treatment classrooms and one control classroom. School 2 included three control classrooms. There were 82 students in the treatment group and 78 students in the control group.

2.4 Intervention

P2 is a web-based professional development curriculum focused on CE that provides teachers with daily, 15-minute lesson plans across the school year. Schools using P2 are trained using 100% online delivery of all professional development (PD) and training materials. In the beginning of the school year, participating teachers view the P2 100 online video involving a 3-hour training in the 24 character strengths from positive psychology and instructions on how to implement the curriculum throughout the school year. The treatment teachers were provided online access to P2's digital resources, including 32 weeks of daily lesson slide decks differentiated by character strength and grade level, which are designed to take up only 15-minutes of class time. Within each set of slides, teachers are provided a 3-5min opening activity (e.g., videos to watch), which is then followed by a discussion of the specific character strength for that day and week. Guiding questions for the teacher to instruct the class are also provided in the slide deck. Teachers are instructed to not alter or edit the slide decks, but they are encouraged to use their autonomy and knowledge of their students to extend the content of the lessons into other parts of the school day, should they choose to do so. Students learn each strength through explicit teaching from the slide decks and by teacher use of a common vocabulary.

A typical week of P2 lessons may follow a schedule such as the following: Days 1 and 2 involved introducing the character strength, reinforcing its meaning, formatively assessing students' understanding, and holding group discussions to clarify any questions; Days 3 and 4 involve engaging students with an activity centered around the strength and more small and large group discussions; and Day 5 involves a review of the strength and possibly providing

students time to reflect on the strength through journaling.

2.5 Procedures

The premeasure on students' externalizing and internalizing behaviors was collected in September of the school year, about a month after school had begun. The time that elapsed between school starting and pre-assessment was needed so teachers could get to know their students and understand their needs. This work met university criteria for operational improvement activities not requiring institutional review board review. After data collection was complete in both groups, teachers in the treatment group began implementing the P2 curriculum in their classrooms. In addition to their regular PBIS practices, the CE lessons from P2 were delivered by all treatment group classroom teachers over the next three months, while teachers in the fourth grade classrooms in the control group continued business as usual with PBIS practices. In the last full week of school before the winter break in December, teachers in both groups collected post-assessment data.

2.6 Measures

The Student Risk Screening Scale – Internalizing and Externalizing (SRSS-IE; Lane et al., 2019) is a systematic screening tool designed to assess students for levels of emotional and behavioral risk related to internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The 12-item measure contains a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = *Never*, 1 = *Occasionally*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Frequently*) and asks teachers to rate how often they see students experiencing exhibiting certain types of emotional and behavioral struggles (e.g., stealing, peer rejection, anxious, emotionally flat, aggressive behavior, shy or withdrawn). Total scores for each subscale are calculated by adding together respective items for externalizing (7 items; range = 0-21) and internalizing (5 items; range = 0-15), as was done in the current study. Scores can also be categorized as placing students in a *no risk*, *some risk*, or *at risk* category for each subscale, which was not used in the current study. The scale has been validated in numerous studies with thousands of elementary-grade students (Lane et al., 2015) and the subscales of internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors demonstrate strong internal consistency and reliability (Lane et al., 2012). In the current study, internal consistency estimates for internalizing behaviors ($\alpha = .79$) and externalizing behaviors ($\alpha = .76$) were both acceptable.

2.7 Fidelity of Implementation

Treatment fidelity was assessed by means of teacher self-report. Teachers were provided a weekly checklist of CE lessons to be taught throughout intervention, following the timeline prescribed by the online P2 materials. At the end of each week teachers noted how many P2 lessons they completed during that time, with the optimal expectation being to deliver one lesson per day (i.e., five per week). The percentage of lessons completed per week was expressed as a percentage (e.g., 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%) and these percentages were combined and averaged for each teacher across the intervention period. Across the four teachers, overall fidelity of implementation ranged from 87%-100%, with an overall mean of 94%.

2.8 Data Analysis

To determine the relationship between treatment teachers' use of P2 and students' teacher-reported externalizing and internalizing behaviors, multi-level modeling (MLM) analyses were conducted using the MIXED procedure in SAS 9.4. There were two random levels in the model: students and classrooms. The use of MLM was necessary because students were nested within classrooms and intraclass correlations (ICCs) for externalizing behaviors (.39) and internalizing behaviors (.33) indicated a moderate level of dependency in the data. Three-level MLM analyses accounting for nesting at the school/district level were not necessary as ICCs for externalizing (.08) and internalizing (.06) behaviors suggested little dependency at this level.

For the two-level models for each subscale, the dependent variable in each model was the respective post-intervention SRSS-IE subscale score. Covariates included sex (female = 0, male = 1), racial diversity (white = 0, diverse = 1), special education status (0 = not receiving services, 1 = receiving services), English language learner (0 = no, 1 = yes), and preintervention scores on the SRSS-IE subscales. Group membership (i.e., treatment or control) was a fixed factor in each of the models. Following suggestions from the WWC (2022), significant treatment effects were calculated using Hedge's *g*.

3. Results

Table 2. MLM Effects for Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors

Fixed Effects/Components	B	SE	g
Internalizing Behaviors			
Pretest	0.83***	0.04	
Sex	-0.05	0.10	
Racial Diversity	0.03	0.20	
Special Education Status	0.15	0.15	
ELL Status	0.04	0.21	
Group	-0.98***	0.10	0.60
Externalizing Behaviors			
Pretest	0.61***	0.07	
Sex	-0.04	0.18	
Racial Diversity	-0.07	0.28	
Special Education Status	0.17	0.28	
ELL Status	-0.11	0.39	
Group	-0.91***	0.18	0.77

Note. Bolded *g* indicates significant effect size. MLM = multi-level modeling.

***$p < .001$

There were no significant differences in students' externalizing behaviors or internalizing behaviors at pretest. At posttest, independent *t*-tests indicated significant reductions in students' emotional and behavioral problems, which favored students in the treatment group. Externalizing behaviors for the treatment group (*M* = 3.39, *SD* = 1.34) were significantly lower than those of the control group (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.43), $t(153) = 4.13$, $p < .001$. A main effect (see Table 2) was found for group ($b = -0.98$, $p < .001$), such that students in the treatment group had significantly lower posttest scores for externalizing behaviors, resulting in a moderate effect ($g = .60$). Internalizing behaviors for the treatment group (*M* = 2.17, *SD* = 1.11) were significantly lower than those of the control group (*M* = 3.00, *SD* = 1.02), $t(153) = 4.84$, $p < .001$. A main effect (see Table 2) was found for group ($b = -0.91$, $p < .001$), such that students in the treatment group had significantly lower posttest scores for internalizing behaviors, resulting in a moderate-to-large effect ($g = .77$).

4. Discussion

The current study represents the first experimental evaluation of a CE program – P2 – that is experiencing significant uptake by school districts throughout the United States. Results indicated that across one half of the school year, fourth grade students exposed to the P2 curriculum experienced significantly greater reductions in both teacher-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, as compared to students in control classrooms. Furthermore, teachers reported a relatively high level of fidelity of implementation. This finding is important because research suggest only about 50% of teachers implement SEL interventions with adequate levels of fidelity (Low et al., 2016).

The preliminary nature of the research base for the P2 program is reason to pause and to proceed with caution regarding implications and recommendations; however, the findings of this study are important for three key reasons. First, an oft-cited criticism of positive psychology is that it focuses only on student strengths and ignores areas of difficulty (Held, 2004). However, results from the current study indicate that exposing students to a CE program based in positive psychology is related to reductions in those students' emotional and behavioral difficulties. Second, students and teachers are returning to the classroom fulltime in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and many are sure to be experiencing varying degrees of trauma (Zieher et al., 2021). School leaders are in need of effective programming to address students social-emotional-behavioral needs (Gimbert et al., 2021). The strengths-based approach found within P2 may be an effective option, but more research is needed. Finally, as schools move to more inclusive models of education, there is a need to address one of the greatest challenges in pursuit of true inclusion: teachers' ability to manage classroom behavior (McKenna et al., 2021). A class-wide intervention focused on students' strengths, which is also capable of reducing behavior problems, may help in that mission.

4.1 Limitations and Recommendations

Although the study was conceptualized to meet WWC standards for quasi-experimental designs (WWC, 2022), there are limitations to be considered when reviewing the findings.

First, the sample was racially homogenous and future studies should explore the effects of P2 with more diverse students. Second, the small sample size does not allow for exploration of differential effects by student group. It may be informative to investigate in future studies the effect of P2 on students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behavior. Larger samples from more geographically diverse populations would also be beneficial. Third, all data for the study came from teachers and there is always the risk of self-report bias when collecting such data. Future studies could complement the findings here with additional measures of student behavior (e.g., student self-report, researcher observations). Fourth, social validity data should be collected in future studies of P2 to better ascertain teacher and student perspectives of the program. Finally, randomized controlled trials of P2 are needed to investigate with the greatest rigor its potential effectiveness for schools adopting the program.

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