

Commentary

Positive Psychology and Strengths-Based Interventions (SBIs): Implications for Uses with Special Student Populations (Special Needs, P-3, Gifted)

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Abstract: In 2000, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi published the highly influential “Positive Psychology: An Introduction” in *American Psychologist*, and with it, they advocated for a strengths-based approach for helping people live a “good life”. Building on that work, positive psychology was further conceptualized as consisting of meta-psychological and practical aspects. The meta-psychological constitutes the aims or “grand vision” of what positive psychology stands for, whereas the practical constitutes the “nuts-and-bolts” elements that should be focused on in developing interventions. In the present commentary, we build on this previous work to propose a “positive psychology pragmatic framework” to develop strengths-based interventions (SBIs) for use with special student populations; in this case, students with special needs and P-3 and gifted students. Relatedly, we review the empirical and theoretical/conceptual literature relevant to the use of SBIs within each subpopulation as well as discuss some characteristics that make each subpopulation unique. Consequently, to the highest degree possible, we advocate for integrating intrapersonal, interpersonal, contextual/environmental, systemic, and developmental factors in developing SBIs and we make specific recommendations for future research through the lens of this proposed framework.



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1. Implications for Use with Special Student Populations (Special Needs, P-3, Gifted)

Ever since publication of the highly influential “Positive Psychology: An Introduction” in 2000 by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi in *American Psychologist* (As of this writing, Google Scholar lists that work as having been cited 30,764 times thus illustrating its influence), there seems to have been a shift away from outdated models (i.e., deficit models) of human functioning toward healthier and more adaptive models of explaining the conditions under which human beings flourish, e.g., [1]. Broadly, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi noted,

“The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, authentic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic” [2] (p. 5).

Under this broader positive psychology umbrella, others have developed a narrower definition of what is meant by positive psychology. Building upon Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s earlier work, ref. [3] developed a workable definition of positive psychology that

included meta-psychological and practical components. At the meta-psychological level, a “grand vision” for what the *aims* [emphasis original] of positive psychology should be was presented, including a synthesis of both positive and negative aspects of human functioning and, in the end, “this synthesis then becomes the new thesis” (p. 6) or starting point for subsequent research and intervention. In the context of the present discussion, this would mean that strengths-based interventions (SBIs) should include an emphasis on the positive, but not at the exclusion of the negative. Others have referred to this as taking a dual-factor approach to understanding mental health [4,5]. Of greater relevance for our commentary was Linley et al.’s focus on the pragmatic in positive psychology. Specifically, in building SBIs among special populations (i.e., special needs, P-3, and gifted), we would focus on the four factors they listed as constituting the pragmatic aspect of positive psychology, *wellsprings, processes, mechanisms, and outcomes* [emphasis original], and combine these with an integrative approach to understanding growth (i.e., positive) trajectories.

According to [3] wellsprings refer to the “precursors and facilitators” of processes and mechanisms, including genetics and early environmental experiences, that “allow the development of strengths and virtues” (p. 6). Accordingly, processes are defined as “those psychological ingredients (e.g., strength and virtues) that lead to the good life, or equally the obstacles to leading a good life. . . positive psychology should seek to understand the factors that facilitate optimal functioning as much as those that prevent it” (p. 6). Mechanisms refer to the “extra-psychological factors that facilitate (or impede) the pursuit of a good life” (p. 6). These would include, for example, more distal social environments (e.g., work or community) and broader systems (e.g., cultural or political), in which “our lives are inextricably embedded” (p. 6). Finally, outcomes, of course, would refer to “subjective, social, and cultural states that characterize a good life” (p. 6). Examples of outcomes would include subjective well-being, positive communities at the interpersonal level, and economic and environmental policies at the social (or systemic) level.

To apply positive psychology principles to SBIs for special student populations through this pragmatic approach, we argue that it is equally important to consider the multitude of factors that influence growth trajectories for all students in an integrative way. In our present discussion, we advocate for a focus on the intrapersonal (e.g., self-esteem), interpersonal (e.g., teacher-student interactions), contextual/environmental (e.g., classroom climate), and systemic (e.g., broader cultural beliefs and practices); combined, these should be explored along developmental pathways. By developmental, we propose this to mean exploring interaction differences by group (e.g., childhood vs. adolescence vs. adulthood) and longitudinally, through cumulative deficit or growth pathways (i.e., how growth/development compounds over time). Relatedly, other important assumptions we are making with this framework are: first, all students, regardless of any unique challenges, can live a “good life,” again, however defined; and second, that the most effective interventions are best examined and implemented through the application of these integrative principles that acknowledge the complexity of person-in-context interactions that shape human experiences. Finally, in line with the principles of positive psychology discussed earlier, we believe that it is important to develop interventions that not only maximize strengths where possible, but also minimize risks wherever possible [2]. In the next few sections, we first detail the characteristics that should be considered when designing SBIs with special populations, which is then followed by a summary of the relevant research that has been conducted with each population.

For this special issue, we chose to focus on groups of students with special needs who reflect the collective areas of expertise of each of the guest editors. However, it is our contention that the principles presented and discussed here would be applicable with other groups of students given the multitude of research on applying principles of positive psychology across many domains. More specifically, considering the factors that influence one’s adaptations and explaining how SBIs work across each subpopulation, we argue that the framework works especially well given the consideration of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental/contextual, systemic, and developmental in designing SBIs.

2. Characteristics of Students with Special Needs

Given its preventative or early intervention focus, most SBIs target general student populations or students with risk factors to promote resilience or positive well-being. Students identified with special needs just received emergent attention in research and the application of SBIs. In this special issue of *Education Sciences*, we broadly identified children and adolescents with special needs, which include those with identified disabilities and those without identified disabilities but considered to have special needs developmentally or psychologically. Considering the factors that influence one's adaptations and explain how SBIs work, this population is "unique" across intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental/contextual, systemic, and developmental levels.

First, students with special needs typically have deficits in one or multiple areas (e.g., learning, emotion regulation, attention, and social competency), which results in more difficult situations they have to deal with than their normally developed peers. These difficulties further create more challenges for students to cope with and raise the risk of psychological vulnerability (e.g., lower self-esteem) and problems (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal, or acting out).

Second, when special needs are recognizable, these students usually receive more attention and different treatment from people in their surroundings, manifested in various forms, such as different expectations, misunderstanding, or criticism. Being different is especially challenging during adolescence, when seeking peer conformity and approval is rooted in their developmental needs. When the general classroom or school climate is not supportive of students with special needs, these students are easy targets for problematic peer interactions (e.g., teasing, aggression, social exclusion, and bullying). Finally, depending on the level of students' functioning and needs, they likely receive additional support from family members, teachers, and peers and have accommodations in schools or other interventions provided by professionals (e.g., counselors and school nurses). Hence, students' special needs are not simply individual characteristics but are accompanied by different school and life experiences, all together permeating into their perceptions, beliefs, psychological processes, and behaviors.

Conceptually, the strengths approach can be especially helpful and needed among this population because strengths are the missing pieces in the deficit model that applies to populations with special needs. Also, how SBIs can be effectively implemented in students with special needs likely differs from those for students without special needs; the intervention needs to be tailored to students' areas of deficits, weaknesses, or needs and delivered in small group or one-to-one sessions (instead of large group administration). Moreover, it is unknown if SBIs work for students with special needs, and the mechanism would be different from that in normally developed students.

3. Characteristics of P-3 Students

The ages of children from preschool to 3rd grade vary slightly depending on the state of residence (in the U.S.) and date of birth, but generally speaking, preschoolers are 3-to-5 years old, kindergarteners are 5-to-6 years old, and so on, first grade (6-to-7), second grade (7-to-8), and third grade (8-to-9). Research in early childhood and elementary school has taken a holistic approach, especially as it relates to SBIs, in that it recognizes that children's cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development are interrelated [6]. Collectively, resounding emphasis is placed on the importance of personal growth and development [7], social and emotional well-being [8], resiliency [9,10], and motivation as the pathways to academic achievement and life-long success [11,12]. Recent P-3 SBI literature, albeit limited, alerts practitioners and scholars about the gaps in research related to positive psychology and the positive implications on children, families, teachers, and schools.

Addressing the needs of young children requires incorporating interventions that comprehensively promote their growth and well-being (i.e., interpersonal, interpersonal, and contextual). Early childhood and elementary students can be considered part of a special population when thinking about SBIs because of their vulnerabilities in the following

areas: (1) critical periods of development; (2) brain and neurological maturation; (3) early experiential impact; (4) environmental sensitivity; (5) importance of developmentally appropriate milestone attainment; and (6) early detection promotes preventive and early intervention opportunities.

Early childhood and elementary school years are complex, primarily due to the accelerated rate of development compared to any other time of life. During early childhood and elementary years, children acquire important developmental milestones; for example, early discovery of self (i.e., who am I), forming secure attachments (e.g., caretakers and friends), developing self-regulation skills, including emotion regulation, and acquiring foundational academic knowledge. Young children are highly sensitive to their surroundings (i.e., environment), including family dynamics, school atmosphere, and community support. Positive experiences and supportive relationships during these formative years can foster resilience and promote healthy social and emotional development [13]. Strengths-based interventions address and target these milestones to support children and can assist children in reaching their full potential. Early identification and intervention can prevent or mitigate future challenges. By focusing on strengths and building upon existing assets, interventions can help to address emerging issues before they escalate, promoting both academic success and socio-emotional well-being [14]. The experiences and skills children develop during early childhood and elementary school greatly influence their later academic achievement, social relationships, and emotional well-being [15].

4. Characteristics of Gifted Students

Like students with special needs and P-3 students, viewing gifted students as being a special population can also be viewed through our proposed integrative framework. As we will discuss, SBIs should be designed to integrate as many of these aspects as possible to design and implement effective intervention strategies [16]. From a positive psychology and SBI perspective, two other ideas are noteworthy. First, previous work has shown that gifted students, because of their advanced cognitive capacity but incongruent emotional maturity, may generate unrealistic expectations from parents, teachers, and peers e.g., [17]. This may in turn lead the gifted student to feel “out-of-sync” with their school and family environments, and these complications may be accentuated when broader education systems do not recognize gifted students as having special curricular or social and emotional needs e.g., [16], and when giftedness is extreme i.e., higher IQ [18,19]. Therefore, development may best be viewed through a person–environment fit theory lens e.g., [20], one in which gifted student functioning is optimized through a congruence of personal academic, cognitive, social, and emotional needs, and corresponding attempts through environmental support or dyadic interactions (e.g., parent–child) that meet the gifted student where they are in terms of need. A second idea that has relevance in exploring how positive psychology, SBIs, and giftedness come together is in examining whether gifted students are more resilient or more at-risk because of their giftedness e.g., [21]. For example, [22] argued that as a function of their advanced cognitive ability, gifted students may be uniquely positioned to seek out or utilize psychological and social resources when they face challenges or adversity, although the “out-of-sync” experience may complicate this relationship as giftedness becomes more extreme e.g., higher IQ [23].

5. Review of SBI Literature

5.1. Students with Special Needs

SBIs have gained increasingly significant attention in school settings as their principles and goals fit well with modern schools’ philosophy and practice, for reviews, see [24,25]. To provide a quick view of the landscape of the SBI research in these populations, using the general library database, we searched peer-reviewed articles in the past 10 years with “strengths-based intervention” in the title or keywords, yielding a total of 178 papers. After manual screening of the title, keywords, and abstract to identify studies that focused on SBIs in school-aged children and adolescents with specific needs, a total of 17 papers

were located, which provided the basis for this commentary. Among these studies, the intervention target samples included students diagnosed with specific disabilities (e.g., autism) or health needs (e.g., diabetes), and those without a diagnosis but with identified difficulties in common developmental areas (e.g., underachievers and sexual and gender minority youths), and those experiencing high-risk factors in life (e.g., toxic stress in neighborhoods). The quality of the empirical studies varied; several high-quality studies used a quasi-experimental design with follow-ups [26], a single-subject design with a multiple probe model [27,28], mixed methods [29,30], and a couple of studies used multi-informant data e.g., students and teachers [30]; parent-adolescent dyads and diabetes care providers [31].

The most common ways of delivering EBIs to students with special needs are: (1) infusing the concept of strengths or exercise to recognize or use strengths in existing interventions, such as expressive art therapy in school counseling [30], social skill training [27], and civic engagement curriculum [32]; and (2) applying an intervention that is primarily designed to promote a set of strengths e.g., ASSET group counseling and strength first for care coordination [29]. Besides the focus on strengths, other features that describe an EBI include setting specific goals to promote positive well-being or competency at a personal level (e.g., self-esteem, identity, and coping) and positive changes at the contextual level (e.g., relationships and resources) to build connections, such as sense of school connectedness or peer relationships e.g., [32]. Some emergent empirical research efforts in finding better ways to support this population included developing and evaluating EBIs for parents whose children have disabilities e.g., autism [33] or illness e.g., adolescents with diabetes [31], and delivering the intervention using technology e.g., APP [31].

Reports of how EBIs can be applied to other populations, such as students with ADHD [34], learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities [35], intellectual and developmental disabilities [36], and those experiencing adverse life circumstances e.g., homelessness [37], appear to be limited to the conceptual or descriptive level at this time. Clearly, more SBI research in various populations with special needs is needed. Also, the generalizability of the findings cannot be assumed and research on adaptations in different types of settings and cultural contexts is needed.

5.2. P-3 Students

This review follows the search protocol, using the same keywords previously described, but applied to P-3 students. Overall, 16 scholarly articles were identified as using positive psychology and SBI's to promote P-3 students' well-being, and each approach fit some component of our integrated model (i.e., ecological system and personal environment fit). Two articles were meta-analyses, including one on early childhood care and education related to human well-being and development [14], and the other regarding P-3 academic and social-emotional outcomes [11]. Another was a systematic review of elementary growth mindset interventions [15]. All of the other literature was disparate, addressing an assortment of age ranges (e.g., preschool only, K-2, 2nd, and 3rd grade), population (e.g., student, teacher), and topic (e.g., social-emotional, mindset, pedagogy, academic skills). Four articles fell within the desired target population of P-3 [12,38–40]. Five articles focused on early childhood, including three that investigated teachers [38,41,42] and two exploring parents [6] and parent-child [43]. Four articles focused on the elementary education side of the P-3 emphasis, including one investigating 2nd and 3rd grade mindset and motivation [44] and three exploring mindset, including two in teacher training [45,46] and one about teacher's perceptions of growth mindset on children's agency for learning [38].

A synthesis of this literature amounted to four strategic trends described within the integrated model: (a) the interrelationship between developmental domains (e.g., cognitive, social, and emotional); (b) the interrelationship with others and experiences of P-3 students with their self, their culture and background, and the environment; (c) parental involvement; and (d) teachers and school community engagement. The roles of parents, teachers, and community stakeholders in early strengths-based development, teaching, and learning

are most successful when very young children and elementary children are exposed to others with positive beliefs about ways to reach one's full potential and model strengths-based thinking and behaviors consistently, persistently, and encourage the same traits from children during opportunities designed in developmentally appropriate ways to cultivate their strengths.

Savvides and Bond [15] indicated that growth mindset is one positive intervention target that teachers and schools are utilizing in primary education (i.e., students, teachers, and whole schools), but the research overall is small compared to investigations in secondary education and mixed in terms of approach and outcomes. Growth mindset emphasizes failure and mistakes as natural aspects of the learning process, which lead to self-improvement and learning through challenges and persistence [47,48]. Growth mindset has been investigated using children's motivation for writing [44], reading progress [49], and evaluating teacher training in growth mindset [38,45]. Researchers exploring teachers and schools have adopted growth mindset perspectives to promote collaborative behaviors [8,39], and social skills [40], and they respectfully found improved collaboration and social interactions with peers but identified a decrease in fixed mindset thinking.

Other ways in which teachers and schools are collaborating and engaging with communities is using creativity, storytelling, games, and technology to tap into students' full potential and success. Ref. [14] reviewed optimism, growth mindset, and positive psychology in early childhood education and care to explain the connections between individuals, community, and society to promote human flourishing (p. 1). Exploring the existing literature, ref. [14] identified ways early childhood can be a hotbed for development and well-being in which fostering creativity, resilience, self-regulation, prosocial, cognitive prolearning, and resiliency behaviors can have a positive impact on success. Characteristics that have potential for generating a significant and permanent impact on the here-and-now, as well as life-long satisfaction and success, are found to be active engagement with people and spaces, exploration, curiosity, and inquiry skills [12,42].

Ref. [13] found that game-based learning contexts provide significant external influences on children's behavior (e.g., embracing challenges, persistence, and adaptability) because game-based learning involves context-specific engagement and mindful learning experiences, allowing children to understand challenges using creativity and problem solving during mastery achievement. When children experience a feeling of competence, it scaffolds future opportunities for self-learning and self-improvement. Likewise [8] used digital growth mindset messaging with elementary students to understand their emotions when experiencing academic challenges and found that messaging positively influenced students' emotions and disposition during difficult tasks, except the emotion of frustration. There are two important aspects of the study by [8] that might have impacted the students' positive emotional well-being and the interpretation of growth mindset. First, the school was considered affluent compared to most strengths-based research that involves students from low socioeconomic environments [7] or with adverse childhood experiences [6,10]. Consequently, the unique affordances of the sample might have involved privileges that lend more to positive dispositions and emotions. Second, frustration was interpreted as a growth mindset characteristic; however, research regarding frustration is discrepant, in that some researchers have aligned frustration to fixed mindset [47] and others have associated frustration with growth mindset [50,51].

Community-based partnerships are becoming more prominent and productive, particularly in early childhood (e.g., Partnerships, Action, and Collaboration, Together [Project PACT]). According to [39] Project PACT is a multi-stakeholder (i.e., parent/caregiver, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and community agencies) consortium dedicated to equity and opportunities that yield an understanding of specific partner roles and responsibilities while making innovation in students' personal growth and learning a priority. Similarly [52] utilizes a multiple stakeholder, collaborative, culturally sensitive approach (i.e., Tree of Change Model) as an alternative to traditional models. The Tree of Change moves away from deficit models in early education by enhancing strengths-based,

positive opportunities for stakeholders and young students in four phases: (1) areas of strength, (2) areas of development, (3) roots, and (4) leaves. Strengths-based approaches have the capability and resources to have broader and deeper impacts on young students because they involve and promote far more systemic ways of thinking about how interactions among individuals and environmental influences change the experiences of young children and elementary age students [10,11,53].

These same trends could be found in six additional articles identified using the search criteria, but they fell outside the developmental scope of P-3. However, it seems worthwhile and valuable to include them due to the developmental flanking around P-3 and they utilized similar populations; for example [54] explored parents of infants using a strengths-based video-coaching intervention. Likewise [52] explored community stakeholders and parents using The Tree of Change strengths-based consultation approach for the K-12 age group. The four other studies focused on 4th through 10th grade students. [13] used cultural story-based creativity games to explore 5th and 6th graders' growth mindset. [7] investigated students, parents, and teachers regarding growth mindset and student social and emotional skill development. Ref. [55] addressed a strengths-based evaluation of 4th through 6th grade students in a socio-emotional strengths self-report. Last [9] explored 8th to 10th graders about parental influences around well-being, resilient mindset, and mental toughness. These studies are also noteworthy here in terms of future research trajectories because it is typical for researchers to begin with older students and work downward with younger age groups, and all of these peripheral studies were published within the last year; therefore, it is reasonable to believe that these more student-centered and positive approaches will be applied to early childhood and younger elementary school students.

5.3. Gifted Students

To review the SBI literature related to gifted students, we conducted a similar search as for the other populations. Our initial search of this literature yielded only nine papers, and after sorting through them using the above criteria, we were left with only three relevant papers to review. Interestingly, all of these papers were conceptual or commentary in nature, with one providing a review related specifically to SBI literature with respect to gifted students [56]. That said, there is a continued lack of relevant empirical research, which leads to the obvious conclusion that additional research is needed in this area. Given this, our review in this section will focus on obvious conceptual overlaps or connections with our present discussion.

The first paper by [56] was probably the most relevant for our discussion. It provided a review of positive psychology or strength[s]-based interventions as applied to gifted students. Similar to us [56] concluded that no relevant empirical studies had been conducted on this topic with respect to gifted students and advocated for additional empirical research. It seems that this recommendation still stands. Further, their review focused mainly on positive psychology and gifted students, rather than SBIs and gifted students. They supplemented their review with specific recommendations around how to develop SBIs. It is noteworthy that they focused on the development of "morally positively valued traits (i.e., *character strengths*)" [emphasis original] (p. 119). With respect to our framework, this would correspond with the intrapersonal. Specifically, they cited work by [57] in which they proposed a "Values-in-Action" framework that consisted of 24 strengths and 6 virtues. Consequently, each strength was then attached to a corresponding virtue, such that "a virtuous life can be pursued by living the respective strengths; for example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective" (p. 120). In the end, their proposed framework focused on four steps to be completed in sequential order: Step 1: knowing one's strengths, which consisted of exploring which traits applied for each student through exploration; Step 2: sharing common experiences, which consisted of having teachers, students, and peers interact with each other to increase awareness of others' strengths; Step 3: implementation of interventions, which consisted of

ways to increase strengths, especially as relevant to the classroom; and Step 4: evaluation, which consisted of feedback loops for ongoing learning and dialog.

In the second paper by [58] the focus was on exploring how strengths-based interventions could be developed using an RTI approach specifically related to Spanish-speaking English-language learners who were also gifted. For those not familiar with RTI as an intervention framework, it essentially views interventions as happening at three levels (or tiers)—Tier 1 (least restrictive) should help 85–90% of students, Tier 2 (next least restrictive) should target the 5–10% of students who did not respond to Tier 1 interventions, and then students who need to transition to Tier 3 would receive “more frequent assessment and intense intervention” (p. 169)—and especially relevant for gifted students, should be administered in the general education classroom. Under this proposed approach, interventions would focus on developing strengths and “valuing cultural beliefs and practices” (p. 171). In the context of our discussion, this focus on values would correspond to the systemic. Given the focus of delivering interventions in the regular education classroom (and often by the teacher), this would also involve interpersonal (e.g., teacher–student interactions) and contextual/environmental (e.g., classroom structure and practices in AP or IB classes) levels to nurture talent.

The final paper relevant to SBIs with gifted students focused on counseling and clinical work with gifted students and their families. Ref. [23] proposed four principles that could help gifted students seek counseling by focusing on strengths. Specifically, the clinical approach presented consisted of: “(1) the best available empirically-supported treatment protocol on the presenting disorder or disorders, (2) in conjunction with establishing and maintaining a strong therapeutic relationship with the client, and, finally, (3) clinical expertise in the context of considerable supervised experience, and (4) a deep understanding working with this unique population” (p. 145). More specifically, each of these would focus on: (1) the process of change, or applying an eclectic approach through use of “what works” for specific disorders; (2) when treating gifted students, focusing on including parents, parenting and families; (3) focusing on “easily available clinically relevant information. . . on empirically-supported interventions which should guide planned interventions for all clients, including gifted kids” (p. 147); and (4) that the therapeutic relationship with the gifted client (and their families if appropriate) is strong, which would require specific knowledge of how gifted student development is unique. Finally, it was further recommended that all treatment plans follow these guidelines in each case, and that “progress monitoring and ongoing feedback optimizes outcomes” (p. 151). Specifically related to the present discussion, this would mean focusing on the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the contextual/environmental to develop a “strength-based, resiliency-focused counseling approach” (p. 152).

6. Future Research Considerations

6.1. Students with Special Needs

Overall, despite its early stage, the application of a strengths-based approach in interventions for students with disabilities or other special needs demonstrates promise in its effectiveness and feasibility. The findings may be generalized to other types of services by integrating strengths-based strategies into existing, evidence-based practices or intervention programs (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy), or applying the EBIs (e.g., character strengths-based interventions) for populations with disabilities (e.g., students with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays [36] or socio-emotional needs [35]). Further, considerations for EBIs may start during the assessment stage to become part of the recommendations for subsequent or continuous intervention plans. Compared to their normally developed counterparts, an earlier focus on recognizing strengths and building assets may be particularly helpful for vulnerable students to gain more protective factors at both personal and contextual levels to mitigate the risk of future complications resulting from their special needs.

Findings from high-quality studies aligned with this research line hold the potential to influence changes at system levels, especially for schools. For example [26] evaluated a strengths-based career intervention program delivered by social workers for secondary students with mild educational needs (in learning, attention deficits, and socio-emotional problems) and a history of absenteeism and low motivation, and the results showed the significant, positive effects of the program on these students' careers and personal and social development. Their findings influenced the Hong Kong government's education policy, which directed more resources to support career development activities and staff who provide career services at senior secondary schools [26].

Typically, interventions are administered by trained mental health professionals such as counselors, social workers, or research assistants. However, it is also crucial for teachers to understand and feel prepared to work with students with disabilities or other special needs. It is worthwhile to train teachers on how to apply EBI strategies in their classrooms through instruction or other daily practice. Beyond EBIs that are sparsely implemented in individual programs, there is a lack of coordinating the strengths-based approach across different programs or services received by students with special needs. As [30] concluded in their study that supported the effectiveness of using SBIs through expressive art in school counseling for underachieving adolescents, "similar intervention programs in the future be supported by auxiliary individual counseling or solution-focused programs to consolidate the gains from the expressive arts activities".

Reports of system-wide implementation of EBIs are currently rare in the literature, but some initiatives were discussed in the child welfare system [59]. As previously mentioned, schools provide an ideal setting for SBIs to promote resilience and well-being among children with various special needs, and more effort should be directed to integrate the strengths-based approach across different levels (e.g., school, classroom, and individual) and formats (e.g., curriculum, group counseling, and individual behavioral intervention). It goes without saying that there are challenges and barriers for EBIs to be sustainably implemented in the system. To advance EBI research and implementation, future efforts are called for to evaluate different aspects of EBI implementation, such as program acceptability, adaptation to complex or different cultural settings, efficacy of interventions, and fidelity monitoring.

6.2. P-3 Students

The important takeaway messages regarding early childhood and elementary education and the use of positive psychological approaches to SBIs are the following. First, there is growing value, importance, and interest being emphasized in early childhood especially and in elementary age students because teaching and learning in early and formative years can have life-long implications. Second, when researchers and schools form and sustain collaborative relationships around holistic, systemic, and positive approaches to teaching and learning, they create a path of productive discourse, planning, and action. Third, educators, practitioners, and other school personnel are advocates for students, families, teachers, and schools through: (1) faculty and staff training (i.e., professional development); (2) providing psycho-educational knowledge and resources for teachers and parents (e.g., presentations and panel discussions); (3) creating classroom interventions with teachers to meet the needs of individual students, emphasizing growth potential, well-being, and success; and (4) through community service and engagement.

6.3. Gifted Students

Collectively, we see several connections with this conceptual literature and our proposed framework with respect to gifted students. First, at the intrapersonal level, [23,56] both acknowledge the importance of the intrapersonal and suggest that the development of positive character traits be a point of emphasis for SBIs targeted toward gifted students. We would point interested readers back to the work by [57] with their Values-in-Action classification [56]. It seems that the enhancement of positive character traits through

strengths-based intervention delivery would help gifted students lead the “good life”, especially as they may be more inclined to benefit from increased awareness of the connection between character strengths and leading a good life. Further, the interpersonal, contextual/environmental, and systemic are all explicitly addressed in the three papers reviewed. Here, we would draw additional connections to the importance of providing social support at critical times of development, which has been shown to be beneficial for gifted student development [1]. For example, at the interpersonal level, previous research has shown that when positive social supports are in place through family and school belonging, gifted students’ self-concept is enhanced and depression is lessened [22]. Furthermore, as discussed, intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, and developmental characteristics can be viewed through the lens of person–environment fit theory, see [16,60] for further discussion.

7. Future Directions for Research

In our review of the existing theoretical and empirical literature relative to each subpopulation, we believe that several issues become clear and should be addressed by future researchers. Again, it should be noted that the purpose of our commentary was to survey the existing literature and to provide a conceptual framework by which future researchers can develop SBIs using a positive psychology approach. That said, it is evident that additional empirical research is needed. We would argue that this is especially true since COVID-19. It is likely that it will take years for researchers and educators worldwide to understand the full scope of how the pandemic is shaping current and future generations. Therefore, designing and testing SBIs using the proposed framework here should consider influences from COVID-19 and plan accordingly. Secondly, although our framework includes a focus on broader cultural and environmental factors, we acknowledge that these will likely vary according to country or region, as these reflect varying cultural beliefs, practices, and standards. Here, we would turn to work by authors such as [61] who argued that when considering culture, one needs to focus on both the etic (cultural universals) and emic (specific cultural phenomena) aspects of culture. In other words, SBIs should be adapted to fit within the context they are being applied. It is our opinion that the potential changes to student health and well-being caused by the pandemic, as well as recognizing variations in cultural beliefs, practices, and standards, need to be accommodated in future SBI design to achieve the positive psychology goal of helping all individuals achieve to their fullest potential.

8. Conclusions

In the present commentary, we advocate for consideration of the intrapersonal (e.g., self-esteem), interpersonal (e.g., teacher–student interactions), contextual/environmental (e.g., classroom climate), and systemic (e.g., broader cultural beliefs and practices); combined, these should be explored along developmental pathways. It was clear in reviewing the disparate literature across the three subpopulations of students that empirical studies and conceptual discussions could broadly fall under this framework, thus substantiating the importance of taking such an approach. Increasingly, there has been a call across disciplines to introduce integrative frameworks to better capture the complexity of human development [62,63], and we would argue that this is especially true when designing SBIs for special student populations.

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