

## **Positive Character Traits of Special Education**

### **Staff: Commonalities and Applications**

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#### **Abstract**

*The goal of the present study was to identify the positive character traits of staff working with a special education population and further understand how staff apply these traits in their work.*

*Twenty-eight staff from a school/treatment program for students with autism and related developmental disorders completed the VIA Inventory of Strengths Survey. The five most highly rated traits included Kindness, Honesty, Humor, Fairness, and Love. Participants who rated*

*these five traits the highest took part in a semi-structured interview. Responses indicated that staff used these positive traits to motivate others, foster other positive traits, maximize student progress, avoid negative outcomes, promote coping, build strong relationships, and meet the individual need of students. That these positive traits could be 'contagious' and have reciprocal benefit was often noted, and overarching themes included a commitment to progress and doing the 'right' thing. Limitations and future directions are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, Special Education, Autism, Qualitative Analysis, VIA Survey

## **Introduction**

Over the past 20 years, research in the area of positive psychology has grown to include a wide variety of topics (e.g., courage, resilience, flow, and many others), as well as a large group of researchers interested in the umbrella concepts such as quality of life, contentment, psychological health and well-being. With its roots in the works of psychologists such as Rogers and Maslow, positive psychology seeks to re-focus attention from pathology and what goes awry in human functioning to what character strengths, positive traits and emotions, and positive institutions lead to a fulfilled, meaningful, and generally 'good' life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Applications of positive psychology are widespread and includes educational institutions. For example, the *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* presents a comprehensive review of positive psychology concepts as related to education and students. While literature supports the use of positive psychology to enhance the experience of students as they progress through their education (e.g., Gilman, Heubner, & Furlong, 2009), there has been relatively little positive psychology research focused on persons with developmental disabilities

and the people with whom they live and work. Possible reasons for this are varied, but may include challenges with assessment procedures or communication, the relatively small size of this population, or limited resources that may need to be directed toward more pressing needs such as daily living skill development or reduction of interfering behaviors (Woodard, 2009). While some of these reasons may pose some unique challenges, it is important to note that the number of persons with autism and related developmental disabilities continues to grow signaling the need for more research in this area. Further, persons with developmental disabilities have a right to benefit from general advances in the evolution of the field of psychology.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by the emergence of impairments in communication skills, social relatedness, and the presence of restricted or stereotyped behaviors and areas of interest prior to age three. It is currently estimated to affect 1 in 68 children (Baio, 2010). In addition to the emotional toll on the families of a person with ASD, the economic toll to society is also concerning. The estimated cost of services including healthcare, education, ASD-related therapy, family-coordinated services, and caregiver time was over \$9 billion in 2011 (Lavelle, Weinstein, Newhouse, Munir, Kuhlthau, & Prosser, 2014). These growing numbers and costs continue to support the need for research with this population. Further, we suggest that fostering and maximizing positive strengths, traits, and emotions in persons with developmental disabilities and those with whom they live and work has the potential to not only contribute to the reduction of non-desired behaviors, but will also open the door to a higher quality of life and more meaningful life experiences.

To this end, there are some selected areas of research that explore positive psychology concepts in persons with autism or related developmental disabilities and their families. For

example, researchers have created scales to measure positive traits in persons with developmental disabilities (Woodard, 2009), created activities and strategies to promote positive traits such as resilience, optimism, and humor (Grodan, Kantor, Woodard & Lipsitt, 2011), and discussed the general benefits of incorporating positive psychology approaches with persons with developmental disabilities (Baker & Blumberg, 2011; Wehmeyer, 2013). Researchers have explored key factors contributing to the stress and levels of resilience in parents of children with a developmental disability (Peer & Hillman, 2014), but very little research has been conducted on the positive characteristics of special education staff. This is particularly relevant given the substantial amount of time these staff spend with students with special needs, the significant impact and influence the staff have on students' development and progress, and the unique challenges presented by this population. For example, students with special needs may display severe problem behaviors, have co-occurring psychiatric or medical diagnoses, or difficult family situations that prevent the child from remaining in the home. This group of challenges creates unique stressors for family members as well as the staff that work with these students.

One study, by Lim and Kim (2014), examined the positive psychology concept of character strengths with special education teachers in Korea. Specifically, they examined the relationship between a measure of teaching efficacy with character strengths for 111 Korean special education teachers. Using the Character Strengths Test (CST; Kwon et al., 2010), they found that character strengths related to perceived efficacy included interpersonal skills and restraint, as well as intellectual and theological strengths. Interpersonal and restraint skills were suggested to be crucial to enhance teacher efficacy, and the researchers proposed that this was due to these strengths' correspondence to extra-version and conscientiousness. Extra-version supported aspects of the special education teacher's particular job such as having to interact with

many other staff, parents, and professionals. Restraint was suggested to be essential to the special education teacher's job in light of the conscientious person being able to delay gratification and persist over time. The job of the special education teacher may require extensive time and effort, and continuing to work with students despite slow progress being made is an essential trait.

Another study by Chan (2009) explored the strength hierarchy of 228 Chinese general education teachers. Like the present study, this research project focused on the Values in Action (VIA) classification of positive strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The results supported the VIA structure of 24 individual strengths being subsumed under six larger domains of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Further, teachers with greater general life satisfaction had high levels of hope and zest. While this study did not examine this structure with special education teachers, it helped to elucidate the important connections between positive character strengths and job performance and satisfaction.

### **Present Study**

To expand our knowledge in this area, the primary goal of the present study was to explore what positive character strengths were common to staff in the United States who regularly work with students with special needs, particularly those who are on the autism spectrum and with related developmental disabilities. Specifically, the purpose of the present study was to not only identify what character strengths were common to these staff, but also to identify how these highly endorsed strengths were perceived as active, useful, or relevant in day-to-day work with this particular group of students. This research used the VIA's six domain conceptualization of positive strengths noted above, and employed the VIA Inventory of Strengths Survey. The VIA survey emerged from a research project led by Martin Seligman and

Christopher Peterson in which positive character strengths/traits were reviewed, studied, and classified. The resulting book from this research titled, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) describes the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues and is regarded highly in the field of positive psychology for its description of positive traits.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a school/treatment program for persons with autism and related developmental disorders that specializes in working with children and families with associated behavioral challenges. 28 staff members completed the survey (27 female; Mean age = 34; Range 23-63) and a subset of those participants (10 female) completed semi-structured interviews that were designed to gather information on how frequently endorsed positive traits were active in their daily work.

### **Measures**

**Positive character strengths.** The Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths Survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was used to assess the character strengths of the participants. This instrument consists of 24 scales representing the character strengths. Each scale consists of 10 items. Participants responded to 240 questions on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *very much unlike me* to 5 = *very much like me*). Previous research on the VIA-IS have been conducted demonstrating that the scale has adequate internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and validity (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ruch, et al., 2010).

**Interview Questions.** The main purpose of the interview questions was to better understand how the positive character traits that were most highly endorsed by participants were used in their daily work at the center. Researchers focused on the five most highly endorsed

traits of the larger group, and participants were asked how the traits might be used in his or her daily work. Each question shared the same structure in which the trait was defined using the VIA definition and then the interviewee was asked about the way that trait was used at work. An example of an interview question is, *“Honesty was highly rated and included the ideas of being authentic or ‘real,’ and having integrity in the things that you do. This means telling the truth, and generally doing the right thing. How do you think you use honesty in your work?”*

### **Procedure**

This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the research site. The current study was introduced to staff members at the research site during a training workshop on positive character traits in the workplace. At the end of the training, the researchers introduced the project and subsequently distributed informed consent forms for staff to complete if they were interested in participating in the study. They were also given information on how to access the survey online with a personal participant identification code. The online survey was accessible through the VIA website. The participants were asked to register on the VIA website by providing their email address and creating a password. This information was not shared with or accessible to the researchers. The registration would allow participants to access multiple types of surveys that they would be able to take outside of this research project if they chose. It also allowed them access to personalized VIA reports that offered more detailed information about their survey results. Once registered on the VIA website, participants followed instructions to complete an adult survey. Upon completion of the survey, the participants were directed to a demographic data page that prompted the user to enter the research code for the present study. The use of this code ensured that their VIA data would be sent to a private excel sheet that would be forwarded to the researchers upon their request.

After entry of the research code, the website prompted entry of their personal participant identification code. During a two week period, two general reminders were sent via email to all staff. Staff were prompted to complete the survey if they had signed an informed consent form and were still interested in participating in the study. After the two weeks had elapsed, the researchers contacted the VIA to receive their data which was emailed to them as an excel spreadsheet. No identifying information was included in the information forwarded to the researchers.

To determine which of the 24 character strengths were most highly endorsed, scores were averaged across all participants for each trait. Researchers selected the five traits with the highest average rating. Once these five traits were identified, participants who had a 4.0 or greater on each of the five traits were selected. These five trait scores were averaged for each participant. The 10 participants with the highest average rating across all five traits were selected to take part in the interview process. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers. With permission of the participants, the interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity.

**Coding process.** Interview data was manually coded using a process of open structural coding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The transcripts were initially read by the researchers and coded based on the interview structure. For example, each researcher developed codes and emerging themes across all interviews for kindness. Then the researchers repeated this process for every trait across the interviews. Once this was completed, the researchers met and discussed their coding, reached 100% consensus, and developed the first coding frame. Once developed, the researchers returned to the transcripts to re-code based on the coding frame. This process was repeated until no more emerging themes were identified. Once



identified, the researchers met to discuss their themes and an initial coding scheme was developed. Then two of the researchers reviewed each transcript using the coding frame. This process continued until a final coding scheme was developed and the transcripts were re-coded.

The final coding scheme is shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Themes**

	<u>Honesty</u>	<u>Humor</u>	<u>Fairness</u>
1. Motivation and Encouragement	3. Maximize progress for student benefit	5. Coping mechanism	8a. Decision-making guide- <i>Treat as same</i>
2a. Gateway Trait- <i>Patience</i>	4a. Avoidance of negative outcomes- <i>Mistrust</i>	6. Tool to engage students in learning process	8b. Decision-making guide- <i>Treat based on individual needs</i>
2b. Gateway Trait- <i>Empathy</i>	4b. Avoidance of negative outcomes- <i>Do not want to hurt students</i>	7. Build connections/ relationships	9. Speaking up to ensure fairness (courage)
<i>Themes Across All Traits</i>			
13. Contagion			
14. Reciprocity			

**Findings**

Results of the VIA Inventory of Strengths Survey indicated that the five most highly endorsed traits were kindness (4.35), honesty (4.25) humor (4.24), fairness (4.24) and love (4.11) (1 = *very much unlike me* to 5 = *very much like me*). The average ratings of all traits are represented in Table 2. Subsequent interviews with 10 staff members illustrated how these strengths are used in their work with students with autism and related developmental disorders, as well as with other staff members. Several themes emerged from our data analysis highlighting the varied ways in which these strengths are used. First, the unique ways each strength is used

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are described followed by a discussion of themes of contagion and reciprocity that were shared across traits in the responses of staff.

**Table 2. Average Rating of VIA Survey Positive Character Traits**

<u>Trait</u>	<u>Average Rating</u>	<u>Trait</u>	<u>Average Rating</u>
Kindness	4.35	Humility	3.77
Honesty	4.25	Self-Regulation	3.70
Humor	4.24	Spirituality	3.70
Fairness	4.24	Curiosity	3.69
Love	4.11	Prudence	3.69
Judgment	4.10	Perseverance	3.67
Perspective	4.10	Appreciation	3.64
Leadership	4.03	Bravery	3.61
Social Intelligence	3.95	Creativity	3.61
Forgiveness	3.87	Hope	3.61
Teamwork	3.82	Gratitude	3.58
Love of Learning	3.77	Zest	3.56

### Individual Positive Character Strengths

**Kindness.** Kindness was used by some of the participants to motivate and encourage students and fellow staff members. Anne described her use of kindness in this way:

*“With my students I think just an overall you know desire to be nice to them because I think I’m a nice person and so that’s sort of my personality to use kindness to encourage them and express my praise for them but also with staff I think we have staff that work really really hard doing a very challenging job, one that can be really unpleasant at times and so I think that in just giving them the positive feedback they deserve...I think to just make sure they feel appreciated is important.”*

Laura also shared how she used kindness in a manner similar to Anne:

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*“You have to work with them and we do a lot of verbal praise so I feel that’s very kind. Like noticing what you do well and so you’re like, ‘Good job doing that!’ Even staff need verbal praise and kindness too.”*

For Anne and Laura, kindness came in the form of providing staff and students with positive feedback and verbal praise to motivate and encourage forward moving progress.

In addition to using kindness for motivation and encouragement, some staff described kindness as a kind of gateway trait that fostered other traits including patience and empathy.

When asked how she used kindness in her work Carol remarked,

*“I think maybe along with kindness, maybe patience along with kindness. You need to be patient in order to be kind so you have to wait kids out and kind of go with their speed so you can help them. And I feel like when you’re not being patient, you’re not being kind.”*

Similarly, Jamie exclaimed, *“You can’t be a selfish person. Like you have to be patient and give it your all.”* Rebecca spoke indirectly about kindness as having empathy for her staff particularly *“by taking each individual staff as an individual and taking their personal situations into account.”* For Kathy, kindness allowed for her to have empathy when working with students with more challenging behaviors. She shared,

*“...it’s easy to get really frustrated with the things that they do but you need to have empathy because I think it’s hard for people who don’t work with this population to understand that they might be doing that and it’s making you crazy but they have their reasons...”*

**Honesty.** Several of the staff interviewed used honesty to maximize students’ academic and developmental progress. For Jamie, honesty was used when staff openly communicated about student progress, for example if something is working well in a student’s behavioral plan,

she remarked, “it’s just good to bring it to the table.” Similarly, Kathy spoke about being honest with staff when she recognized a poor fit between a student and a particular classroom. She shared the following example:

*“Oh, this child is perfect for this classroom” and then, not so much. I think in order to best meet every possible need they have, honesty is the way to go for that.”*

For Laura, honest and accurate representation and implementation of programs was crucial to student development. She remarked that *“being honest with what you’re saying, like if you know that the behavioral plan is to do something when something else occurs and you don’t do it-some people think it’s easier to just not do it...that doesn’t help anything.”* Other staff discussed the need for honesty with parents and guardians regarding student progress. Marilyn explained,

*“So I think that with regards to students and parents I think that I’m honest about what’s going on here, what we’re doing, progress that the kids are making, problems that they’re having because I think that them knowing exactly what’s happening is more beneficial to the family and to the students.”*

In addition to using honesty to benefit students in their progress at the school, staff used honesty to avoid negative outcomes. Anne discussed that although difficult at times, her honest portrayal to parents of a student’s progress was important to ensure that parents would not develop mistrust toward her or the school. Anne conveyed the important yet sometimes difficult task of doing this,

*“I think earlier on in my career I would really try to gloss over some of that stuff because I would feel sort of bad giving parents unpleasant information but I think I’ve realized that what that does is not give them a good picture of their child and can often backfire...”*

Also to avoid mistrust, Rebecca described that she is honest when she does not know the answer to a question. Instead, she said, she “*will look into it rather than give them misinformation.*”

Staff also spoke about being honest to avoid doing harm to students. Alena described that without honesty student and staff development may suffer. She shared,

*“...if you are not honest with [the staff] then you are doing a disservice to the students as well as the staff because they can’t grow and get better if they don’t now what they’re doing is not the best way to do it.”*

Carol echoed this idea that dishonesty can be detrimental to students when she reflected about honesty in data collection. She remarked, “*you have to be honest because it’s the kids’ lives so any wrong data could affect them in a negative way.*”

**Humor.** The majority of the staff interviewed spoke about using humor as a coping mechanism. When asked how she used humor in her work Jamie exclaimed, “*Oh definitely everyday I use humor because you gotta keep it light or else you’re just going to become this grump.*” Carol echoed a similar sentiment when she said, “*Just generally making a joke out of things, laughing at things, letting them roll off your back, not taking things too seriously.*” Some of the staff alluded to using humor to keep the mood light because of the particular challenges inherent in their job. Alena conveyed this in the following description:

*“...I think that [humor] comes in more to play with the staff that I work with because I think sometimes there’s a real need for some levity in a moment, like if... you’ve been working with a child who’s been smearing feces or something like that I think it can really benefit everyone involved if someone can say something to sort of lighten that mood and make it a little bit less challenging.”*

Rebecca also mentioned the importance of *“trying to see the light side of different situations... because we’re dealing with such stressful day-to-day situations.”* While many of the staff used humor as a coping mechanism among staff, Jamie also described how she used humor to help students cope as well. She explained, *“and sometimes like since [the students] can’t tell you what’s going on you just have to be like, ‘It’s alright, I’m there for you and we’re going to get through this’ in the happiest way possible.”*

In addition to using humor as a coping mechanism, a few staff described how they used humor as tool to engage students in the learning process. Both Anne and Kathy spoke about using humor to make learning more enjoyable for the students as well as to sustain their attention. Anne shared,

*“The students that are sort of capable of more traditional humor, I’ll do a lot of playfulness with some of the students about saying silly things like, ‘Do alligators come to school?’ or kind of phrasing things that will maybe make them find something more enticing or enjoyable.”*

Similarly, Kathy reflected,

*“I think it’s funny too because education is supposed to be fun and the only way you can get the kids to be engaged...it’s so limited what they’re going to pay attention to that sometimes that’s all you have is to use those silly voices and those silly faces and animation...so it’s important to keep their attention.”*

Lastly, for some staff, humor was a way for them to connect to students and build positive relationships. To this effect Anne remarked, *“...I think that more so than traditional humor that there’s sort of a playfulness and a silliness that can help you and a student bond with each other.”* Julie described how humor is a developmentally appropriate way to bond with

students. She explained, “Keeping everything a little light and playful is kind of how kids interact so just kind of in relation to their age level and their developmental level.”

**Fairness.** Many of the staff interviewed spoke about using fairness in a way that guided decision making when it came to students and other staff. Fairness seemed to be used on a spectrum, with it meaning equal treatment on one end and treatment based on individual need on the other. In discussing the treatment of other staff members, many of the staff interviewed described how they used fairness to treat the other staff the same. For example, Laura exclaimed, “*Fairness like giving everyone the same amount of workload or the same breaks. Like I’m not going to be like, ‘Hey, you get 40 minutes and you get 20 minutes.’ Like everyone basically gets the same thing.*” Rebecca also discussed the importance of using fairness to mean equal treatment,

*“Well, I think that if there’s a situation that arises I will look to see what we’ve done in the past for similar situations to make sure that we’re not playing favorites and making sure that we’re doing the same thing for each individual as it comes across.”*

However, in speaking about fairness with students, many staff used fairness to justify treating students based on their individual needs. Anne described that sometimes she spends a significant amount of time with one student but eventually the amount of time “*always comes full circle*” and she finds that she is spending less time with that student and more time with another. She explained, “*So someone who for three or six months is taking a ton of my time and energy is then the student who is doing okay and that sort of just translates to someone else.*” When asked how she used fairness in her work, Julie shared, “*I don’t want to say by treating each [student] equally because it’s more individualized than that.*” As with other staff including Alena and Kathy, Anne and Julie recognized that equal treatment of students is not always the best practice.

One staff member mentioned the importance of having courage in assuring fair working conditions among staff. Jamie described the need for action when she recognized a situation was unfair. She remarked,

*“I think I rated fairness so high because I feel like when something isn’t right in the classroom, I want to make things right. So like when there’s a staffing situation and I feel like it’s not right, I want to personally go fix it, you know what I mean.”*

**Love.** Similar to humor, some of the staff used love as a means through which they built and maintained good relationships rooted in trust and support. Carol reflected this idea when she said, *“I mean you just have a connection with people and I think that’s really important with these kids.”* Julie echoed this when she said, *“...it’s very important to create that kind of trust in a relationship.”* For Rebecca, who initially had difficulty conceptualizing how she used love directly in her work, ultimately described love in terms of relationships when she said, *“it’s really critical that we work as a team and to be able to support each other it’s good that we have good relationships.”*

Love also seemed to serve as a guide for staff in how to treat students. For Julie, using love meant, *“I guess through being consistent with my work with them and treating them with the highest respect and love that’s appropriate for this position.”* Both Anne and Kathy also described that the love they have for their students manifested in how they treat them with respect and dignity. Anne shared,

*“I think that the compassion and sort of where that is similar to love is a real belief that these kids are someone’s son or daughter or little brother or sister or niece or nephew and I think about how would I want them to be treated while they’re at work and how would I want people to respond to them.”*



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Love also guided how staff seemed to care for students during difficult times. In other words, love allowed for compassionate coping between staff and their students. Laura reflected this sentiment when she stated,

*“As far as taking care of students when they’re sick or just overall being understanding. You know, love and understanding can be showing compassion. So if they’re going through a rough time or if they’re not feeling well you try to comfort them and that’s a way of love.”*

Marilyn, when asked how she used love in her work, echoed this idea of compassion in helping students cope:

*“I am very compassionate about people, how they’re feeling, what’s going on. If I can see that somebody is down or not how they usually are, I’m not just nosy, I want to know what’s wrong, I want to know why, I want to know if there’s anything I can do to help....”*

Lastly, some staff described how they used love as a providing a supplemental source of love to students. Anne remarked that families have *“often said, ‘I know that when he goes to school he’s loved.’”* Both Carol and Julie spoke about how they felt it was important especially for students who were not living with their families. Carol said, *“They need to know they’re loved. Especially the kids in my room who are in a group home...”* Similarly, Julie said, *“Especially for some of these kids, especially the ones who maybe don’t see their families everyday, just kind of expressing that you value them and that they’re important to you in some sort of way is important to them.”*

## **Cross-Trait Themes**

During the analysis, there were two emergent themes that were related to the use of many of the individual traits. These themes are contagion and reciprocity.

**Contagion.** Some of the staff recognized how their use of many of the traits had a kind of contagion effect on the work environment. In referring to the use of humor Alena reflected, “*You know, it’s contagious so it makes for a better work environment for everybody.*” Similarly, Marilyn described the contagiousness of humor when she said, “*...I do like to make people happy, I do like to make people smile, I like to be happy and smile so if the people around me are happy and smiling then it’s kind of that domino effect.*” Laura echoed this idea of expanding the trait to others when in discussing kindness she said, “*And also, we want our students to be kind to each other so you want to be good role models.*” In other words, she used kindness in her work with the hopes that students would learn to be kind to others. For Julie, kindness was used in “*creating a team environment and putting your best foot forward for the kids and for the whole agency....*” Perhaps Marilyn was most able to capture the importance of these traits as contagions when she said, “*The world would be a much nicer place if there was more love and fairness and kindness and humor.*”

**Reciprocity.** Throughout the interviews, it became evident that many of the staff spoke about using many of these traits in a reciprocal manner, namely in a way to that would also benefit them. For example, both Alena and Marilyn spoke about being kind so as to have others be kind back to them as well as to be helpful to them. Alena described,

*“Well, you get more with sugar, right? So it’s better to be kind with people and work on what you need from them. Having a bad attitude doesn’t exactly get you what you want and generally makes your day pretty awful.”*

Similarly, Marilyn said,

*“And I think even though it’s corny, do unto others as you’d have done to you. I don’t want people snapping at me or being nasty to me so there’s no reason to do that to other people. You get more bees with honey.”*

Like with kindness, Julie shared that she was honest others and hoped it would work “*vice versa*.” Similarly, in discussing diffusion of work responsibilities Kathy described how fairness was used in a reciprocal manner:

*“If you know a staff is having a certain issue and is off a certain day I think it’s only fair that the other teachers in the classroom sort of pick up that weight that that person can’t take care of that day. I think that’s fair because then hopefully they’ll reciprocate and do it for you because everyone’s going to need that some day, does that make sense.”*

In speaking about humor, Marilyn reflected, “*What I find is that is also draws people to you.*”

For Jamie, the reciprocal nature of humor was in the positive effect it had on her mood. She remarked, “*...if you keep a smile on your face you just get into this good mood and when you act happy you become happy.*” Love was also used in this way by Jamie who described the joy she received when the students expressed love back to her when she said, “*And these kids love you back and it’s crazy. I’ve never worked with this population before but they have a special place in my heart.*”

## **Discussion**

The field of positive psychology gives practitioners and researchers alike the opportunity to focus on topics related to a more fulfilled, meaningful, and ‘good’ life. One aspect of this includes positive traits, and while there has been expanding research on the positive traits that contribute to a ‘good’ life for typically developing persons, research for persons with developmental disabilities is sparse. Even more limited is positive trait research that focus on the family members and staff that work with persons with developmental disabilities. The purpose of the present study was to extend our knowledge of the positive traits of staff working with a special education population, and more specifically, how these traits were activated in their daily work. Using the VIA Inventory of Strengths Survey, researchers found that these staff most frequently endorsed positive traits to include kindness, honesty, humor, fairness and love. Through a process of follow-up interview and coding, it was found that kindness was used to motivate both students and staff, as well as to foster the related traits of patience and empathy. Honesty was important in maximizing student progress, and to avoid negative outcomes such as mistrust and harm. Humor was mainly identified as a coping mechanism for staff, but also to foster learning and build strong relationships. Fairness was used to ensure staff were treated the same and some were not favored for example, and students were given what he or she needed based on individual needs. Finally, love was activated to build good relationships, foster compassionate treatment, and supplement for time that could not be spent with families.

These findings are similar to some prior research. While a different measure was used in research conducted by Lim and Kim (2014), the findings of these two studies are consistent in many ways. For example, Lim and Kim found that teacher efficacy was supported by interpersonal skills and extra-version, given the many different people with whom the special

education teacher interacts. In the present study, nearly all of the positive traits most frequently endorsed by staff were later described as activated with various stakeholders in the life of the person with the developmental disability; other staff, other students, and families. Clearly, this highly interactive and interpersonal aspect of the job of special education staff highlights the need for supporting related traits such as kindness and humor. Lim and Kim also suggested that acting with restraint was important to the special education teacher in its relation to conscientiousness and persistence over time. In the present research, traits closely related to conscientiousness include honesty and fairness in that the conscientious staff would necessarily do the '*right*' thing. Persistence over time is reflected in the present study through the staff's commitment and devotion to maintain motivation, maximize progress and development, and continually strive to engage students in the learning process.

The results of the present study differed from those of Chan (2009), which is not surprising given the very different student population with whom the teachers worked. Teachers working with typically developing students highly endorsed hope and zest instead of the five traits listed above, and there was virtually no developmental disorders. Throughout the interviews, several staff remarked that they felt these traits were inherent in who they were as individuals and had not previously given thought to how they used these traits specifically in their work. This is important in mentioning as it provides information into the type of people that may be attracted to this type of work and who may be more satisfied in this position than staff who do not possess these traits. As previous research on positive character strengths and workplace engagement has shown that employees who use their strengths in their work are more engaged in the workplace (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) as well as are more satisfied both in their workplace and in their life (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010), it is important to foster these

strengths. It may be advantageous for schools and treatment centers such as the one used in this research project to recognize and nurture the positive character strengths of their employees and to include training about positive character strengths. This is not only for the benefit of the staff members but also as evident in the narratives of the staff we interviewed, is likely to have a positive effect on the progress and development of their students. overlap between these listings of traits. Hope and zest were actually rated relatively low in comparison to other traits (see Table 2). This stark difference perhaps is the result of the very specialized and heterogeneous needs of the special education population, the need for individualized treatment and care, and/or the high level of need or complexity of circumstances (severe behavior challenges, psychiatric diagnoses, unique learning profiles or needs, family situations, etc.). These high need and often unique challenges of the special education student population create a need for positive traits that represent a number of overarching themes. First, when the concepts related to use or activation of positive traits are considered as a whole, there is a common theme representative of a commitment to progress or general moving forward. The explanations focused on motivation, encouragement, maximizing progress, positive coping, and maintaining engagement in the learning process. It is not surprising that such a commitment is present in the special education staff who see it as their responsibility to ensure that the potential of the student is not only realized, but maximized. These are staff who are not satisfied with “caring” for the person with developmental disability, but rather want to do whatever is needed to foster independence and fulfillment.

Second, with such a strong commitment to foster movement forward, the special education staff need to know where to go and have a firm grasp on what is the “right” direction. They act in ways that foster patience, compassion and empathy for others. In using honesty,

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even though some discussions with families may be uncomfortable, staff use this trait to build trust and avoid negative outcomes. They value and maximize positive relationships, and want equal treatment for their co-workers. Special education staff pursue the unique and individualized needs of each student, and uphold the dignity and respect of each and every student. In essence, they know what the ‘*right*’ thing to do is, and the positive traits they endorse reflect their commitment to doing what is right. This represents the best of special education staff, in that it suggests that they are highly ethical people who hold central the value of the individualized needs of each student.

### **Limitations**

As is the case with qualitative research, the findings are not generalizable to other settings or populations. It is also important to point out the lack of diversity particularly in gender and race in the sample as the study participants were primarily white women. More persons with whom they work and guard their well-being and rights. It suggests they are people who are concerned for others, and willing to give when a need is identified.

A diverse sample would provide richer insight into staff persons who work with this unique student population.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

This study is important in providing insight into how positive character strengths are utilized by staff who work in a school/treatment center for students with ASD and related

Future research possibilities could include examining whether or not the positive character strengths of Kindness, Honesty, Humor, Fairness, and Love are related to staff workplace satisfaction and other positive workplace outcomes. These traits are active in the

workplace in a wide variety of ways, but whether or not they increase actual job satisfaction and/or contribute to positive student outcomes remains to be explored. Future directions might also examine the rate of change, or perhaps stability, of these traits over the course of staff's careers. Factors such as the passage of time, teacher burnout, and increasing needs/diminishing budgetary and community supports may be related to the expression of such character traits.

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