

Success in the classroom and in life: Focusing on strengths of the head *and* strengths of the heart

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Abstract

Strengths of the heart is a new and potentially useful paradigm for understanding how the whole gifted child can thrive and flourish. Until recently, those who have written about and have researched the gifted have focused much of their work on *strengths of the head*—understanding, identifying, and promoting intelligence and creativity. More recently, there has been a growing interest in looking “beyond the head,” to the *heart and soul* of the gifted child. Feelings, emotions, character strengths, and social competencies are now being researched among high-ability students. This article introduces the idea of *strengths of the heart* and the special issue.

Keywords

Strengths of the Heart, Character Strengths, Emotional Intelligence, EI

Introduction

It is with great pleasure, considerable graciousness, and a pinch of pride that I agreed to serve as guest editor for this special issue of *Gifted Education International*. I was thrilled by the journal editor’s invitation to organize a special issue on “strengths of the heart.” I first wrote in *Gifted Education International* about “head strengths and heart

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strengths” a few years ago in an article entitled, “Lessons learned from working with high-ability students” (Pfeiffer, 2013a). Those familiar with my work on strengths of the heart recognize that the paradigm, as I conceptualize and describe it in the real world of clinical practice, includes an integration or amalgam of three related psychological constructs: character strengths, emotional intelligence, and social competence (Pfeiffer, 2003, 2009a, 2013b).

In this special issue, readers will find six invited articles that offer provocative and cutting-edge information, authored by leaders in the fields of character strengths, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and social competence. I invited each of these leading authorities to contribute an original article on their ground-breaking work, with the request that they contribute an article to a special issue on “strengths of the heart and the gifted.” However, I could have just as easily designated this special issue “positive psychology and the gifted.”

In the next few pages, I will provide a brief, behind-the-scenes look at how I came to consider strengths of the heart a relevant paradigm in my work with high-ability students. I hope that this brief narrative helps set the stage for this special issue and for the six articles that follow.

A strengths of the heart paradigm

I have worked with high-ability children and youth in a variety of capacities for over 35 years. Trained as a clinician, my career has focused on the social and emotional development of children, youth, and their families—particularly how and why things might go awry for some, but not all children, and how we might be able to effectively intervene when things go awry (Pfeiffer, 1977, 2003, 2009b, 2013b). Early in my career, my interests were directed toward the psychosocial, developmental, and psychiatric challenges that *all* children and youth are at risk for experiencing (Allen and Pfeiffer, 1991; Coleman et al., 1992; Pfeiffer, 1985; Pfeiffer and Reddy, 1998; Pfeiffer and Strzelecki, 1990).

Although my dissertation research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill explored how cognitive style might influence creative writing performance among high-ability children (Pfeiffer, 1978), upon graduation I did *not* follow a career path that focused exclusively or even primarily on the gifted; rather, I charted a *generalist clinical path* and worked with a wide range of psychological problems that *all* children and youth encounter (Pfeiffer, 1985, 1986, 1987; Pfeiffer and Reddy, 1998, 2001).

Over the course of my career, I have worked with children presenting with any number of social, behavioral, and psychiatric problems. My clinical work has included outpatient, day treatment, residential, inpatient settings, and the schools (e.g. Baker et al., 1993; Pfeiffer, 1977, 1986, 1987, 1992; Reddy and Pfeiffer, 1996, 1997). I have had the good fortune of working with children of very high ability, but I have also had the opportunity to provide clinical services to children of average and below-average ability (e.g. Pfeiffer and Nelson, 1992; Pfeiffer et al., 1986; Reddy and Pfeiffer, 2007). I believe that my foundational work in generic clinical practice early in my career served me well in later years as I began to specialize in work with high-ability children (Foley Nicpon and Pfeiffer, 2011; Neihart et al., 2015; Pfeiffer, 2001b, 2009a, 2009b, 2013a, 2013b;

Pfeiffer and Blei, 2007; Pfeiffer and Stocking, 2000). I will shortly explain how some of my early professional experiences set the stage for my growing interest in prevention, early intervention, health promotion, resilience, and invulnerability collectively, what I have come to call *strengths of the heart* (Pfeiffer, 2013a).

Early in my clinical work as a pediatric psychologist at the Ochsner Clinic and Foundation Hospital (1982–1987), in New Orleans, I was introduced to prevention and early intervention programs for children at risk for neurodevelopmental, behavioral, and psychiatric disorders (e.g. O’Connell et al., 1983; Pfeiffer et al., 1985; Pfeiffer and Tittler, 1983). As I reflect back 30 years on my early career as a pediatric psychologist, two experiences stand out as helping to plant the nascent idea of a paradigm shift reflecting *strengths of the heart*. The first experience was a week-long workshop organized by the Albert Einstein Medical School. The workshop was held on Cape Cod and led by Sir Michael Rutter, one of the most eminent child psychiatrists at the time.

Professor Rutter offhandedly announced at the conclusion of the first day of the workshop that he was looking for someone who might be available to play tennis with him after each daily workshop session concluded. To my great surprise, none of the other clinicians attending the workshop jumped at this opportunity. An avid tennis hacker and never shy to pass on such a prospect, I volunteered. I quickly became smitten with this brilliant and gifted child psychiatrist, and taken with his bold and creative insights (e.g. Garmezny and Rutter, 1983; Rutter, 1987). Between sets over iced tea, Professor Rutter challenged my thinking on how best to view psychopathology and mental health. He discussed how ecological contexts indelibly affect the course of psychological development for all children, an idea also being promoted at the time by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Professor Rutter also eloquently explained, over iced tea, that genetics, early temperament and behavioral style, parenting, the family, school, and sociocultural factors dynamically and synergistically determine which children develop psychiatric problems or alternatively learn to cope, thrive, and become “resilient,” and even “invincible” (e.g. Anthony, 1987; Compas, 1987; Werner and Smith, 1982).

The second experience, early in my career, that helped formulate my thinking about the idea of *strengths of the heart* was my work with a highly creative clinical psychologist who was my mentor and supervisor at Ochsner Hospital, Dr Andy Burka. Andy is a brilliant clinician who never missed an opportunity to focus on client strengths. His mindset as a therapist has always been to look for client assets and resources and to creatively weave these into treatment to provide therapeutic leverage.

During my tenure at Ochsner in the 1980s, Andy developed a unique and highly successful summer program for at-risk students that essentially built upon each youngster’s strengths. The program, *Challenges*, reflected much of what Sir Michael Rutter had talked about—how to increase a child’s spirit, resilience, and personal strengths. Predating even the work of Martin Seligman and his colleagues (e.g. Seligman, 1991; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), Dr Burka’s summer program infused positive psychology activities that encouraged mindfulness, humility, teamwork, persistence, and leadership. Exposure to these innovative ideas about how to array strength-based psychoeducational and psychotherapeutic services in support of high-risk children furthered my thinking about the idea of *heart strengths*.

One final experience helped shape my thinking about *strengths of the heart*. In 1998, I was executive director (ED) of the Duke University gifted program, Duke TIP. One of my responsibilities as ED was serving, in the summer, as headmaster of a large, campus-based set of summer programs. The program annually invites over two thousand intellectually gifted young adolescents to the campus of Duke (and a few other elite colleges) to study, live, learn, and interact over a 3-week period with other very bright peers.

The great majority of the Duke TIP student population do quite well living away from home on the college campus, in the classrooms and labs, as well as in the dorms and at social/recreational events. However, as you might expect at any boarding school, some of the TIP students—affectionately known as TIPsters—don't adjust well and present with behavioral, social, and emotional challenges. As headmaster of the campus programs, I was expected to meet with and, if needed, even dole out discipline for misbehaving TIPsters. It became apparent to me, after meeting with perhaps 15 or 20 of these unruly, mischievous, yet extremely high IQ students my very first summer on duty, was that the *root problem* for many was that they were lacking a commensurate level of what I labeled, at the time, *emotional intelligence* (Pfeiffer, 2001a), but what I later came to call *strengths of the heart* (Pfeiffer, 2013a).

Many of these TIPsters, all with fabulous *head strengths*, didn't present with nearly as well-developed *heart strengths*; assets such as social maturity, open-mindedness, honesty, gratitude, agreeableness, kindness, humility, compassion, self-reflection, tact, empathy, or forgiveness. These character strengths, virtues, and intra- and interpersonal competencies came to make up what I call *strengths of the heart*. Because of what I observed in my role as dean of students at Duke TIP, we instituted two campus-wide interventions the summer of 2000. First, we developed a youth leadership course that centered around *heart strengths* and included a service-learning component to encourage empathy, compassion, justice, and teamwork (Pleasants et al., 2004). Second, we instituted a campus-wide, strength-based counseling program with the explicit goals of preventing problems, building resilience, and encouraging social skills within the campus community. Although our counselors were trained and available to “put out fires” and deal with acute psychiatric emergencies, their primary focus was to help promote the well-being and social maturity of all of our students.

Most recently, in my research lab at Florida State, my doctoral students and I have been investigating *strengths of the heart* for the past 10 years. We have conducted a number of studies to better understand how character strengths, emotional intelligence, and social competence, what we call *strengths of the heart*, impact the gifted. However, in the following pages, you will have the good fortune of reading six articles that discuss others' research and thinking about *strengths of the heart*! The articles in this special issue discuss emotional intelligence and the gifted (Parker, Saklofske, and Keefer; and Zeidner and Matthews), strength-based models and interventions (Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Faves, and Ochs; and Proyer, Gander, and Tandler), stress and resilience within the family with a gifted child (Renati, Bonfiglio, and Pfeiffer), and mindfulness-based strength practices with the gifted (Sharp, Niemiec, and Lawrence). This special issue represents, in my opinion, some of the more exciting new ideas and research findings on strengths of the heart and the gifted! I hope that you enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed putting this issue together.

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