



University of  
Zurich <sup>UZH</sup>

Personality Psychology and Assessment



# Which character strengths matter most at school?

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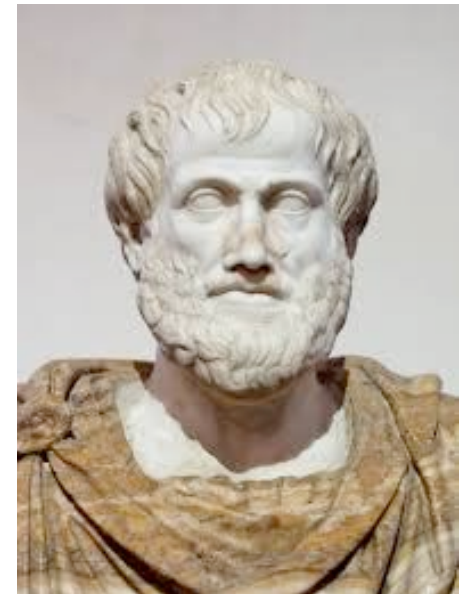
Positive institutions are institutions that  
enable the development of **positive traits**.  
(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)

What does it mean if we want schools  
to be *positive institutions*?

Photo by [Barry Zhou](#) on [Unsplash](#)

## Character vs. personality

- In early psychology character and personality were often used as synonyms
- Gordon Allport (1937) banned character from psychology as an ethical concept but not a psychological one
  - „character is personality evaluated- personality is character devalued..“*
- This influenced the lexical approach leading to the Five-Factor Model
- Peterson and Seligman (2004) reintroduced character in psychology
- The idea that a „good character“ is key to leading a „good life“ dates back to Aristoteles





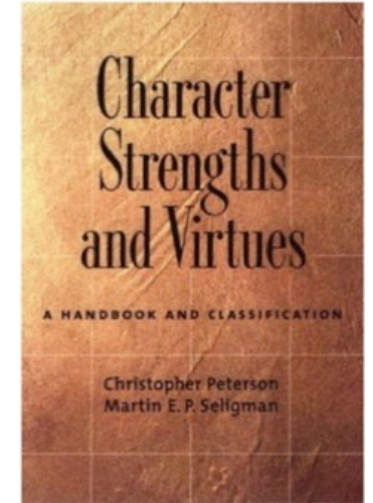


## VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)



Three levels

- 6 universal virtues
- 24 character strengths
- situational themes



Classification is a product of a large project looking at writings on virtues and good character (moral philosophers, religions, cultural documents, scouts guidelines, Harry Potter, etc.)



# Background: The VIA Classification of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

## Wisdom and Knowledge



- (1) **creativity**: thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
- (2) **curiosity**: taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
- (3) **judgment**: thinking things through and examining them from all sides
- (4) **love of learning**: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
- (5) **perspective**: being able to provide wise counsel to others

## Courage



- (6) **bravery**: not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
- (7) **perseverance**: finishing what one starts
- (8) **honesty**: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
- (9) **zest**: approaching life with excitement and energy

## Humanity



- (10) **love**: valuing close relations with others
- (11) **kindness**: doing favors and good deeds for others
- (12) **social intelligence**: being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others

## Justice



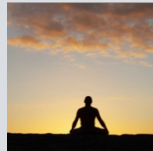
- (13) **teamwork**: working well as member of a group or team
- (14) **fairness**: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
- (15) **leadership**: organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

## Temperance



- (16) **forgiveness**: forgiving those who have done wrong
- (17) **modesty**: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
- (18) **prudence**: being careful about one's choices
- (19) **self-regulation**: regulating what one feels and does

## Transcendence

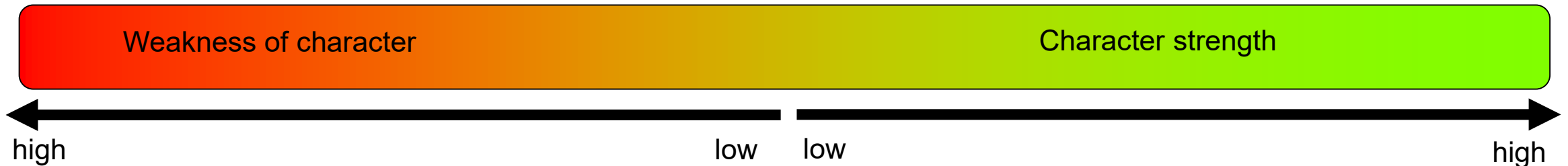
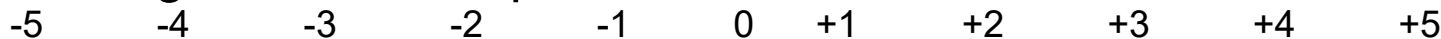


- (20) **appreciation of beauty and excellence**: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
- (21) **gratitude**: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
- (22) **hope**: expecting the best and working to achieve it
- (23) **humor**: liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people
- (24) **spirituality**: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

## Character strenghts in the VIA classification

**(Peterson & Seligman, 2004)**

- Character strengths are seen as **relatively stable** (across time) and consistent (across situations).
- They contribute to fulfilments that make up the “good life”. As such, they are described as the “**inner determinants of a good life**” that complement situational influences (e.g., education, family situation, etc.).
- They are explicitly seen as **malleable**.
- Important: They are defined as **unipolar concepts**, that means a low expression of a strength does not equal a weakness.





# International Positive Education Network (IPEN)

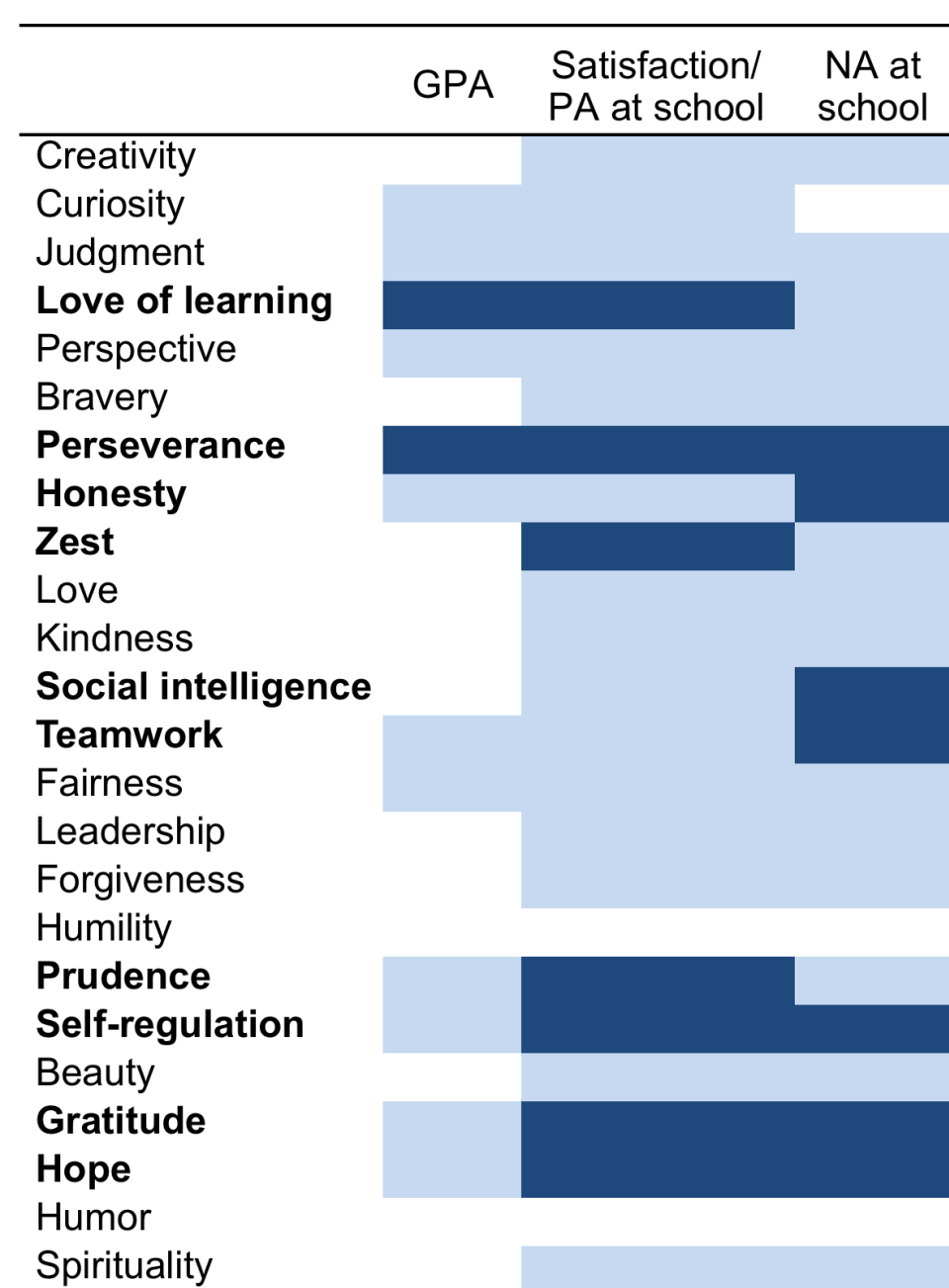




A high-angle photograph of two students sitting at a dark, weathered wooden table outdoors. The student on the left, with long brown hair and glasses, is looking down at an open book. The student on the right, wearing a yellow shirt, is writing in a notebook with a pen. A clear plastic cup with a straw sits on the table between them. In the foreground, another open book is visible, showing text about prayer. The scene is brightly lit by natural light, casting shadows on the table.

So, are students' character strengths linked with educational outcomes?





Summary of several studies involving samples of Swiss primary and (mostly) secondary school students

- **Love of learning** and **perseverance** are consistently related to school achievement (GPA) and school satisfaction.
- Additionally, strengths such as **zest**, **prudence**, **self-regulation**, **gratitude**, and **hope** are associated with school satisfaction.
- Low levels of negative affect at school also go along with **honesty**, **social intelligence**, and **teamwork**.
- Taken together, between 8 and 10 character strengths can be considered substantially linked to these educational outcomes.

light blue = stable relationship (across several samples)  
dark blue = stable strong relationships (across several samples)

PA = positive affect  
NA = low negative affect

Wagner (2019a); Wagner & Ruch (2019a, 2019b)



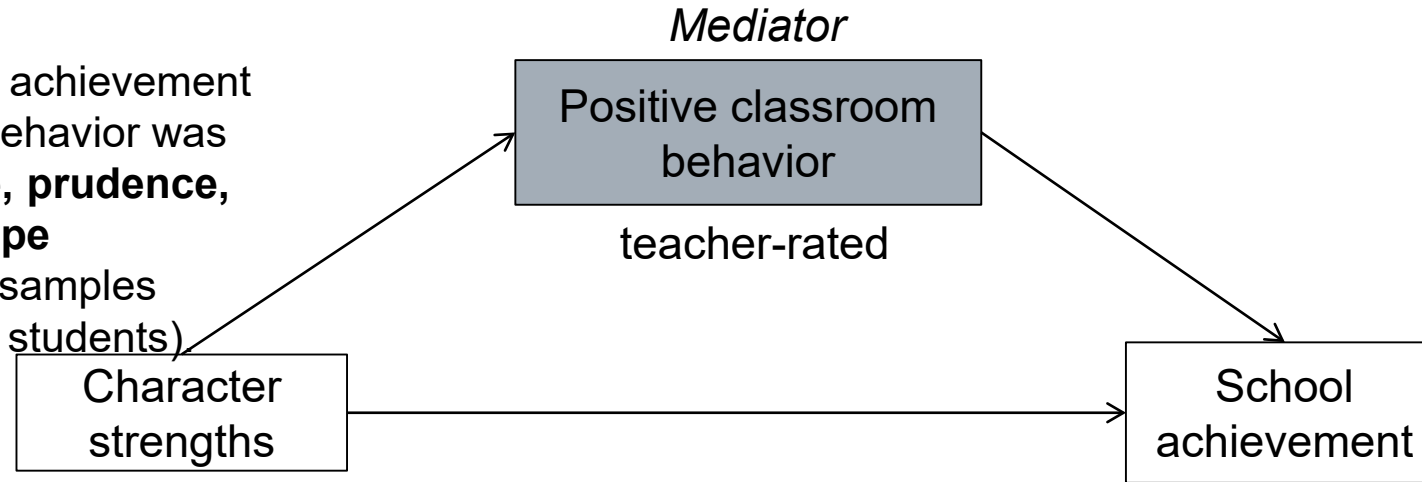
## Do character strengths explain variance beyond already established predictors of educational outcomes?

- Several well-known individual differences that predict both academic achievement and well-being at school, in particular intelligence (e.g., Gottfredson, 2002) and personality traits of the five-factor model, such as conscientiousness (e.g., Dumfart & Neubauer, 2016; Poropat, 2009).
- Wagner & Ruch (2019a): Character strengths predict several educational outcomes (e.g., GPA and school satisfaction) incrementally and **beyond** the influence of both **cognitive ability** and the **five-factor model personality traits**

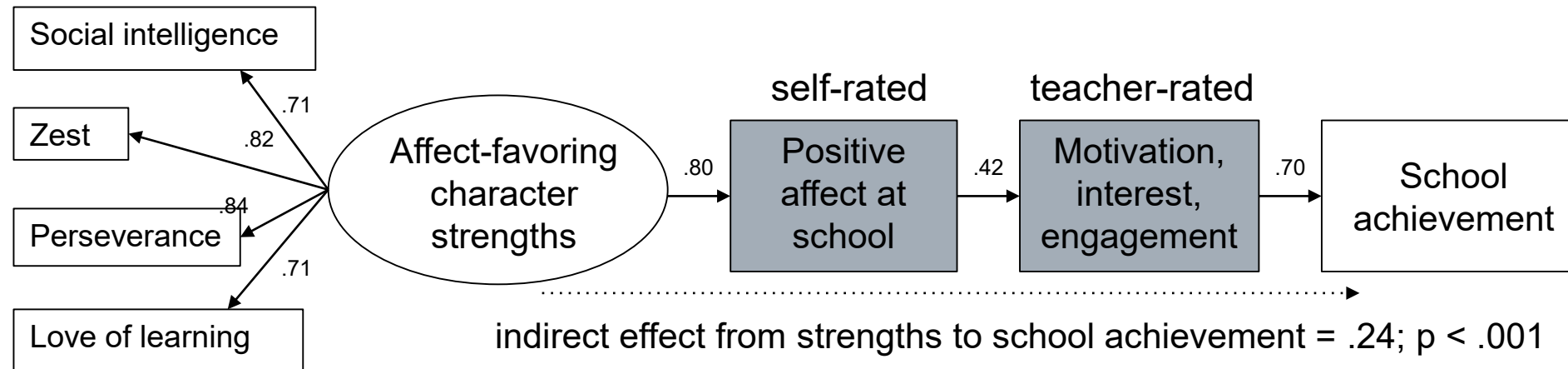


# Potential mechanisms

Indirect effect on school achievement via positive classroom behavior was found for **perseverance, prudence, self-regulation, and hope** consistently across two samples (primary and secondary students)



Wagner, L., & Ruch, W. (2015). Good character at school: Positive classroom behavior mediates the link between character strengths and school achievement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6: 610. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00610>



Weber, M., Wagner, L., & Ruch, W. (2016). Positive feelings at school: On the relationships between students' character strengths, school-related affect, and school functioning. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17, 341-355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9597-1>



## Conclusion

- Character strengths (in particular 8 to 10 of the 24) can serve as potential resources for achievement and well-being at school.
- Assessing positive traits such as character strengths adds incremental value to known predictors when explaining variance in relevant educational outcomes.
- There are likely multiple mechanisms involved that explain the links with school achievement; first candidates are positive classroom behavior, positive affect at school, and motivation.



Is that already all?










## Five objections to the list of „school strengths“

1. Can school achievement be reduced to GPA?
2. How many students actually „have“ the „school strengths“?
3. What characterizes those students that don't have high levels of these „school strengths“?
4. Does it also matter which strengths are actually shown in behavior in the classroom?
5. Did we consider all relevant aspects?

## Objection 1: Strengths and achievement in different learning situations

- Positive relationships with **teacher-rated achievement** in line with hypotheses (when controlling for psychometric **intelligence**)
  -  – **in teacher-centered teaching:** Love of learning, perserverance, zest, self-regulation, and hope
  -  – **in individual tasks:** Love of learning, perseverance
  -  – **in group work:** Love of learning, perspective, perseverance, zest, kindness, teamwork, fairness





## Objection 2

- Peterson & Seligman (2004): Individuals have between 3 and 7 strengths that are highly typical of them (“signature strengths”)
- Focus is on the *individual* and which are their highest strengths (in comparison to their remaining strengths)



## Example: „signature strengths“ of teachers and headmasters

### Teachers ( $n = 2749$ )

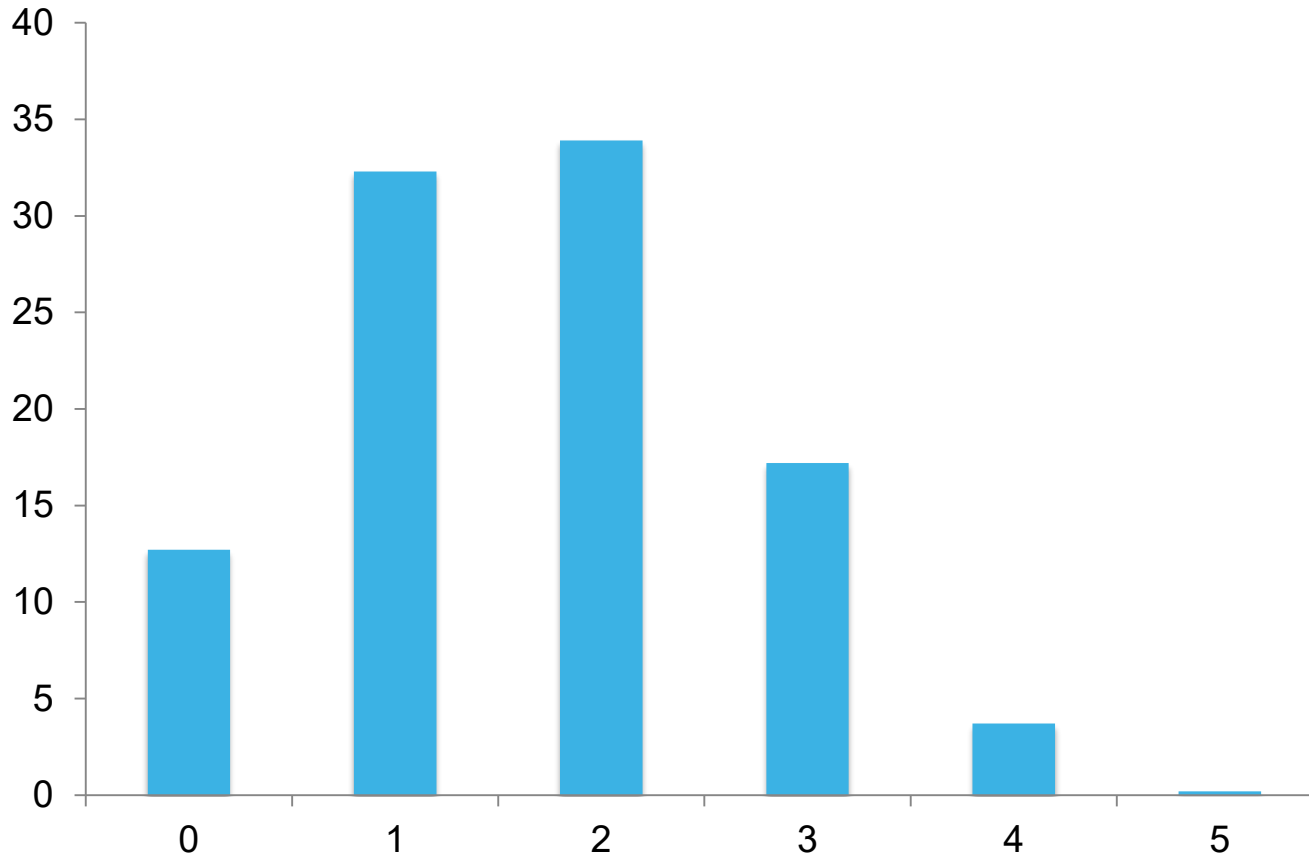
- love of learning
- appreciation of beauty and excellence
- leadership
- love
- fairness

### Headmasters ( $n = 152$ )

- leadership
- zest
- hope
- perseverance
- creativity



## Objection 2: How many students „have“ the „school strengths“?



$N = 2101$  Students

Percentage of students that have  $x$  strengths of the 9 identified „school strengths“ among their top 5 character strengths



## Thought experiment

Think of a very „difficult“ student you were in touch with – this can also be a teammate, employee, boss, etc.

Which character strengths did they show in their behavior?



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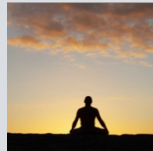
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## Objection 3: An example of a poor fit – Class clown behavior

- Typically studied as a type concept (yes/no)
- New approach: different facets, dimensional (Ruch, Platt, & Hofmann, 2014)
  1. Class clown role
  2. Comic talent
  3. Disruptive rule-breaker
  4. Subversive joker

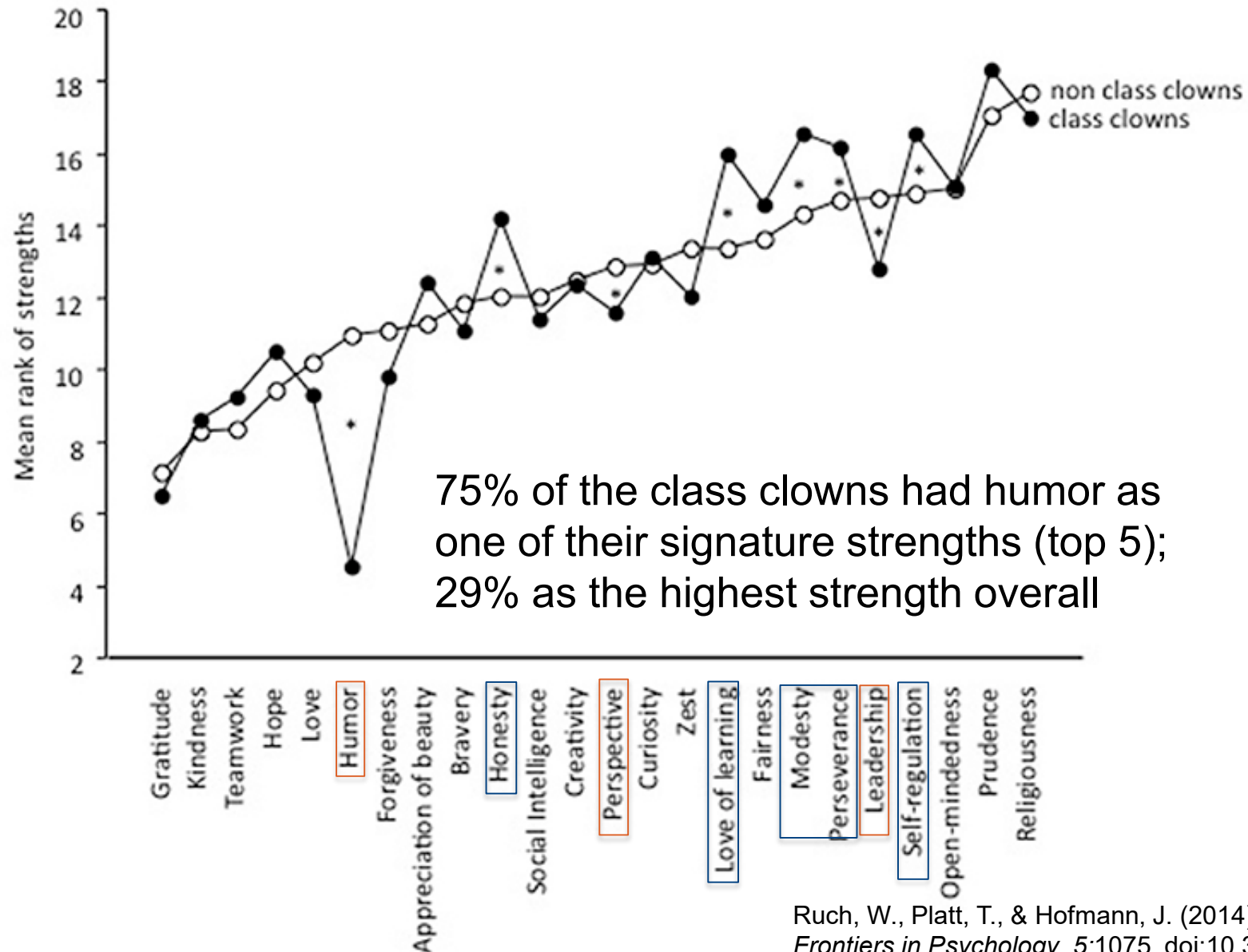
Ruch, W., Platt, T., & Hofmann, J. (2014). The character strengths of class clowns. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5:1075. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01075

Platt, T., Wagner, L., & Ruch, W. (2016). The association between class clown dimensions, school experiences and accomplishment. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 51, 327-332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.08.036>

Wagner, L. (2019). The social life of class clowns: Class clown behavior is associated with more friends, but also more aggressive behavior in the classroom. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10: 604. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00604>



# Signature strengths of class clowns



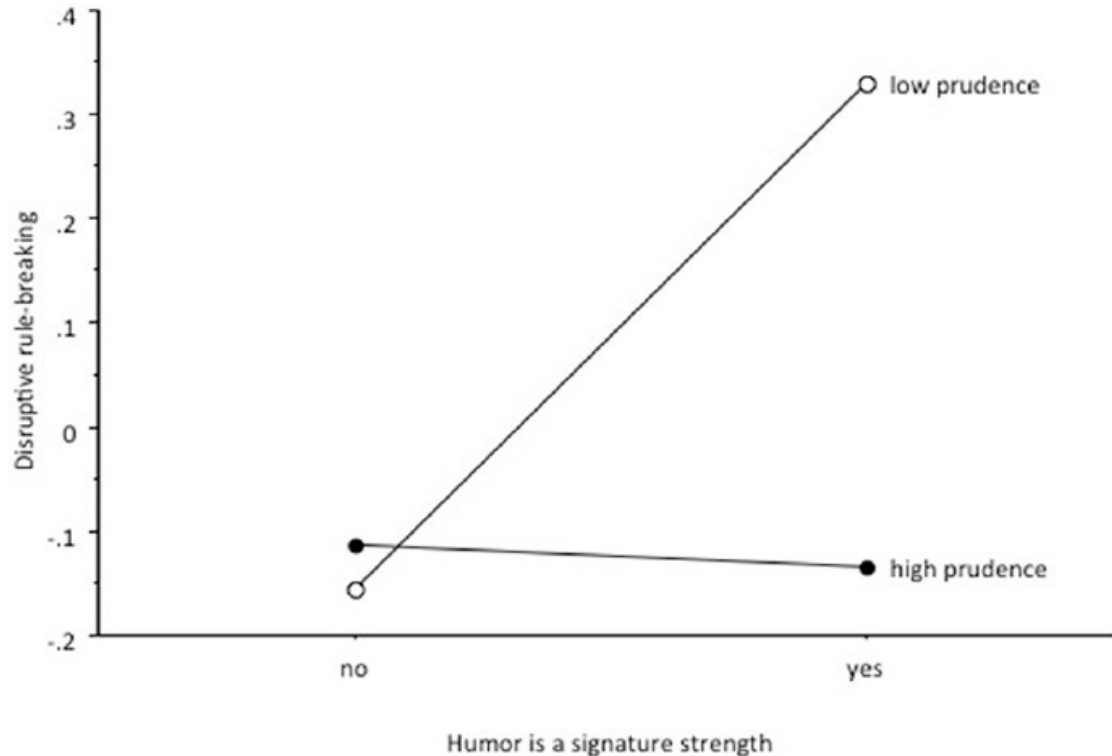
Higher in:

- Humor
- Perspective
- Leadership

Lower in:

- Honesty
- Love of learning
- Modesty
- Perseverance
- Self-regulation

## Interaction between character strengths



Humor as a signature strength was only associated with higher disruptive rule-breaking class clown behavior when it was paired with low prudence.

**FIGURE 3 | Interactive effects of humor as a signature strengths (yes, no) and prudence (high, low) on the degree of disruptive rule-breaking.**

Ruch, W., Platt, T., & Hofmann, J. (2014). The character strengths of class clowns. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5:1075. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01075





## Objection 4: Displaying strengths in behavior

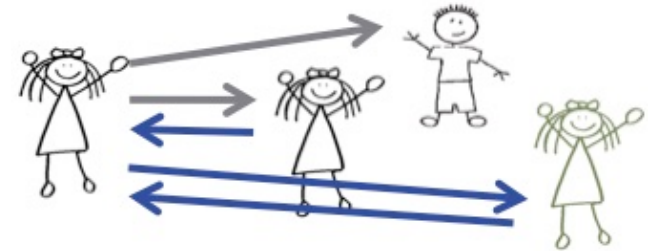
- **Strengths-related behavior** at school showed positive relationships with (when controlling for the individual level of the character strength!)
  - well-being at school → particularly displaying kindness, fairness, leadership, and hope
  - school achievement → particularly displaying creativity, perseverance, and kindness
- Also that perception that character strengths were **desirable at the classroom level** was additionally relevant to well-being at school → particularly the desirability of perseverance, fairness, forgiveness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and hope
- Daily diary study across five days: **Strengths-related behavior on one day** is related to the **current well-being at school on the next morning** → If students had displayed e.g., curiosity, bravery, or kindness, they enjoyed being in school more on the next morning

## Objection 5: Did we consider all relevant aspects?

Social relationships at school are key to students' overall well-being and all aspects of their development (e.g., Bagwell & Smith, 2011)

Wagner (2019): Role of character strengths in social relationships

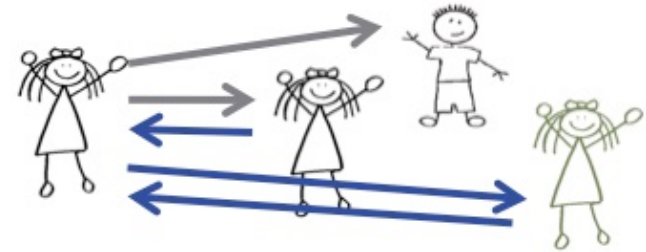
- $N = 339$  primary and secondary school students (mean age: 12.8 years)
- Nominated friends in the classroom, and completed measures of character strengths, the desirability and importance of character strengths in a friend, and of friendship quality for their best friend in the classroom



Wagner, L. (2019). Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 39, 864–903.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431618791286>

## Objection 5: Character strengths and peer relationships

- **Six character strengths** were positively related to all three indicators (peer acceptance, number of received friend nominations, and number of mutual friends)
  - **Perspective**
  - **Love**
  - **Kindness**
  - **Social Intelligence**
  - **Teamwork**
  - **Humor**
- In addition, **modesty** was positively related to likeability and number of mutual friends, and **leadership** was positively related to likeability and received friend nominations



Wagner, L. (2019). Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 39, 864–903.  
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## Objection 5: Perceived importance of character strengths

- **Four character strengths** stood out as most desirable and most important qualities in a friend
  - **Humor**
  - **Honesty**
  - **Kindness**
  - **Fairness**
- These four strengths were also rated as **more desirable and important than all of the additional qualities** (i.e., good looks, common interests, popularity, social skills, good grades, and sportiness)
- Gratitude, teamwork, love, forgiveness, social intelligence, bravery, and hope also received very high ratings
- All 24 character strengths received ratings above “somewhat desirable”

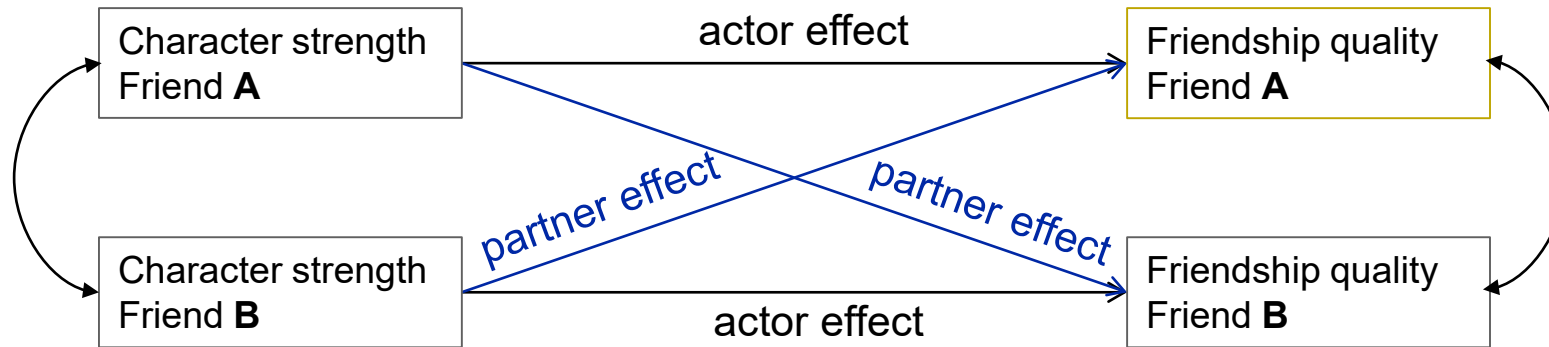
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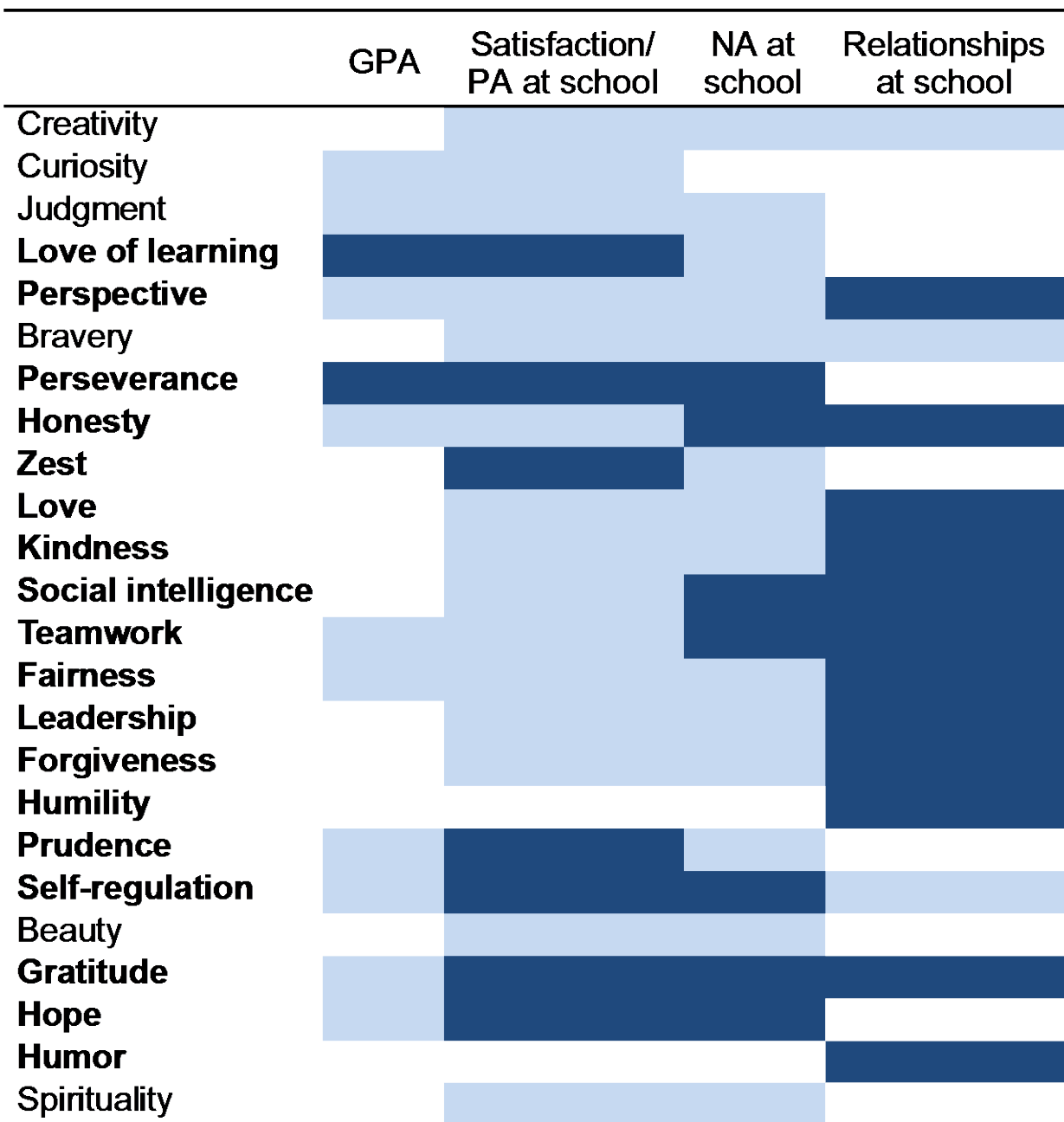
## Objection 5: Role of character strengths in friendship quality

Multilevel Actor-Partner-Interdependence Model for indistinguishable dyads (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006)



- Perspective, honesty, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, and gratitude showed **positive partner effects on friendship satisfaction** and overall **friendship quality**
- Additionally, certain character strengths showed **partner effects on specific friendship functions**, e.g., creativity, zest, leadership, and humor on *stimulating companionship*

Wagner, L. (2019). Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 39, 864–903.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431618791286>



When relationships at school are additionally considered, the picture changes and all 24 character strengths show at least one stable relationship with one of the outcomes studied.

light blue = stable relationship (across several samples)  
dark blue = stable strong relationships (across several samples)  
PA = positive affect  
NA = low negative affect






Building character strengths at school

Photo by Alora Griffiths on Unsplash



## Two approaches

Linkins, Niemiec,  
Gillham, &  
Mayerson (2015)



Fostering the character  
strengths that „matter  
most“ in school

Photo by Swapnil Dwivedi on Unsplash



Working with students'  
signature strengths

Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash





## Elements of character strengths interventions in education

- (1) Providing knowledge on character strengths by means of **developing a language** for talking about character strengths
  - Example exercise: Talking about positive qualities of people one admires
- (2) Fostering the **identification of character strengths** in oneself and others
  - Example exercises: Strengths spotting, Character strengths 360°
- (3) Instructing students to **display strengths-related behavior** (e.g., in new situations etc.)
- (4) Encouraging **reflection** on own and others' strengths-related behavior

In addition, interventions best use a **whole-school approach** by including not only students, but also teachers and other staff members as well as including a group or school perspective.

- Example exercise: The sum of our strengths
- Other applications: Using character strengths to structure parent meetings, framing school activities in terms of strengths, using signature strengths in peer evaluations among teachers



## Conclusions

Character strengths are relevant for a wide range of educational outcomes, and they predict them above the influences of intelligence and the Big Five personality traits.

Which character strengths „matter the most“ depends on which outcomes are considered – so this might be the wrong question to ask.

If character strengths are displayed in behavior in the classroom and are perceived as desirable in school, this goes along with higher well-being at school.

Character strengths can provide a useful framework for talking about positive traits and for taking action on displaying them.

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**Thank you very much  
for your attention!**

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