

# Character strengths of first-year student teachers and the 5 Cs of the Positive Youth Development framework: A mixed-methods study

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## Abstract

The Positive Psychology and Positive Youth Development frameworks conceptually overlap noticeably, such as their orientation to a thriving continuum, yet they vary in certain respects like their theoretical backgrounds and focus on different populations. The VIA (Values in Action) Classification of character strengths and virtues constitutes an important research topic in positive psychology. Character strengths are defined as positive personality traits that are morally valuable; they can be systematically developed and contribute to various positive outcomes. The theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development is operationalised by the 5 Cs: Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring and Connection. The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between character strengths and the 5 Cs of the Positive Youth Development framework given that this relationship has yet to be studied empirically. The sample consisted of 130 first-year Slovenian student teachers, mostly female (just 2 males). The participants' average age was 19.51 years. First-year students face two distinct transitions (developmental and educational), meaning they need support during this period. Mixed-methods were used in the study; quantitative (correlational analysis) and qualitative analysis (content analysis of students' written responses to open-ended questions). The results show that 12 out of 24 character strengths relate to the 5 Cs: Love, Kindness, Fairness, Teamwork, Humour, Gratitude, Spirituality, Judgement, Self-regulation, Prudence, Perseverance

and Curiosity. These strengths can therefore be used to promote the positive development of first-year students. A possible strategy for successfully overcoming the transition period entails identifying, developing and using students' character strengths so that they may experience positive personal and professional development in the direction of the 5 Cs.

*Keywords:* Positive psychology, character strengths, VIA Classification, Positive youth development, 5 Cs, first-year students, transition

Vrline študentov prvega letnika pedagoških smeri v odnosu do »5 C-jev« iz teoretičnega modela  
Pozitivni razvoj mladih  
Povzetek

Pozitivna psihologija in Pozitivni razvoj mladih sta kot dva različna teoretična modela za preučevanje pozitivnih vidikov življenja v več pogledih sorodna, a se v nekaterih tudi razlikujeta. Oba poudarjata pomembnost pozitivnega delovanja človeka in razvijanja njegovih potencialov, pri čemer so v modelu Pozitivni razvoj mladih v ospredju mladostniki kot izbrana razvojna skupina. Klasifikacija vrlin predstavlja pomembno raziskovalno področje znotraj pozitivne psihologije. Vrline so opredeljene kot pozitivne lastnosti, ki so moralno cenjene. Z njihovim sistematičnim razvijanjem lahko prispevamo k številnim pozitivnim vidikom posameznikovega delovanja, počutja in doživljanja. Pozitivni razvoj mladih je glede na angleško pojmovanje opredeljen s t.i. »pet C-ji«: kompetentnost (Competence), samozavest (Confidence), značaj (Character), skrb (Caring) in povezanost (Connection). Cilj raziskave je bil preučiti odnos med vrlinami in petimi C-ji iz modela Pozitivni razvoj mladih, saj ta empirično še ni bil raziskan. V raziskavi je sodelovalo 130 študentov prvega letnika pedagoških študijskih programov. Povprečna starost udeležencev je bila 19,51 let, v vzorcu so prevladovali ženske (bila sta le dva moška udeleženca). Na podlagi kvantitativne (korelacijska analiza) in kvalitativne analize (metoda analize vsebine pisnih odgovorov študentov) smo ugotovili, da lahko dvanajst izbranih vrlin (od skupno 24) pri študentih prvega letnika pozitivno prispeva k njihovemu osebnostnemu razvoju na področju petih C-jev. Te vrline so: ljubezen, prijaznost, poštenost, sodelovanje, humor, hvaležnost, duhovnost, kritično mišljenje, samouravnavanje, preudarnost, vztrajnost in radovednost. Študenti prvega letnika se soočajo z dvema različnima prehodoma hkra ti (razvojnimi in izobraževalnimi), zato v tem obdobju potrebujejo podporo. Pomembno je, da znajo študenti prepoznati, razvijati in uporabljati svoje

vrline, saj lahko te prispevajo k osebnostnemu in strokovnemu razvoju v smeri ciljev modela Pozitivni razvoj mladih.

*Ključne besede:* pozitivna psihologija, vrline, VIA klasifikacija vrlin, pozitivni razvoj mladih, 5 C-jev, študenti prvega letnika, obdobje prehoda

## Introduction

### Positive Psychology and the VIA Classification of character strengths

The last two decades have seen a growing body of research on topics that promote the importance of positive aspects of life, such as flourishing and well-being, arising from the relatively new discipline of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology focuses on the study of positive individual traits, positive subjective experiences and positive institutions that facilitate positive experiences and positive traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of the largest projects in positive psychology involved development of the VIA<sup>1</sup> Classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are defined as positive personality traits that are morally valuable (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). They constitute the “good character” needed for individuals and societies to thrive (Park et al., 2006). The VIA Classification contains 24 character strengths that are manifest reflections of six higher-order virtues (McGrath, 2015) considered to be universal in time and place: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence. The VIA Classification is as follows (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; we list *virtues* in italics and their corresponding character strengths; in square brackets, we add some synonyms to assist understanding of particular character strengths): *Wisdom and Knowledge* (Creativity, Curiosity, Judgement [critical thinking], Love of learning, Perspective [wisdom]); *Courage* (Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty [authenticity, integrity], Zest [enthusiasm, vitality]); *Humanity* (Love [capacity to love and to be loved], Kindness [generosity], Social Intelligence); *Justice* (Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership); *Temperance* (Forgiveness, Modesty [humility], Prudence, Self-regulation); *Transcendence* (Appreciation of beauty and excellence, Gratitude, Hope [optimism], Humour [playfulness], Spirituality [religiousness]).

1 While VIA originally stood for “Values in Action”, it is today used as an acronym associated with the VIA Institute on Character (McGrath, 2015).

The hierarchical model of character strengths and virtues was based on cultural considerations with the authors recognising that empirical studies could lead to a different model being proposed (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Numerous empirical studies on the latent structure of self-reported character strengths followed, extracting 3–5 factors with a considerable overlap in their factors (McGrath, 2015). When people employ their character strengths, they use their natural capacities to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals, which should lead to positive outcomes like achievements and well-being (Linley & Harrington, 2006). There is growing evidence that certain character strengths can buffer the negative effects of stress and trauma and that character strengths help young people thrive (Park, 2004). Many youth development programmes use interventions aimed at building specific character strengths (e.g. Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). The Aware-Explore-Apply (A-E-A) model was proposed to describe how strengths-based approaches lead to positive outcomes (Niemic, 2013): individuals (1) build up knowledge of their strengths (aware); (2) explore how their character strengths relate to valued outcomes in their past and current experiences; and (3) use their character strengths in their everyday lives (apply). In the higher education context, this gives students opportunities to apply their strengths in the processes of learning, intellectual development, and personal excellence (Louis, 2011). In sum, the VIA Classification is a ‘common language’ for describing personality traits that “1. reflect our personal identity; 2. produce positive outcomes for ourselves and others (e.g., well-being, positive relationships, achievement); and 3. contribute to the collective good” (Niemic, 2018, p. 2).

### The Positive Youth Development Framework

Alongside the Positive Psychology framework, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework (Lerner, 2007) has emerged independently. Both frameworks are primarily oriented to a thriving continuum – shifting the focus away from deficits, even though PYD focuses almost exclusively on adolescence (Tolan et al., 2016). The PYD perspective is based on developmental systems theory. It emphasises that positive development and thriving can occur when young people’s strengths are systematically aligned with positive resources that promote their growth (Lerner et al., 2005). The 5 Cs Model of PYD is the most empirically supported framework to date (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009). It stresses the strengths of adolescents and enables youth to be seen as resources waiting to be developed (Bowers

et al., 2010; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The positive development that results from aligning young people's strengths and positive, growth-promoting resources in the ecology of youth can be operationalised with the "5 Cs": *Competence* refers to having a positive view of one's actions in domain-specific areas, e.g. social, academic, vocational; *Confidence* means having an internal sense of positive self-worth and self-efficacy; *Character* encompasses respect for social and cultural rules, standards of correct behaviour, a sense of right and wrong; *Caring* means having a sense of sympathy and empathy for others; *Connection* refers to having positive bonds with people and institutions (Lerner et al., 2005).

These domains are interactive and adolescents need healthy development in all domains (Dukakis et al., 2009). Although the 5 Cs were formulated with a focus on measuring and explaining adolescent development, they were not meant to be limited to this developmental period (Lerner et al., 2005; Tolan et al., 2016).

### Comparison of the Positive Psychology and Positive Youth Development frameworks

A comparison of the Positive Psychology (PP) and PYD frameworks shows the aim of each framework is the thriving of individuals (concentrating on adolescents in PYD) and society. Both recognise the role of individuals' (character) strengths that can be developed and promoted to achieve valuable outcomes like well-being, achievements and, finally, a contribution to society. Park (2004, pp. 40-41) emphasised that in the PP framework, one can find "a comprehensive scheme for understanding and promoting positive youth development" whose goal is to "build and strengthen assets that enable youth to grow and flourish throughout life". The PYD framework (Lerner, 2007) is based on developmental systems theory and puts greater emphasis on the role of the growth-promoting resources in the ecology of youth. While PP seeks to understand, describe and promote positive human experience, PYD promotes optimal human development with intentional efforts to enhance young people and their interests, skills and abilities (Tolan et al., 2016). Noting the evident common aspects in each framework, we speculated that the theoretical and practical aspects of the VIA Classification of character strengths, namely the core theme in PP, could provide a new perspective for understanding the possible pathways leading toward young people's positive development by achieving the 5 Cs of the PYD. To the best of our knowledge, no empirical study thus far has

combined both frameworks, making this the first study to integrate character strengths and the 5 Cs and to explore their relationship.

### The developmental context of transition

First-year university students are a special group of youth because they are experiencing two distinct transitions at once: the developmental transition between late adolescence and emerging adulthood, and the transition in levels of education from upper secondary school to university. Transitional periods are potentially risky periods with a possible decline in academic achievement and adaptive behaviours (Eccles et al., 1993). While moving from one level of education to another, adolescents often find it difficult to establish new relationships and obtain social support from their teachers and peers (Eccles et al., 1993). The transition to university can be stressful as it requires adjustment to a new social and academic environment (Eccles et al., 1993; Fischer, 1994). For first-year students, successful integration into a new social and intellectual life is of great importance – when students find their interactions meaningful and rewarding, they increase their learning efforts (Tinto, 1993). This transition is also important for later academic success, such as in the longitudinal study by Tinto (1993) where the majority of non-progressing students attributed their reasons for dropping out to their first-year problems. Therefore, we should investigate the support mechanisms or strategies that can contribute to the 5 Cs of the PYD of first-year students in order to promote their positive development.

### Aims of the study

The study aimed to examine the relationship between the character strengths of first-year university students (student teachers) and the 5 Cs of the Positive Youth Development framework from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the character strengths–5 Cs relationship. Therefore, the goal was to determine which character strengths are related to Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring and Connection (1) using correlational analysis, and (2) according to students' responses to open questions after having had the theory of character strengths introduced to them. The results provide insights into the overlap of these two theoretical frameworks.

## Method

### Participants

The study participants were 130 first-year students in different study programmes at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education: preschool education ( $n = 59$ ), social pedagogy ( $n = 25$ ), special and rehabilitation pedagogy ( $n = 29$ ) and speech and language therapy and surdo-pedagogy ( $n = 17$ ). There were only two male students in the sample. The sample reflects the typical gender structure in Slovenian educational study programmes and the two male students were therefore not excluded from the sample. The participants' average age was 19.51 years ( $SD = 0.66$ ). In Slovenia, tertiary education consists of short-cycle higher vocational education (post-secondary education) and higher education; study programmes take 2 to 6 years (Taštanoska, 2019). Slovenia is involved in the Bologna Process. Higher education is organised in three study cycles (professional and academic undergraduate study programmes, postgraduate master's study programmes and doctoral study programmes). Participants in our study were first-year university students of the 3- or 4- year programmes of the first cycle (undergraduate) study programmes.

### Instruments

#### *Character strengths*

Character strengths were measured using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson et al., 2004), which consists of 240 items. Each of the 24 character strengths is assessed by 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = not at all like me to 5 = completely like me). Example scales with corresponding items are: Kindness (e.g. "I enjoy being kind to others"), Love (e.g. "I am always willing to take risks to establish a relationship"), Fairness (e.g. "I always admit when I am wrong"), Perseverance (e.g. "I never quit a task before it is done"), Teamwork (e.g. "I work at my very best when I am a group member"). In general, the scales show good internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and validity (Park et al., 2006; Ruch et al., 2010). In our sample, reliability coefficients range from .63 (Self-regulation) to .87 (Creativity). The Slovenian translation (Gradišek, 2014) of the VIA-IS was used.

### *The 5 Cs*

The 5 Cs were measured using the PYD short-form questionnaire (Geldhof et al., 2014). It consists of 34 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (22 items) or from 1 = not important to 5 = extremely important (4 items) or from 1 = not at all like me to 5 = very much like me (8 items)). The items measure five scales – the 5 Cs: Competence (6 items, e.g. “I do very well in my class work in my school”), Confidence (6 items, e.g. “I am happy with myself most of the time”), Character (8 items, e.g. “Accepting responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get into trouble”), Caring (6 items, e.g. “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them”), and Connection (8 items, e.g. “My friends care about me”). The questionnaire is psychometrically adequate (Geldhof et al., 2014). The reliabilities of the scales in the present sample were satisfactory with reliability coefficients as follows: .68 (Competence), .73 (Confidence), .56 (Character), .75 (Caring) and .72 (Connection). Kozina et al. (2019) reported slightly higher reliabilities for the Slovenian version of the questionnaire for high school students (.67, .89, .67, .81, .77) and an adequate fit of the 5-factor structure.

### *Character strengths and the 5 Cs*

Participating students were asked five open-ended questions to collect their insights concerning how their character strengths might help them achieve the 5 Cs: Competence (“Which character strengths (and how) might help you perceive your actions as positive to feel competent in different domains – social, academic and vocational?”), Confidence (“Which character strengths (and how) might help you be more satisfied with yourself, feel self-worth and self-confidence?”), Character (“Which character strengths (and how) might help you act according to social norms, be aware of right and wrong, take responsibility for your actions?”), Caring (“Which character strengths (and how) might help you develop or enhance your empathy and caring for others?”), and Connection (“Which character strengths (and how) might help you build and maintain positive relationships with others – on both individual and institutional levels?”).

### **Procedure**

As part of the tutorials at the university, the students participated in a workshop on character strengths. Prior to the workshop, they completed the VIA-IS questionnaire. During the 90-minute (online) workshop,



students were introduced to theory about character strengths and the VIA Classification, identified their signature strengths and reflected on their results. They discussed the practical implications of engaging their character strengths in their private and professional lives and reflected on how the workshop had contributed to their professional development. After the workshop, they were asked to complete the PYD questionnaire and answer the open-ended questions. Participation was voluntary. Students provided their student ID numbers in order to link their pre- and post-workshop responses, but the data were considered to be anonymous. In March 2020, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the study process in higher education in Slovenia to shift from the face-to-face to online form. In the 2020/2021 academic year, first-year students – the participants in our study – attended lectures in person for only the first 2 weeks in October 2020, before the study process again shifted to the online form and then remained there until the end of the academic year. The study took place in March 2021, during the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. All study-related activities (the workshop and completing the questionnaires) were therefore carried out in an online form.

## Results

### Results of the quantitative analysis

Descriptive statistics (*M*, *SD*) and Pearson’s correlations between the character strengths and the 5 Cs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations of the VIA-IS scales and 5 Cs.

	M	SD	Competence	Confidence	Character	Caring	Connection
Fairness	4.32	0.44	.20*	.05	.41**	.30**	.19*
Kindness	4.29	0.40	.19*	.11	.32**	.36**	.37**
Teamwork	4.18	0.45	.33**	.29**	.35**	.39**	.42**
Leadership	4.17	0.45	.33**	.08	.41**	.31**	.26**
Gratitude	4.17	0.50	.16	.34**	.27**	.29**	.21*
Love	4.14	0.51	.31**	.38**	.13	.22*	.46**
Honesty	4.08	0.44	.16	.27**	.24**	.12	.14
Humour	4.07	0.55	.35**	.22*	.19*	.17*	.38**
Appreciation of beauty	4.05	0.51	.12	.19*	.45**	.24**	.11

	M	SD	Competence	Confidence	Character	Caring	Connection
Curiosity	3.96	0.53	.32**	.24**	.35**	.14	.16
Zest	3.92	0.56	.46**	.51**	.29**	.14	.39**
Judgement	3.91	0.49	.12	.15	.39**	.08	.10
Modesty	3.81	0.60	-.11	.06	.18*	.40**	.14
Hope	3.80	0.64	.30**	.61**	.21*	.10	.31**
Perseverance	3.79	0.60	.32**	.36**	.28**	.15	.44**
Social intelligence	3.77	0.50	.52**	.36**	.35**	.15	.29**
Creativity	3.75	0.65	.19*	.03	.24**	.25**	.16
Perspective	3.73	0.47	.37**	.37**	.42**	.13	.22*
Forgiveness	3.72	0.56	.16	.25**	.26**	.20*	.18*
Prudence	3.67	0.53	-.02	.17	.36**	.32**	.21*
Spirituality	3.58	0.84	.24**	.35**	.19*	.04	.09
Bravery	3.54	0.53	.31**	.23**	.31**	.10	.20*
Self-regulation	3.51	0.51	.36**	.26**	.35**	.14	.37**
Love of learning	3.37	0.62	.06	.05	.35**	.02	-.03
Competence	3.37	0.59	1	.45**	.11	-.03	.38**
Confidence	3.87	0.52	.45**	1	.30**	-.01	.36**
Character	4.10	0.38	.11	.30**	1	.30**	.30**
Caring	4.44	0.48	-.03	-.01	.30**	1	.34**
Connection	3.94	0.55	.38**	.36**	.30**	.34**	1

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Students showed the highest scores for the character strengths of Fairness, Kindness, Teamwork, Leadership, Gratitude, Love, Honesty, Humour, and Appreciation of beauty (mean scores above  $M = 4.0$ ). The lowest-rated character strengths were Spirituality, Bravery, Self-regulation, and Love of learning.

The majority of character strengths showed significant positive correlations with the 5 Cs. Social intelligence, Zest, Perspective, Self-regulation, Humour, Teamwork and Leadership showed the highest correlations with Competence. Confidence correlated most strongly with Hope, Zest, Love, Perspective, Perseverance, Social intelligence, Spirituality and Gratitude. Character correlated most strongly with Appreciation of beauty, Perspective, Fairness, Leadership, Judgement, Prudence, Self-regulation, and Love of learning. Caring correlated most strongly with Modesty, Teamwork, Kindness, Prudence, Leadership and Fairness. Connection correlated most strongly with Love, Perseverance, Teamwork, Zest, Humour,

Kindness, and Self-regulation. Only Teamwork and Humour correlated significantly with all 5 Cs. Fairness, Kindness and Leadership correlated with all Cs, except Confidence. Similarly, Gratitude and Forgiveness correlated with all Cs, except Competence. Several character strengths showed no significant correlations with Caring: Zest, Hope, Perseverance, Social intelligence, Perspective, Bravery and Self-regulation, whereas they correlated significantly with the four other Cs. Love correlated with all Cs, except Character. Two intellectual character strengths, Love of learning and Judgement, correlated only with Character.

### Results of the qualitative analysis

Participants were asked to name and describe character strengths that could help them achieve each of the 5 Cs. The frequencies of all character strengths listed were evaluated and divided by the number of participants ( $N = 130$ ); results are presented in Table 2. Students could name various character strengths that relate to each of the Cs, meaning the sum of *f%* exceeds 100%. In addition, some students' quotes are presented to illustrate how students perceive the role of character strengths in achieving the 5 Cs.

Table 2: Perceived contribution of character strengths (in *f%*) to Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection and Caring, according to the students' responses.

	Competence ( <i>f%</i> )	Confidence ( <i>f%</i> )	Character ( <i>f%</i> )	Connection ( <i>f%</i> )	Caring ( <i>f%</i> )
Kindness	42.31	20.00	4.62	56.92	61.54
Love	34.62	36.92	2.31	46.15	52.31
Fairness	33.08	7.69	74.62	29.23	18.46
Perseverance	31.54	12.31	3.08	6.92	6.15
Teamwork	30.77	2.31	3.85	28.46	2.31
Humour	27.69	11.54	0.00	32.31	3.85
Honesty	25.38	13.85	13.08	21.54	13.08
Judgement	23.08	3.85	34.62	4.62	0.00
Gratitude	18.46	30.00	2.31	17.69	19.23
Creativity	16.92	3.85	0.77	6.15	0.77
Curiosity	16.92	3.85	0.77	10.00	3.08
Leadership	15.38	4.62	2.31	9.23	0.00

	Competence (f %)	Confidence (f %)	Character (f %)	Connection (f %)	Caring (f %)
Love of learning	14.62	0.00	1.54	1.54	0.00
Social intelligence	14.62	2.31	10.00	18.46	19.23
Forgiveness	11.54	7.69	6.92	14.62	15.38
Hope	10.77	12.31	0.00	5.38	6.15
Zest	10.00	3.08	3.08	7.69	4.62
Perspective	7.69	0.77	6.15	6.15	11.54
Bravery	7.69	20.77	12.31	10.00	0.00
Beauty	7.69	15.38	0.00	6.15	5.38
Modesty	5.38	10.00	2.31	10.00	7.69
Prudence	5.38	4.62	19.23	3.08	4.62
Self-regulation	4.62	9.23	16.92	3.85	1.54
Spirituality	3.08	16.15	5.38	1.54	5.38

Note. F % was calculated according to the number of participants (N = 130)

### Competence

Students indicated they could mainly use their strengths of Kindness (42.3%), Love (34.6%), Fairness (33.1%), Perseverance (31.5%), Teamwork (30.8%), Humour (27.7%), Honesty (25.4%) and Judgement (23.1%) to perceive their actions as positive and to feel competent in different domains (social, academic, vocational) – these were the most common responses, related to Competence. The least frequent responses were related to Modesty and Prudence (both 5.4%), Self-regulation (4.6%) and Spirituality (3.1%) (Table 2).

Kindness was a character strength most frequently mentioned in the context of Competence, mostly in relation to the social domain, e.g. *“It is important for me that people feel comfortable around me”*; but also in the vocational (work) domain, e.g. *“Kindness is important for ensuring good relationships at work – you build positive social interactions with colleagues and they can rely on you”*. Some students emphasised the interplay of Kindness and Love: *“When you are kind, you get a nice response from others and that makes you feel accepted by those you know and those you don’t. And love helps you maintain caring relationships with those closest to you”*. However, the character strength of Love can also independently contribute

to Competence according to the students, e.g. *“I feel good and also do well when I feel that I have good relationships with others, when they can rely on me and I can rely on them”*.

Fairness was identified as a strength that can help *“resolve conflict and establish compromise”*. Students were aware that *“if you achieve something when you are fair, you should be proud of yourself and your success”*. The students’ responses reveal Perseverance as an important character strength for all three domains of Competence: *“It helps me not to give up in my relationships with friends and colleagues at work even when there are difficulties”*. In the academic domain, Perseverance helps students *“set a certain study goal and persevere until it is achieved”*.

### *Confidence*

According to the students, the character strengths that can help them the most to be more satisfied with themselves, to feel self-worth and self-confidence were Love (36.9%), Gratitude (30.0%), Bravery (20.8%), Kindness (20.0%), Spirituality (16.2%) and Appreciation of beauty (15.4%). The least recognised strengths, related to Confidence, were Social intelligence and Teamwork (both 2.3%), Perspective (0.8%) and Love of learning (no mentions) (Table 2).

Students indicated that, in the context of Confidence, they found the role of Love (36.9%) important, especially *“love of self”*. This character strength helps them to *“love [themselves] as [they] are”* because *“if you love yourself, you can love others”*. However, they also recognised the role of Love in relationships with others: *“If I saw that I was as important to my closest people as they are to me, it would make me more satisfied with myself”*.

The second most commonly identified character strength in relation to Confidence was Gratitude, which can help students *“notice more things [they are] grateful for in life and consequently notice more of [their] successes and begin to appreciate [themselves] more”*. Students acknowledged the important role of Gratitude while faced with negative thoughts about themselves, e.g. *“when I’m stuck with negative thoughts about my body and my weight, I remind myself that my body keeps me alive and healthy, gives me energy so I can run or do something else. And then I become grateful and loving of myself”*.

Bravery was also identified as an important character strength for building students’ self-confidence – it helps them ‘activate’ their inner strength: *“Courage would help me to dare to say, try and do more things”*.

Students sometimes use the courage they already possess: *“Courage helps me show my confidence and self-worth”*.

Kindness was identified as a strength with positive effects in terms of Confidence when used towards others: *“Kindness gives me a sense of accomplishment – I feel very good when I know that I am positively influencing the people around me with my friendly attitude”*; or towards students themselves as *“being able to accept [themselves] as [they are] and not be too hard on [themselves]”*.

The role of Spirituality in building students’ self-esteem was identified as a character strength that helps students *“make [their] life meaningful and valuable in both difficult and easy situations”*. The character strength Appreciation of beauty and excellence was mentioned in the way with respect to helping the students *“realise that small and simple things can make [them] happy and fulfilled”*.

### *Character*

Character strengths that can assist the students to act in line with social norms, be aware of right and wrong, and take responsibility for their actions were Fairness (74.6%), Judgement (34.6%), Prudence (19.2%) and Self-regulation (16.9%), according to their responses. The least frequently mentioned character strengths related to Character were Love of learning (1.5%), Creativity and Curiosity (both 0.8%), while Appreciation of beauty, Hope, and Humour were not mentioned (Table 2).

Fairness was the most frequently mentioned character strength in relation to Character – nearly three-quarters of the students in the sample recognised its role. The role of Fairness in achieving Character was identified as: *“It is important to ask ourselves if we have done something right or wrong and that we take responsibility for our actions”*. Students use Fairness when they *“try to act fairly, treat everyone the same”* and *“act in accordance with social norms”*. They could use Fairness more when they *“should admit that [they] did something wrong, regardless of the consequences”*.

Judgement was also identified as important for achieving Character: *“being able to define what is right and wrong and what is expected of me”*. One student described the interplay of Judgement, Self-regulation and Fairness for achieving Character: *“Critical thinking is necessary for deciding what to do in certain situations. Self-control is required to control what we will or will not do. And fairness helps us admit our mistakes and accept consequences, and in this process we learn a lot”*.

### *Caring*

Caring refers to developing or fostering one's empathy and caring for others. Students responded that the following character strengths play an important role in feeling and showing empathy: Kindness (61.5%), Love (52.3%), Social intelligence, and Gratitude (both 19.2%), Fairness (18.5%), and Forgiveness (15.4%). Judgement, Love of learning, Bravery and Leadership were not mentioned in relation to Caring (Table 2).

The role of Kindness in developing empathy was evident: *"We must always be kind to a person – even if we know someone very well, we never know the whole story"*. Students are aware of the importance of *"respecting others, being kind and understanding"*, *"listening to another person, helping"*.

The character strength of Love was also regarded as significant for empathy: *"Love is necessary to show caring and promote empathy because you need love to care about people and their mental health. Love also allows you to get to know a person and build an emotional connection with him or her"*.

According to the students, the character strength of Social intelligence plays an important role in fostering empathy because it helps us *"see the motives of others' actions, understand them better, and consider what we would do in a similar situation"*.

In addition, the role of Gratitude was recognised: *"We must always be grateful for being surrounded by loving people and helping those who are not"*.

### *Connection*

The students were asked which character strengths help them build and maintain positive relationships with others on an individual and institutional level. With regard to Connection, they identified Kindness (56.9%), Love (46.2%), Humour (32.3%), Fairness (29.2%) and Teamwork (28.5%) as the most important character strengths. Prudence (3.1%), Self-regulation and Spirituality (both 1.5%) were the least mentioned character strengths related to Connection (Table 2).

The role of Kindness in relation to Connection was described as *"making others feel comfortable around [us] when [we are] kind"* and helping relationships to improve: *"People appreciate it when you are there for them and are willing to help them; this builds good relationships"*.

The character strength of Love is necessary for building and maintaining positive relationships with others: “When you find relationships with others important, you invest more time and effort and they improve”.

Humour plays an important role in positive relationships because “with humour we create a positive atmosphere which positively affects everyone”.

### Comparing the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses

A comparison of the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses will enable us to conclude with greater certainty which character strengths add the most by way of achieving each of the 5 Cs in the PYD framework. Table 3 provides an overview of the results of both analyses. In the last column (overlap), character strengths showing at least moderate correlations ( $r > .30$ ) and mentioned by at least 15% of the participating students are highlighted.

Table 3: Comparison of results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

	Quantitative analysis ( $r > .30$ )	Qualitative analysis ( $f\% > 15\%$ )	Overlap
Competence	Social intelligence, Zest, Perspective, Self-regulation, Humour, Teamwork, Leadership, Curiosity, Perseverance, Love, Bravery, Hope	Kindness, Love, Fairness, Perseverance, Teamwork, Humour, Honesty, Judgement, Gratitude, Creativity, Curiosity	Love Perseverance Teamwork Humour Curiosity
Confidence	Hope, Zest, Love, Perspective, Perseverance, Social intelligence, Spirituality, Gratitude	Love, Gratitude, Bravery Kindness, Spirituality, Appreciation of beauty	Love Gratitude Spirituality
Character	App. of beauty, Perspective, Fairness, Leadership, Judgement, Prudence, Self-regulation, Love of learning, Curiosity, Social intelligence, Teamwork, Kindness, Bravery	Fairness Judgement Prudence Self-regulation	Fairness Judgement Prudence Self-regulation
Caring	Modesty, Teamwork, Kindness, Prudence, Leadership, Fairness, Gratitude ( $r = .29$ )	Kindness, Love, Social intelligence, Gratitude, Fairness, Forgiveness	Kindness Gratitude Fairness
Connection	Love, Perseverance, Teamwork, Zest, Humour, Kindness, Self-regulation, Hope	Kindness, Love, Humour, Fairness, Teamwork, Honesty, Social intelligence, Gratitude	Love Kindness Teamwork Humour



According to the findings, Competence can be promoted by developing Love, Perseverance, Teamwork, Humour and Curiosity; Confidence through Love, Gratitude and Spirituality; Character through Fairness, Judgement, Prudence and Self-regulation; Caring through Kindness, Gratitude and Fairness; and Connection through Love, Kindness, Teamwork and Humour.

## Discussion

The Positive Psychology and Positive Youth Development frameworks share a considerable theoretical overlap. Peterson & Seligman's (2004) theory of character strengths, originating from the Positive Psychology framework, highlights the importance of developing, fostering and using one's character strengths in order to achieve positive outcomes for self and others and to contribute to the collective good (Niemiec, 2018). "Contribution", however, is also considered "the sixth C" in the Positive Youth Development framework, meaning that when young people manifest all 5 Cs over time they are more likely to contribute to themselves, the family, community and society, and therefore less likely to engage in risk behaviours (Lerner, 2007).

Our research findings show that identifying, developing and using character strengths may be a good strategy for promoting the 5 Cs of the Positive Development framework in first-year students, which could later manifest in their active engagement in and contribution to society. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses, we conclude that the following 12 character strengths are associated with one or more of the 5 Cs: Love, Kindness, Fairness, Teamwork, Humour, Gratitude, Spirituality, Judgment, Self-regulation, Prudence, Perseverance and Curiosity (Table 3). Their roles in promoting specific Cs are presented below.

*Love* is, according to our findings, important for promoting *Competence*, *Confidence* and *Connection*. Love is a character strength often typical of student teachers (Gradišek, 2012) who find it easy to use in everyday life, e.g.: "I really enjoy showing love, showing people that I listen to them, I try to give them advice, help them understand, comfort them, cheer them up, and show them that I care with my actions, not just words". As such, it helps them feel competent and able to accomplish what is needed because this is required for having effective interactions with other people and social institutions (Lerner, 2007). Love is primarily associated with the social domain of Competence in the form of reciprocal relationships that serve as positive feedback in well-established relationships. In relation to Confidence,

self-love was highlighted in the students' responses as they recognised the need to value themselves and their qualities more, which they perceived as a foundation for building loving relationships with others. Connection is an indicator of positive youth development that chiefly focuses on relationships (Lerner, 2007) and thus it is unsurprising that Love can serve as a pathway to promoting Connection. As one student wrote, *“when we are loving, positive, open, and smiling, others accept us more easily”*.

*Kindness* is important for promoting *Caring* and *Connection*. Kindness is another character strength that is usually highly expressed by student teachers (Gradišek, 2012), for example: *“I always like to do someone a favour, it is never difficult for me to help”*. Kindness indicates the orientation of the self towards the other and is manifested in the tendency to help others, be generous, compassionate and caring (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This makes it no surprise that it contributes to *Caring*, which is composed of empathy (the ability to feel another's pain) and sympathy (feeling bad when another person is suffering), but also refers to someone who has a “big heart” and is “kind, who listens, who always seems to know the right thing to say or offer, who seems genuinely interested in us” (Lerner, 2007, p. 166). Kindness is also relevant for *Connection* – it places emphasis on the well-being of others and thereby prevents the possibility of *Connection* being used selfishly or manipulatively (Lerner, 2007). Kindness has a reciprocal effect: *“If you are kind to someone, he or she is likely to be kind to you and the relationship will grow. If love is then added to that – even better!”*.

*Fairness* is important for promoting *Character* and *Caring*. Fairness and *Character* clearly overlap. Fairness, by definition, is the product of moral judgement, the process “by which people determine what is morally right, what is morally wrong, and what is morally proscribed” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 392). Similarly, Lerner (2007) recognises people of character as those who have a clear and consistent sense of right and wrong and who treat everyone with equal consideration, meaning that everyone has equal opportunities. The students also acknowledged this congruence of the two concepts, as evident in one response: *“By definition, fairness tells me not to praise myself for the actions of others, not to cheat, or to discriminate between people. If I don't behave according to the rules, I'm willing to admit it and take responsibility because that's fair”*. In terms of the role of Fairness in promoting *Caring*, students recognised that Fairness is important for empathy, for treating people fairly and equally – *“to be able to care for others, we need to be fair to others and to ourselves”*.

*Teamwork* can be useful for promoting the *Competence* and *Connection* of first-year students. The character strength of *Teamwork*, defined as “a feeling of identification with and a sense of obligation to a common good that includes the self but stretches beyond one’s own self-interest” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 370) was identified by the students as important for both academic competence (e.g. collaborating on team projects at university) and vocational competence (e.g. working with diverse co-workers at work in the future). Its role in *Competence* is illustratively described here: “*Work [in teams] is easier and the results are better*”. The important role of teamwork was also shown in relation to *Connection*, mainly in students’ involvement in various organisations (the institutional level of *Connection*).

*Humour* was identified as a character strength able to promote the *Competence* and *Connection* of students. This character strength describes the ability to make others smile or laugh and involves a light-hearted outlook on adversity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The students recognised that “*humour can help [them] resolve conflict because it makes a situation less tense and can provide a new perspective on the problem*” and thereby positively impacts their *Competence*. In terms of *Connection*, humour “*adds a special touch to relationships*”, creates a positive atmosphere, with this positively impacting relationships on both individual and organisational levels.

*Gratitude* was found to be important for promoting *Confidence* and *Caring*, and *Spirituality* for promoting *Confidence*. Gratitude has been defined as a “sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 554), which may be a tangible benefit from another person or a moment of special, peaceful bliss. We feel and express gratitude when we value something or someone and feel a sense of goodwill toward that person or thing. Spirituality refers to “beliefs and practices that there is a transcendent (nonphysical) dimension of life” that influence “the kinds of attributions people make, the meanings they construct, and the ways they conduct relationships” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 600). Students described how Gratitude helps them appreciate more of what they have – their possessions, qualities, loving relationships, opportunities in life, acts of kindness they receive from others – with all of this impacting their *Confidence* and *Caring*. Spirituality, in contrast, helps them find their calling and purpose, making their lives meaningful and them feel worthy.

*Judgement*, *Self-regulation* and *Prudence* are important for promoting *Character*. Lerner (2007) highlights that people of character know the

importance of respecting the balance between serving oneself and acting selflessly for the benefit of others. Here, the role of Self-regulation is indirectly recognised. For people of character, a moral compass is necessary and Judgement can assist them to make difficult decisions about what is right and wrong. These decisions should be made with Prudence, a strength of character that is a “form of practical reasoning and self-management that helps to achieve the individual’s goals effectively” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 478). In the students’ words, it is important for them to be able to define what is right and wrong, decide what to do in certain situations (Judgement), restrain themselves from doing the wrong thing (Self-regulation), and think before taking actions so as to later avoid regretting it (Prudence).

*Perseverance* and *Curiosity* can be used for promoting *Competence*. The benefits of perseverance are widely recognised – it increases the chances of achieving difficult goals and is usually necessary for success. It can also improve one’s skills and resourcefulness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), where its intertwining with Competence is evident. The students recognised the role of Perseverance in all three domains of Competence as it helps them maintain good relationships with friends (social domain), accomplish their study goals and successfully meet deadlines (academic domain), and they see it as an important strength for their future work (vocational domain). The role of Perseverance in students’ Competence is clearly described here: “*If I set goals and am very persistent in achieving them, sooner or later I will succeed. And when I achieve my goals, I feel positive in different areas*”. Curiosity is one’s “intrinsic desire for experience and knowledge” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 125) and important for Competence. Students with greater curiosity learn better, engage and perform better in academic settings, feel more positive emotions, and report having more satisfying school experiences and relationships with teachers (for a review, see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Students expressed that Curiosity helps them learn better, improve their general knowledge and obtain more experience in different domains.

## Conclusions

‘A life well-lived’ can be encouraged by identifying, developing and using individual character strengths (Seligman, 2002), with the findings of the present study showing that fostering and developing particular character strengths is a promising strategy for promoting the 5 Cs of the PYD

framework in first-year student teachers. Certain intervention strategies should be developed for fostering specific character strengths to promote positive development. Moreover, student teachers should identify their own character strengths in order to become aware of them, especially their “signature strengths” – those they possess, celebrate and frequently exercise; and feel fulfilled and excited while engaging them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Student teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how they can harness their signature strengths to achieve positive development following the proposed Aware-Explore-Apply model (Niemiec, 2013). One student’s insight holds considerable meaning: *“When I am aware of my character strengths, it increases my self-confidence. I become happier when I realise that I am using my strengths in a good way, such as doing something good, taking care of my loved ones, or volunteering. It makes me happy when I get a kind response from others, when others notice my kindness, and when I notice that my actions have positive consequences”*.

PYD interventions stress the role of matching young people’s needs and skills with the support and opportunities provided by their setting (Tolan, 2014). This casts a spotlight on university teachers, who are important sources of potential support for first-year student teachers who need to integrate into a new ongoing social and intellectual life (Tinto, 1993). Further, university teachers are important role models for student teachers. Our society needs teachers who lead fulfilling lives, are satisfied, feel that teaching is a calling and are aware of their impact on generations of students. Namely, teachers’ professional development begins in their first year of studies, a period crucial to shaping teachers’ future professional role. Only student teachers who are systematically supported and encouraged during this period will experience positive personal and professional development; with this in turn leading to them making a positive Contribution – the sixth C – to themselves, society and their future students.

Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. This study was exploratory in nature and aimed to examine the relationship between two theoretical frameworks that overlap in several respects. The students were not introduced to the PYD framework before completing the PYD questionnaire, in which they assigned particular character strengths to the 5 Cs categories. Prior knowledge of PYD might have influenced their responses about the character strengths–5 Cs relationship, yet we wanted to explore the intuitive congruence between the two concepts. The 5 Cs were described very briefly, suggesting that broader definitions of the Cs may

provide increased understanding of the indicators of PYD. The reliability of the Character subscale in the PYD short-form questionnaire was also quite low, meaning that findings on this subscale should be interpreted with caution. Moreover, certain items in the PYD short-form questionnaire might affect the reliability coefficients. For example, the item “I have a lot of friends” reflects having positive relationships with others on the individual level and could therefore (also) measure Connection, not (just) Competence. Finally, when interpreting the results one should note the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have impacted the participants, albeit all participants shared this unusual context.

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