RELATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS TO PERSONAL TEACHING EFFICACY IN KOREAN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Young-Jin Lim
Mi-Na Kim
Daegu University

Many factors that may affect personal teaching efficacy (PTE) of special education teachers have been discovered. However, little is known about the relationship between character strengths (CS) and PTE in them. This study aimed to investigate CS in relation to PTE in Korean special education teachers. Character Strengths Test-Short Form (CST-SF) and Teacher Efficacy Scale-Personal (TES-P), respectively, assessed the CS and PTE of 111 Korean special education teachers. Results showed that four dimensions of the CST-SF (interpersonal, restraint, intellectual, and theological strengths) were significantly related to PTE, indicating that teachers with high CS were likely to experience greater PTE. Regression analysis indicated that the areas of interpersonal and restraint strengths significantly predicted PTE. The results have implications for the development of effective programs for special education teachers as well as the formalization of special education teacher recruitment policies.

Introduction

The construct of teacher efficacy has a theoretical basis in Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy. It has been defined as teachers' belief in his or her capabilities to influence how well students learn, even among those students who may be considered difficult or unmotivated (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). Several factor analysis revealed teacher efficacy to be bi-dimensional (Coladarci & Breton, 1997; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990): Personal teaching efficacy (PTE), which refers to the teachers' belief in their ability to bring about change in students, and General teaching efficacy (GTE), which refers to the teachers' belief that students can be taught despite external factors, such as their family environment (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). However, the concept of GTE has caused much controversy (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

According to previous studies, several factors that affected PTE fell into three categories: (a) environmental and contextual elements (for example, school level, school structure, teacher affiliation, lack of support from administrators or school leadership, and administrator turnover) (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001); (b) demographic factors such as age, gender, and years of experience (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996; Schonfeld, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998) and (c) the teachers' personality traits. Regarding the last category, extraversion predicts classroom management while conscientiousness predicts instructional strategies as well as student engagement (Navidnia, 2009).

In recent years, character strengths (CS) have been emerging as an important focus in the teaching profession. Definitions of CS have included pre-existing qualities that arise naturally, feel authentic, are intrinsically motivating to use, and energizing, thereby increasing the probability of healthy outcomes (Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Previous studies have shown that CS has a connection to personal, social, academic, and occupational functioning. For example, high CS is associated with efficiency in coping with problems and difficulties (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013) and with higher levels of subjective well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman,

2004). There exists a positive relation between CS and the academic success of college students (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). Finally, deploying CS is related to job satisfaction and meaning at work (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010).

In the teaching profession, relevant evidence has indicated that CS seems to be one of the personality traits that potentially influence PTE (e.g. Chan, 2009). In a sample of Chinese teachers (Chan, 2009), the strengths of zest, hope, gratitude, and humanity were robustly associated with subjective well-being (Chan, 2009). Consistent results were found in the samples of Slovenian teachers, indicating the highest correlation of hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity with life satisfaction (Gradisek, 2012). Although, these previous findings suggest that CS may play an important role in PTE, there have yet been studies that examined the relationship between CS and PTE in teachers.

The present study aimed to clarify the associations between the CS and the PTE in special education teachers. Up until now, the focus of PTE research has been centered on general education. However, a high level of PTE is vital for special education teachers in order to fulfill the unique social and academic needs of their students (Leyser, 2002). Research indicates that teachers possessing a high degree of PTE are less likely to refer difficult-to-teach students to special education than teachers with a low degree of PTE (Soodak & Podell, 1996). In addition to setting high academic standards, high PTE teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward low-achieving students, establish rapport, and build relationships (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Also, research shows that special education teachers with a high PTE tend to spend more time and effort in planning, exhibit greater organization, provide clarity in their instruction, and have greater enthusiasm (Allinder, 1994). Thus, the relationship between CS and PTE must be evident in special education teachers.

Given the diverse psychosocial environments of schools and the multiple pathways there for developing strengths, every CS dimension (interpersonal, restraint, intellectual, and theological) is likely to be positively related to PTE. In addition, on a basis of prior findings that conscientiousness and extraversion are the trait most commonly associated with teacher efficacy (Navidnia, 2009), the restraint and interpersonal strengths, the dimensions that correspond to conscientiousness and extraversion, might be highly related to the PTE.

Research Method
Participants
111 Korean special education teachers holding full-time positions in three schools participated on a voluntary basis; 27 males and 84 females, ranging in age from 23–59 years with a mean (SD) of 33.1 (7.30) years. The participants' teaching experience in special education ranged from 1–29 years, with a mean of 6.8 years.

Measures
The Character Strengths Test (CST; Kwon et al., 2010) is a well-performing, 240-item self-report questionnaire. The scale consists of 4-point Likert-style items for measurement of the degree to which respondents endorse each of the 24 strengths of character in the Values in Action (VIA) classification (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Individuals are asked to report on the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves. Scales for the CST have satisfactory alphas (>.70) and test-retest correlation (>.70) (Kwon et al. 2010). The short form of the CST (CST-SF; Lim, 2012) was developed to preserve the coverage and structure of the full CST while reducing its length. Correlations between the CST-SF and the full-form primary scales were uniformly high (.80–.92). The internal consistency estimates for the CST-SF scales were also generally high, ranging from .72 to .84. When empirical factor analysis was performed for an assessment of the CST, a four-factor solution (interpersonal strengths, restraint strengths, intellectual strengths, and theological strengths) was found in the Korean population (Lim, 2012).

When assessing teachers' efficacy, the Korean version of the teacher efficacy scale-Personal (K-TES-P) for special educators was used (Coladarci & Breton, 1997; Lee, 1998). The TES-P was developed by Gibson and Dembo (1984) for use with regular educators, a modified version of which was administered to participants in the current study. Each of the items rated from 'strongly disagree' (coded as 1) to 'strongly agree' (coded as 6). Although validity and reliability for the modified scale (Coladarci & Breton, 1997) have not been established, the original version of the scale has demonstrated adequate discriminant and convergent validity, as well as internal consistency reliabilities for the TES-P (Cronbach's alpha = .78) (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). The internal consistency coefficient of the K-TES-P for the current study is .94.

Statistical Analysis
Firstly, bi-variate Pearson correlations were calculated between each pair of measures. Secondly, hierarchical regression analysis were conducted to evaluate whether CS primarily predicted PTE after controlling for gender, age, and years working. During the analysis, age, gender, and years working were entered in the first step and the four factors of the CS were added in the second step.

Results
As shown in Table 1, the four factors of the CST-SF were significantly correlated with the K-TES-P, ranging from .26 to .46. Interpersonal strengths, restraint strengths, and intellectual strengths were moderately associated with the K-TES-P (r = .42, .46, and .33, respectively), while theological strengths had small size correlations with the K-TES-P scores (r = .29).

Table 1. Inter-Correlations between PTE and CS Dimensions

	PTE	Interpersonal	Restraint	Intellectual	Theological
PTE	-				
Interpersonal	.42***	-			
Restraint	.46***	.69***	-		
Intellectual	.33***	.77***	.71***	-	
Theological	.26**	.58***	.51***	.51***	-

Note. PTE = Personal Teaching Efficacy; CS = Character Strengths; Interpersonal = Interpersonal Strengths; Restraint = Restraint Strengths; Intellectual = Intellectual Strengths; Theological = Theological Strengths
*** p < .001, ** p < .01

When gender, age, and years working were entered in the first step of the regression equation, they significantly predicted the K-TES-P, $t(104)$ = -1.78, p = .07, $t(104)$ = 1.22, p = .22, $t(104)$ = .32, p = .74, respectively. Interpersonal and restraint strengths accounted for significant additional variance in the K-TES-P when it was entered on the second step, $t(100)$ = 2.45, p < .05, $t(100)$ = 3.02, p < .01, respectively. Intellectual and theological strengths were not significant predictors of the K-TES-P, $t(100)$ = -1.27, p = .20, $t(100)$ = -.82, p = .41, respectively (Table 2).

Discussion
This is the first study that explores the relationship between CS and PTE in special education teachers. Our findings showed that the four dimensions of CS were moderately correlated with PTE. Interpersonal and restraint CS had the highest correlations with PTE, indicating that these are crucial factors for enhancing PTE. This suggests that Korean special education teachers who perceive themselves as having high interpersonal and restraint CS tend to believe in their ability to bring about change in students than those who had low levels of interpersonal and restraint CS. Furthermore, these two CS factors made a significant and independent contribution to PTE even after controlling for gender, age, and years of experience. This finding suggests that the restraint and interpersonal CS primarily contribute to the development of PTE.

The interpersonal and restraint CS are considered to correspond to extraversion and conscientiousness among the big five personality traits, respectively (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to previous studies, an individual who is highly extraverted will exhibit better job performance when the nature of the job is characterized by social interaction such as sales or marketing (Bing & Lounsbury, 2000; Vinchur et al., 1998). In case of the special education teachers, social interaction is important for effective teaching. For example, a large part of a special education teacher's work involves interacting with others. Special education teachers

frequently communicate and coordinate with parents, school psychologists, social workers, school administrators, occupational and physical therapists, and other teachers. Given that job performance is associated with teacher efficacy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Di Fabio, Majer, & Taralla, 2006), this may be a potential explanation for why interpersonal CS was the main predictor in our model. Regarding restraint CS, much of the research has indicated that conscientiousness corresponded to this domain. One of the main characteristics of conscientiousness is delayed gratification or persistence (Nettle, 2007) and is the main predictor for job performance across a range of job positions and different occupations (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006). Delayed gratification, or persistence is valued by special education teachers. For example, working with special-needs students can require much time and effort, meaning that special education teachers have to be persistent.

Table 2. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting PTE (n=111)

variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Gender	-3.95	2.21	-.17
Age	.26	.22	.18
Years Working	.08	.25	.05
Step 2			
Interpersonal	6.85	2.79	.36*
Strengths			
Restraint Strengths	8.23	2.71	.38**
Intellectual Strengths	-3.64	2.87	-.18
Theological Strengths	-1.53	1.86	-.09

Note. $R^2 = .07$ for step 1, $R^2 = .24$ for step 2 (p values $< .001$), PTE = Personal Teaching Efficacy
** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of effective programs for special education teachers as well as the development of special education teacher recruitment policies. For instance, a pre-service teacher program aimed at enhancing CS is likely to prevent a low PTE that may emerge at some time in the future. This program must assume the form of a focused intervention to develop the specific dimensions of CS that were the main predictor of PTE in this study. The current findings suggest that early in prospective teachers' time at the university serves as the time to design and implement such interventions.

A number of important limitations must be considered: First, only self-reported data was included, and the relationships between study variables may have been inflated as a consequence of questionnaire-specific method variance. Future research should employ a multitrait–multi-method assessment. Second, the investigation was conducted within a limited region, meaning a fair amount of caution when generalizing the present findings to other cases. This investigation should be replicated with a more representative sample from the general population.

The present study takes the first step in reporting that the dimensions of CS are related to PTE in special education teachers. The current study could stimulate further exploration of the relationship between teachers' CS and PTE. Also, the findings of this study could help design intervention for the special education teachers and develop the recruit policy of special education teachers.

References
Adams, C. M., & Forsyth, P. B. (2006). Proximate sources of collective teacher efficacy. *Journal of Educational Administration, 44*, 625-642.
Allinder, R. M. (1994). The relationship between efficacy and the instructional practices of special education teachers and consultants. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 17*, 86–95.
Bandura, A. (1977). Self efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. Psychological Review, 84, 191–215.
Bing, M. N., & Lounsbury, J. W. (2000). Openness and job performance in US-based Japanese manufacturing companies. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 14*, 515-522.
Caprara, G., Barbaranelli, C., Steca, P., & Malone, P. (2006). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as determinants of job satisfaction and students' academic achievement: A study at the school level. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*, 473–490.
Chan, D. W. (2009). The hierarchy of strengths: Their relationships with subjective well-being among Chinese teachers in Hong Kong. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*, 867-875.
Coladarci, T., & Breton, W. A. (1997). Teacher efficacy, supervision, and the special education resource-room teacher. *The Journal of Educational Research, 90,* 230-239.
Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. (2001). The job demands–resource model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*, 499–512.
Denovan, A., & Macaskill, A. (2013). An interpretative phenomenological analysis of stress and coping in first year undergraduates. *British Educational Research Journal*, *39*, 1002-1024.
Di Fabio, A., Majer, V., & Taralla, B. (2006). Correlations of teacher self-efficacy: Personal characteristics and attitude toward the job. *Psychologie du travail et des organizations, 12*, 263–277.
Dudley, N. M., Orvis, K. A., Lebiecki, J. E., & Cortina, J. M. (2006). A meta-analytic investigation of conscientiousness in the prediction of job performance: examining the inter-correlations and the incremental validity of narrow traits. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*, 40-57.
Gibson, S., & Dembo, M. (1984). Teacher efficacy: A construct validation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 76*, 569–582.
Gradisek, P. (2012). Character strengths and life satisfaction of Slovenian in-service and pre-service teachers. *CEPS Journal, 2*, 167–180.
Guskey, T. R., & Passaro, P. D. (1994). Teacher efficacy: A study of construct dimensions. *American Educational Research Journal, 31,* 627-643.
Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk, A. E. (1993). Teachers' sense of efficacy and the organizational health of schools. *The Elementary School Journal, 93*, 355–372.
Kwon, S., Yu, S., Lim, Y., & Kim, J. (2010). *The CST: Manual for the Character Strengths Test*. Seoul: Hakjisa.
Lee, H. J. (1998). *A study on teacher efficacy scale development.* Unpublished master's dissertation, Ewha Womans University, Korea.
Leyser, Y. (2002). Choices of instructional practices and efficacy beliefs of Israeli general and special educators: A cross-cultural research initiative. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 25*, 154–167.
Lim, Y. J. (2012). *Development and validation of a short form of the Character Strengths Test*. Unpublished manuscript.
Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+: Realizing strengths in yourself and others*. London: CAPP Press.
Littman-Ovadia, H., & Steger, M. F. (2010). Character strengths and well-being among volunteers and employees: Toward an integrative model. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 419–430.
Lounsbury, J. W., Fisher, L. A., Levy, J. J., & Welsh, D. P. (2009). An investigation of character strengths in relation to the academic success of college students. *Individual Differences Research, 7*, 52-69.
Navidnia, H. (2009). Psychological characteristics of English language teachers: On the relationship among Big Five personality traits and teacher efficacy beliefs. *Journal of English Language Studies, 1,* 79-99.
Nettle, D. (2007). *Personality: What makes you the way you are*. OUP Oxford.
Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*, 603-619.
Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook of classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Ross, J., & Bruce, C. (2007). Professional development effects on teacher efficacy: Results of randomized field trial. *The Journal of Educational Research, 101*, 50–60.

Ross, J. A., Cousins, J. B., & Gadalla, T. (1996). Within-teacher predictors of teacher efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 12*, 385–400.

Schonfeld, I. S. (2001). Stress in first-year women teachers: The context of social support and coping. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs, 127*, 133–168.

Soodak, L. C., & Podell, D. M. (1996). Teacher efficacy: Toward the understanding of a multifaceted construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 12*, 401–411.

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*, 783–805.

Tschannen-Moran, M., Woolfolk Hoy, A., & Hoy, W. K. (1998). Teacher efficacy: Its meaning and measure. *Review of Educational Research, 68*, 202–248.

Vinchur, A. J., Schippmann, J. S., Switzer III, F. S., & Roth, P. L. (1998). A meta-analytic review of predictors of job performance for salespeople. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*, 586-597.

Woolfolk, A. E., & Hoy, W. K. (1990). Prospective teachers' sense of efficacy and beliefs about control. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*, 81-91.