

Positive Education: Creating flourishing students, staff and schools

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This article provides an introduction to the field of 'positive education' and demonstrates how applied positive psychology, which includes evidence-based coaching, can inform and assist schools to develop and maintain the optimal functioning of students and staff. We encourage those working in or with schools to think strategically in creating positive education programs that support and sustain a positive school climate and culture for whole school wellbeing.

What is positive education?

In Australia and globally there is growing interest in positive education. Much of this interest has stemmed from the work of Professor Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania who developed a whole school positive education program for Geelong Grammar School in Victoria. Positive education has been defined as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness" (Seligman et al., 2009). We suggest a broader and more useful definition is "applied positive psychology in education". Positive psychology itself has been defined as an umbrella term encompassing theory and research in relation to what makes life worth living (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Whilst the study of happiness falls under this umbrella, so do other psychological constructs such as meaning, wisdom, creativity and many more. We would argue that positive psychology is extremely relevant to the school setting to assist in the understanding and development of high levels of psychological wellbeing in students, staff and school.

Whilst the sub-field of positive education is relatively new, it has a long history. Helen McGrath (2009) outlined a brief history of wellbeing in education in her keynote presentation at the 1st Australian Positive Psychology in Education Symposium. McGrath claimed that positive education arose from a focus on self esteem in the 1970s, moved to social skills programs in the early 1990s, then to resilience programs in early 2000. From that time on it has become a focus on anti-bullying initiatives, values programs and student wellbeing initiatives, including social and emotional learning programs just to name a few.

Why positive education?

Whilst historically schools may have aimed for academic excellence as sole evidence for their success, there are growing numbers of schools who are now acknowledging the need to develop students in a more holistic way, with a stronger focus on wellbeing. Much of this is in recognition of the increasing statistics on psychological distress and mental illness in our children and adolescents, and the realisation of the need to take a more proactive rather than reactive approach to mental health.

Schools now are seen as institutions where their role extends beyond academic competence to further preparing the 'whole child' (Huitt, 2010). In fact, the focus on schools as a means for preparing young people for adulthood is one of the hallmarks of developed countries (National

Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Therefore, it would appear schools have a duty of care to educate their students on the research and application of wellbeing and implement interventions aimed at increasing the optimal functioning of their students and staff, thus hopefully reducing the incidence of mental illness which often appears during the early stages of puberty.

At Geelong Grammar, the implicit teaching of positive education takes place at each year level across all aspects of school life: academic subjects, pastoral life and the co-curriculum program. Explicit teaching is delivered in Year 7 and Year 10 through specific positive psychology programs. Anthony Seldon from Wellington College in the UK is another pioneer in this field who embarked on a series of initiatives to 'teach happiness' or, as he explains it, "provide students with tools with which to nurture happiness themselves". At Wellington College, girls and boys in years 10 and 11 (aged 14+ and 15+) complete a 40-minute timetabled lesson on the skills of wellbeing every fortnight for two years. The lessons provide them with an understanding of what factors help a life to thrive and flourish, as well as teaching them some practical skills for everyday use (www.wellingtoncollege.org.uk).

There are also a growing number of schools embracing positive psychology interventions (PPIs). PPIs are intentional activities that aim to increase wellbeing through the cultivation of positive feelings, cognitions and behaviours (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Examples of PPI's include: identifying and developing strengths; cultivating gratitude; and visualising best possible selves (Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). A meta-analysis conducted by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) of 51 PPIs with 4,266 individuals revealed that PPIs do significantly increase wellbeing and decrease depressive symptoms. Whilst these studies are very promising, further research is required given the majority of studies were conducted using adults. Research on adolescent populations is still in the formative stages.

Despite this shortfall in research, interest in applying PPIs with youth and in schools is growing rapidly, and empirical research must continue to ensure the application of positive psychology does not overtake the scientific evidence (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Accordingly, there is an urgent need for further research on PPIs and whole school programs. Unfortunately the positive education program conducted at Geelong Grammar was not, to the authors' knowledge, scientifically evaluated. Further research will ensure that the most reliable and valid PPIs are being adopted to assist in increasing social and psychological wellbeing and potentially achieve savings in mental health costs. The authors have recently commenced two positive education research studies aimed at addressing this research shortfall. One study includes a three-year, strategic positive education program at Knox Grammar School, a Sydney private boys school, being scientifically evaluated by the University of Wollongong. The second study is a randomised controlled trial comparing evidence-based coaching and a positive psychology intervention with Year 11 students at two Sydney selective public high schools. This research is supported by a research grant from the Institute of Coaching, McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School.

GRAY'S POINT PUBLIC SCHOOL (SYDNEY) WELLBEING PROJECT

The Gray's Point Public School Wellbeing Project is a multi-layered project that commenced with teacher training in positive psychology. Following this, a number of whole school programs were developed based on the teaching of values. This included Grandparents Day where 'Learning from the Lives of Others' was celebrated following classroom work on 'Gratitude and Respect'. Another important part of the project was the Year 6 leadership training, where students were taught the skills of wellbeing and emotional first aid so they could act as wellbeing monitors of the school

(using their signature strengths). The school then ran a lunchtime program called 'Playground Post' and 'Friendship Tree' (anti-bullying strategies), where Year 6 leaders administer emotional first aid to younger students who need help in the playground. Teachers use the language of positive psychology in the classroom and have developed activities that fit within the curriculum. The Wellbeing Project has now been expanded to a community of schools in the area.

Positive psychology and coaching psychology in schools: Creating positive schools

Positive schools have been defined as ones in which students experience predominantly high levels of subjective wellbeing in the form of positive emotions and positive attitudes towards school (Huebner et al., 2009). It is suggested here that the combination of positive psychology and coaching psychology can be utilised to enhance wellbeing and optimal functioning and hence support the creation of positive schools. As an applied positive psychology, evidence-based coaching has been shown to increase wellbeing, goal striving, resilience and hope in both adults and adolescents. Research at the University of Sydney has given preliminary support for the use of evidence-based coaching in educational settings for both students and teachers (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010).

However, despite growing interest, these approaches currently primarily operate in isolation from each other. For example, a school that might undertake leadership coaching for staff may not necessarily be engaged in a large-scale positive education program such as that undertaken at Geelong Grammar. Similarly, schools that may have wholeheartedly embraced positive psychology may not have even considered evidence-based coaching, believing it to be mostly utilised in organisational settings.

It may be argued that both approaches lead to increased wellbeing and hence it is not necessary to utilise both approaches simultaneously. For example, if a school were to train staff and students in coaching with the aim of creating a coaching culture (e.g., Hayes Park School in the United Kingdom), research would suggest that this would support enhanced wellbeing of both staff and students. Why then would a school need to provide training in positive psychology and offer additional PPIs? Alternatively, why might a school that was interested in creating a large scale positive education program aimed at increasing staff and student wellbeing, require additional education and training in coaching?

Research has shown that coaching can enhance transfer of training (Olivero et al., 1997). Coaching provides the opportunity to practice and obtain constructive feedback regarding the subject matter learned during training. As such, any explicit training in positive psychology principles and practices could be enhanced through the use of coaching to support the transfer of training and sustain the ongoing application in daily life, thus reducing relapse. We would argue that any school providing training in positive psychology should consider the use of evidence-based coaching as a methodology to increase retention of knowledge, enhance transfer of training and be an integral part of a sustainability strategy.

What does the future hold for positive education?

Future research needs to extend applications of PPIs and coaching psychology and, more importantly, define how these two sub-fields may be more closely integrated to improve outcomes

for students, staff and school. Additionally, studies on the use of PPIs in clinical settings is currently scant, therefore future research needs to also address issues such as mental health screening prior to undergoing a PPI or evidence-based coaching intervention.

Conclusion

Both positive psychology and coaching psychology have much to offer schools. However, to increase sustainability, the successful integration and strategic application of both approaches is required. Clonan et al. (2004) highlight the need to customise each program to the specific needs of the school. There is a pressing need for further research on such programs and the need for expert external consultants and educators to work collaboratively with schools to create and evaluate individualised programs.

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