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AT ALL LEVELS

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POSITIVE EDUCATION AT ALL LEVELS

Learning to Flourish

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

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You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.

(Christopher Robin to Winnie the Pooh)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the aims of the book, how it is structured and introduce the main concepts of positive psychology and positive education. This includes a brief history of positive psychology and how it led to its application in schools as positive education. The chapter introduces positive education, what it is, why wellbeing is important in education and some of the main frameworks for positive education being used in schools. A rationale for why the focus of this book is on positive education and at all levels of those involved in education in the UK is also provided. Namely, to address whether positive education is too positive for the UK (Robson-Kelly, 2018).

Keywords: positive education; positive psychology; school wellbeing; student wellbeing; mental health; mental wellbeing

As somebody who reportedly experienced mental illness himself, and whose books about Winnie the Pooh are often referred to in relation to mental health given his characters embody many of the traits and behaviours of mental illnesses (e.g. anxiety in Piglet or depression in Eeyore), starting with this quote often attributed to A.A. Milne feels an entirely appropriate way to introduce a book on positive education. This is because his words embody the principles of self-belief, resilience, and strength, often associated with positive psychology.

In contrast to psychology ‘as usual’, positive psychology focusses on ‘what works’ and ‘what is strong’, rather than ‘what doesn’t work’ or ‘what is wrong’. It uses the same scientific rigour and methodologies as ‘traditional’ psychology, but its focus is ‘on strengths instead of weaknesses, building the good in life instead of repairing the bad, and taking the lives of average people up to “great” instead of focusing solely on moving those who are struggling up to “normal”’ (Peterson, 2008, p. 1).

Positive psychology also has four central concerns (e.g. Peterson, 2006):

1. Positive subjective experiences (e.g. happiness, fulfilment, flow).
2. Positive individual traits (e.g. Values In Action (VIA) character strengths; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
3. Positive interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendship, marriage, peers).
4. Positive institutions (e.g. families, businesses, communities, and schools).

AIMS OF THE BOOK

Starting with a brief overview of positive psychology, the aim of this book is to introduce positive education and, in particular, how wellbeing can be embedded into an existing education curriculum, and for all those involved in all levels of education, in the UK. The focus is on the UK because, whilst starting to develop, most of what we know about positive education is based on research and practice carried out in the USA and Australia, and concerns have been raised as to whether positive education is too positive for the UK (Robson-Kelly, 2018). As such, and by including some case studies of positive psychology in practice in education in the UK, an underlying aim of this book is to address this concern too.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is structured across 8 chapters:

Chapter 1, this chapter, provides a brief overview of positive psychology and positive education and, as part of this, two of the most common wellbeing frameworks being used by schools today.

Chapters 2–4 inclusive focus on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ positive education is important across three main levels of UK education. This includes: in pre-/primary schools in Chapter 2; in secondary (high) schools in Chapter 3; and at Higher Education (HE) level in Chapter 4. A case study of *Positive Psychology in Practice* at Further Education (FE) level is also presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5 addresses the evaluation of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) applied in education. This includes guidance on how to design, apply and evaluate PPIs, and provides a useful checklist for educators to use.

Chapter 6 introduces positive education for parents and carers, and positive psychology parenting (PPP). Also a useful chapter for parents and carers, this looks at what PPP is and the role that parents and carers can have in the wellbeing education provided by schools. It also describes how positive education can help parents, carers and families with their wellbeing.

Chapter 7 looks at positive education for positive educators. Co-authored by a positive educator who has implemented positive education into her practice in FE, the aim of this chapter is to help educators, at least, ‘get started’ with embedding positive psychology into their practice. It looks at the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of educator wellbeing, and why educator wellbeing is essential in positive education too.

Chapter 8 brings everything in the other chapters together, to summarise key issues and lessons learned, and provide a ‘what next’ to move things forward. The question of whether positive education is too positive for the UK is considered too.

Whilst there is some cross-reference to other chapters, each chapter is designed to focus on its own specific ‘level’ of positive education. When read together, however, they present an overview of positive education for all levels of those involved in the UK, including parents and carers, educators, and those who need to evaluate PPIs in a reliable and robust way. This includes at all levels of education in the UK, for parents and carers, and for educators, and for those who will need to evaluate it in a reliable and robust way.

With contributions from psychologists, educators working in education in the UK and researchers who have developed and applied PPIs themselves, this book is written with the UK educator practitioner in mind. However, by

also including up-to-date scientific research and theories, it will be of value to anyone studying psychology and/or education too, and for anyone simply wanting to know more about positive psychology and how, when applied, it can help improve wellbeing.

IMPORTANT

Positive psychology and positive education are fast-developing areas and there are limits as to how much information this relatively short book can provide. What you will also see, therefore, is plenty of signposting, including to further resources, readings, and references and, where possible, those which are freely accessible and available to use.

To begin, therefore, this wellbeing journey starts with an introduction to positive psychology and another quote, this time from the ‘father’ of positive psychology himself.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

*I've rented the Grateful Dead house in the Yucatan (Mexico) ...
Can you and Isabella cancel your New Year's plans for 1998 and
spend the first week with us, inventing positive psychology.*

([Seligman, 2018a](#), p. 3.3)

Whilst this quote might seem a curious way to introduce a book on positive education, it captures the beginnings of positive psychology when Professor Martin Seligman – the ‘father of positive psychology’, spoke this to his colleague and co-founder, Professor Mike Csikszentmihalyi – the ‘father of flow’, over the phone in 1998. Soon to be joined by Professor Raymond Fowler – a colleague and clinical psychologist who, at that time, was soon to become the CEO of the American Psychological Association, these three men spent the rest of that week ‘spelling out the elements of a new field and how to found it’ (p. 3.3).

Two years later, the parameters of positive psychology were spelt out in the January Special Issue of the *American Psychologist* journal ([Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000](#)), covering topics ranging from hope and creativity to spirituality and courage. It also described how ‘... a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities’ (p. 5), was needed and, as such, a paradigm shift in ‘traditional’ psychology to positive psychology was made. The rest, as they say, is history.

There is, of course, little doubt that positive psychology did not evolve ‘de novo’. Its development took place over several decades, but it was brought together as a coherent discipline by Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, Fowler and others, although Fowler faded from the story and was not a co-author of their classic positive psychology paper (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The influence of the great humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow was also acknowledged, but then discredited for its lack of cumulative empirical base and association with numerous self-help movements.

Whilst certainly not the only one, however, the most important figure in the history of positive psychology is Professor Martin Seligman and, in examining its short history, his work over the last 20 years provides clues as to how the field developed.

AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS

In his first book on positive psychology – *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment* (Seligman, 2002), this covered positive emotions, strengths and virtues, work and personal satisfaction, love, raising children, and meaning and purpose. Perhaps the most important idea to emerge from this was Authentic Happiness theory, where Seligman argued three routes to happiness:

- The ‘pleasant’ life – a life filled with positive emotions, where the emphasis is on how an individual feels and the pleasures and positive experiences that they have. This is also known as *hedonic* happiness.
- The ‘good’ life – an engaging life, where individuals use their authentic strengths and signature qualities in the things and activities that they do. As part of this life, an individual can also experience ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).
- The ‘meaningful’ life – a life where using strengths continues to be important, but where they are used for the greater good of others rather than for ourselves. This life, alongside the ‘good’ life, is known as *eudaimonic* happiness.

Indeed, to sum it up from Seligman (2002, p. 61), positive psychology ‘takes you through the countryside of pleasure and gratification, up into the high country of strength and virtue, and finally to the peaks of lasting fulfilment: meaning and purpose’.

Authentic Happiness formed the basis of Seligman's well-known TED talk: *The new era of positive psychology* available via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FBx7DL3E>. Since this first aired in 2008, it has been viewed over 1.3 million times.

FLOURISHING AND WELLBEING

One of the main criticisms of Authentic Happiness theory is that it is one-dimensional. It is also measurable by life satisfaction and based on what an individual chooses as a life course to maximise how they feel. In his second positive psychology book – *Flourishing: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being and How to Achieve Them* (Seligman, 2011), therefore, Seligman expanded upon Authentic Happiness arguing that the new goal of positive psychology was to increase human flourishing. In this book, he developed his previous ideas on happiness by adding positive relationships and accomplishments. The book also showed a number of practical applications of positive psychology and across a variety of fields. This included positive education, grit, comprehensive soldier fitness, post-traumatic growth, positive physical health, and the politics and economics of wellbeing.

Perhaps the most significant idea to emerge from this second book however was the PERMA Theory of Flourishing. As opposed to a focus on happiness, the focus of PERMA is on wellbeing measurable across the following five elements:

- Positive emotion (which includes happiness and life satisfaction);
- Engagement;
- Relationships;
- Meaning and purpose;
- Accomplishment.

With PERMA, there is no one element which defines wellbeing; each of the five elements contributes to it. Some aspects of PERMA are also measured subjectively by self-report, but others are measured objectively.

PERMA was designed as a general theory of wellbeing, and not for positive education per se. However, PERMA and its adaptations (discussed later) is currently the most commonly used theory of wellbeing used by schools. As such, see <https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn/wellbeing> for more information on PERMA, alongside links to questionnaires and other resources you can use.

FROM HELPLESSNESS TO HOPE

The third and final book of Seligman's to mention is his magnum opus – *The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism* (Seligman, 2018b). By far the most personal of his career, perhaps the most fascinating aspect to emerge from this book is the description of his role on the emergence of positive psychology.

'Not me', I said, 'I was called ... I have always paid attention to dreams and epiphanies for my entire scientific career ... Why me? Why not Al Bandura, Richard Lazarus, Julian Rotter, Mike Csikszentmihalyi or Ed Diener? ... The history of positive psychology is best described as the alignments of the planets than in the execution of a plan ... And I do not intend to invoke a higher power in my life course. But I do not intend to deny it'. (Seligman, 2018b, p. 382)

IMPORTANT

It would be unfair to credit Martin Seligman with the whole of the development of positive psychology and throughout this book reference to other important and influential figures in its relatively short history will be made. It is also important to note that, since its first 'wave' of inception to readjust the focus of psychology away from 'repairing the worst in life', positive psychology is now entering its third wave to expand its scope to be more inclusive and context-sensitive (Lomas et al., 2021). One important impact of this growth includes further development of the application of positive psychology in schools: positive education.

FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO POSITIVE EDUCATION

In two words or less, what do you want most for your children? In two words or less, what do most schools teach?

These two simple yet thought-provoking questions were first posed by Martin Seligman and colleagues in their seminal paper introducing positive education 'as an entity in and of itself' (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021, p. 1) in 2009. At that time defined as 'education for both traditional skills and happiness' (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293), they also described the gap between what

parents most want for their children and what most schools teach, and how positive education could help bridge this gap by providing a more holistic approach to education. In particular, a ‘positive’ education that allowed schools to nurture wellbeing and achievement, and without one needing to overshadow the other.

At that time, the need for education for wellbeing was related to the, then, high levels of depression reported in young people, a small rise in life satisfaction and the synergy between learning and positive emotion. Since 2009, levels of mental illness in school-aged children have continued to rise and, in 2020, the Mental Health of Children and Young People survey reported that 16% of children aged 5–16 years in England had a probable mental health disorder, an increase of 5% from the 11% reported in 2017 (NHS, 2022). As a result, increased attention started to be paid to the holistic development and mental health of students by schools (Lou & Xu, 2022).

Today, parents still continue to prioritise their child’s wellbeing. For example, a more recent survey of parents in the US listed mental wellbeing top of their concerns (Pew Research Center, 2023) and, in the UK, a survey commissioned by the children’s charity – Youth Sport Trust (2020), found parents listing wellbeing as a top priority when choosing a secondary school. It was also the second most important priority, compared to location, when choosing a primary school.

DEFINITIONS OF POSITIVE EDUCATION

Since Seligman et al.’s original definition in 2009, positive education has continued to be defined in a variety of ways. More recently, this includes as ‘an umbrella term to describe empirically validated interventions and programs from positive psychology that has an impact on wellbeing’ (White et al., 2017, p. 1). This highlights how, for positive education to be effective, it needs to be, both, evidenced-based and actionable (Waters & Loton, 2019). Slemp et al.’s (2017) definition of positive education as an approach that combines both the concepts and scholarship of positive psychology with best practice guidelines from education defines positive education as an applied science that ‘weaves’ knowledge gained from, both, the science of wellbeing and positive psychology, into educational practice (Waters & Loton, 2019). Whilst a single definition of positive education has not been established, a consistent claim being made is that emotional wellbeing in young people is an ‘essential path to mental illness prevention, better learning, and greater academic success’ (Cabanas & Gonzalez-Lamas, 2022, p. 1249).