A Synopsis of Positive Education

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Abstract

Positive education draws on positive psychology and aims to incorporate a positive perspective on youth development into the formal education system. As an alternative to conventional education, it focuses on cultivating positive emotions such as optimism, hope, and resilience in schoolchildren, and provides a comprehensive strategy for enhancing not only academic achievement but also mental health and overall wellbeing. By prioritizing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments, positive education can equip students with positive qualities and mental strengths they need to thrive in their personal and professional lives, ultimately leading to a flourishing life. While approaches to positive education may vary depending on unique contextual and cultural factors, schools that practice positive education must genuinely prioritize students' wellbeing as a core of their mission.

Keywords: wellbeing, positive psychology, positive education, optimism, mindfulness

A Synopsis of Positive Education

Since the dawn of the 21st century, developmental psychologists have increasingly advocated for a new approach to youth mentoring that focuses on exploring and cultivating a child's positive qualities and strengths, rather than simply identifying and addressing deficiencies or negative traits. Various isolated theories and initiatives under this new approach to youth development are generally categorized under the umbrella of *Positive Youth Development (PYD)*. Although the positive youth development movement began with available scientific models in recent decades, the history of a positive perspective on youth development can be traced back to the emergence of ancient wisdom (Lerner et al., 2008). Positive youth development incorporates elements from both ancient wisdom and contemporary scientific research to create a holistic approach to youth development.

Larson (1912) opines that remarkable ability, extraordinary talent and rare genius do exist in deeper mentality of every child; and further emphasizes the need of inculcating good vibes and virtues among children through constructive scientific trainings to bring out those strengths into tangible expression for practical use. When young minds, through scientific trainings, learn to think righteous, to be righteous and to do righteous, the learned righteousness will not only ensure their personal growth and wellbeing but also protect them from potential psychological and behavior problems.

In this context, positive youth development presents a comprehensive strategy for inculcating righteousness among children and adolescents through scientific training programs. Within the broader framework of positive youth development, *Positive Education* specifically aims to embed this 'positive perspective on youth development' into the formal education system (Kern et al., 2017). The central goal of positive education is to nurture students with a holistic education that emphasizes not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for academic achievement but also the fostering of positive attitudes, virtues, character strengths, and other qualities required to live a flourishing life.

According to Seligman's (2011) book "Flourish", Anthony Seldon, a British educator, contemporary historian, and politician biographer, once posed a question to a group of educators from around the world: "In two words or fewer, what do we most want for our children?" The responses included happiness, joy, confidence, contentment, fulfillment, wellness, courage, enthusiasm, kindness, wisdom, satisfaction, or the like.

When the same question is asked to any parent in the world, most probably the answer will be similar: parents wish for the *Wellbeing* of their children.

Anthony posed a subsequent question to the educators at the meeting: "Now, in two words or fewer, what do schools teach?" The common responses included science, literacy, numeracy, grammar, competition, conformity, hard work, discipline, and the like. Schools have an achievements list to teach, and most people will give a similar response anywhere.

"Notice," Anthony said, "There is almost no overlap between the two lists. Now imagine that the whole first list could be taught without compromising the traditional goals of school, the achievement list."

Anthony was defining a new kind of education, and Martin E. P. Seligman, a renowned psychologist and proponent of *Positive Psychology*, thought the name should be positive education. At that time, Seligman was already working with psychoscientific conclusions, theory and model to boost child wellbeing, evolved from his and his colleagues' decades of painstaking research. The subsequent paragraph is from Seligman et al. (1995).

> We want more for our children than healthy bodies. We want our children to have lives filled with friendship and love and high deeds. We want them to be eager to learn and be willing to confront challenges. We want our children to be grateful for what they receive from us, but to be proud of their own accomplishments. We want them to grow up with confidence in the future, a love of adventure, a sense of justice, and courage enough to act on that sense of justice. We want them to be resilient in the face of the setbacks and failures that growing up always brings . . .

So, how can it be achieved?

Develop such environment where the children can learn and live with the skills of optimism, righteousness and character strengths.

A seminal study on learned helplessness among schoolchildren (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1992) identifies pessimism as a serious obstacle that threatens child wellbeing. The study suggests that inculcating the skills of optimism to young minds not only acts as an antidote to pessimism and protects against the negative impact of unrealistic pessimistic thoughts, but also significantly enhances child wellbeing. In light of similar facts and findings, and at the initiation of Seligman and his team, the University of Pennsylvania had developed a program named *Penn Prevention Program* to teach schoolchildren the skills of optimism, which later became the forerunner of the phenomenal model of education, the positive education (Seligman, 2018). Positive education is becoming increasingly popular as a psychoscientific method for promoting optimism, righteousness and character strengths among schoolchildren within the school environment with the aim of fostering child wellbeing. Positive education has been proven to offer numerous advantages for the development of young minds. By emphasizing positive aspects of students' lives, including positive emotions, positive character traits, resiliency, and the like, and by reducing negative elements such as stress and anxiety, positive education fosters optimism, hope and engagement, which significantly impact both student wellbeing and academic performance (Waters, 2011; Waters & Loton, 2019).

Positive education has its roots in positive psychology.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive aspects of human experience (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Prior to the emergence of positive psychology in the late 20th century, there was a significant gap in the field of psychology when it came to the study of consciousness and thought, righteousness and virtue, happiness and wellbeing, and abilities and strengths. Instead, psychology was primarily focused only on the negative aspects of the human mind, with no corresponding attention paid to the positive ones. The emergence of positive psychology marked a

significant paradigm shift within the field. The approach emphasizes exploring and strengthening *what is going right* with human beings unlike the traditional psychology that aims only at identifying and treating *what is going wrong* in human mental world.

The traditional psychology deals with misery and conflict, stress and anxiety, and curing negatives; positive psychology instead focuses on the *positives* that we want for ourselves and for our world. We want to feel good, flow through our tasks, have close relationships with our family and friends. We desire achievements in life with our unique strengths and abilities, and we want our lives to have meaning. In essence we want wellbeing for ourselves, and for our loved ones. Positive psychology places an increased emphasis on studying and promoting positive qualities and traits, including optimism, righteousness, and character strengths, and through the cultivation of such strengths and virtues, the ultimate goal of positive psychology is to enhance human wellbeing.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing has been the subject of philosophical and scientific inquiry for centuries. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of its significance, particularly since the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. *SDG 3* underscores the crucial role of wellbeing in achieving sustainable development by promoting healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all ages.

So, what is wellbeing?

It is a complex and multidimensional concept that is understood and measured in different ways depending on the context and the theoretical framework being used. However, there is a growing consensus among researchers and scholars that wellbeing is not a real thing, but a construct (Seligman, 2011; Huppert & So, 2013; World Health Organization, 2021). Being a construct, several different elements constitute wellbeing. As Seligman (2011) exemplify, a construct can be better analogized with weather or with freedom. Weather is not a real thing but a construct – several elements, including temperature, humidity, precipitation, wind speed, barometric pressure etc. constitute weather. Similarly, freedom is also not a real thing but a construct – elements like civil

liberty, press freedom, equality, justice etc. contribute to the freedom. In the same way, wellbeing is not a real thing, but a construct, and several different elements contribute to wellbeing.

What are the elements of wellbeing then?

While there is no definitive answer to what constitutes wellbeing, Martin E. P. Seligman's *PERMA Theory of Wellbeing* has emerged as a widely accepted framework for understanding and measuring wellbeing. This well-developed construct highlights five key components that contribute to wellbeing: ***P**ositive Emotions, **E**ngagement*, Positive ***R**elationships*, ***M**eaning*, and ***A**ccomplishment*. As the essence of the science of positive psychology, these five elements are viewed as "the best approximation of what humans *pursue for their own sake*" (Seligman, 2011).

Positive Emotions: Positive emotions are the hedonic feelings of happiness that arise from feeling good and experiencing pleasure. They encompass emotions such as love, gratitude, contentment, and cheerfulness, among others, and bring a sense of delight and enjoyment to life.

Engagement: Engagement is the state of being fully present and absorbed in an activity that aligns with one's strengths and interests. It can occur in different domains of life, such as work, leisure, hobbies, personal growth, and relationships. Engagement can lead to a sense of flow, which is a state of optimal experience, where the individual immerses oneself in the task at hand and may even lose track of time because of their absorption in the activity.

Positive Relationships: Positive relationships are founded upon experiencing a sense of social belonging, being cared for, loved, and supported by others; and feeling content and satisfied with one's social connections. These connections can come in various forms, including romantic, familial, platonic, or professional relationships, and are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and compassion.

Meaning: Meaning refers to the sense that one's life has purpose, direction and significance. It involves the belief that life is valuable; and that one's actions and decisions contribute meaningfully to the world. It entails a feeling of a connection that extends beyond the self and a sense of contribution to something greater than oneself.

Accomplishment: Accomplishment is the result of achieving goals, mastering skills, and experiencing competence. It can take various forms, such as completing a work project or becoming proficient in a new hobby. The feeling of accomplishment arises from setting goals, making progress towards them, and attaining sense of achievement.

Overall, the PERMA model posits that experiencing positive emotions, engaging in fulfilling activities, nurturing positive relationships, finding meaning and purpose in life, and setting and achieving goals are the five key elements for achieving wellbeing. The more these elements are present in one's life, the higher their level of wellbeing. Seligman (2011) claims that PERMA applies universally to people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds, and is essential for living a flourishing life. Positive psychology aims to study and promote the conditions that lead to the cultivation and maintenance of these five key elements of PERMA; and positive education, as being rooted in the principles of positive psychology, focuses primarily on promoting wellbeing among schoolchildren by integrating the insights and practices of positive psychology into best-practice teaching.

Approaches to Positive Education

Positive education is a comprehensive concept that encompasses a range of educational approaches that are grounded in strength-based teaching and focus on equipping schoolchildren with the elements of wellbeing, including positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. While there is space for schools to adopt any valid method to promote positive education, a common thread is that schools must have a genuine commitment to prioritize the wellbeing and flourishing of their students as a central part of their mission (Green et al., 2021).

Optimism

Optimism is a foundational component of positive psychology, positive education, and overall wellbeing. As such, the fundamental approach of positive education is to cultivate an optimistic mindset among schoolchildren. Developing such a mindset involves embracing a forward-thinking approach to life and focusing on opportunities and possibilities rather than dwelling on

negatives. Research has consistently shown that optimism promotes better health by lowering the rates of chronic illnesses and immunizing against mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Overall, optimism provides an enabling condition for cultivating positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment. Positive education emphasizes the cultivation of optimism through various strategies, such as, positive self-talk, constructive explanatory style, reframing negative thoughts, focusing on character strengths and virtues, and mindfulness practices.

Character Education

One of the keys to positive education is character education, which involves teaching students a set of positive character traits or virtues that can help them flourish both academically and in their personal lives. Positive education programs typically use the framework developed by Chris Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as a basis for imparting *character strengths and virtues* to the students. As presented in Table 1, the framework includes 24 character strengths organized into six core moral virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Table 1

Character Strengths and Virtues

Core Moral Virtues	Character Strengths
Wisdom and knowledge	Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of learning, Perspective
Courage	Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality
Humanity	Love, Kindness, Social intelligence
Justice	Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership
Temperance	Forgiveness and mercy, Humility / Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty and excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality

The character strengths and virtues presented in Table 1 are systematically drawn from ancient wisdom shared by most cultures throughout history. Peterson & Seligman (2004) argue that character strengths and virtues are not innate qualities but can be developed through intentional practice and cultivation. A number of explicit and implicit strategies are prescribed to teach and reinforce character strengths and virtues, including storytelling, role-playing, journaling, and reflective writing exercises among others.

Growth Mindset

Positive education further emphasizes the importance of cultivating a growth mindset, which involves believing that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, practice, and perseverance, rather than being fixed traits. This concept is based on Carol S. Dweck's research on *implicit theories of intelligence*, also known as *Mindset Theory*, which posits that human capacities and intelligence are not fixed but rather malleable and can be developed and expanded over time (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Legget, 1988; Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2020). By fostering a growth mindset, educators encourage students to focus on effort and progress rather than solely on achievement. This approach can help students to embrace challenges, learn from failure, and cultivate resilience – the ability to bounce back from setbacks. The importance of nurturing a growth mindset in education is thus clear, as it can help students to reach their full potential and overcome obstacles.

Grit

The concept of growth mindset is closely related to another psychological trait known as Grit. Grit is characterized by a combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals. It involves the ability to persist in the face of adversity and setbacks, to maintain effort and interest over extended periods of time, and to work hard towards a specific goal despite obstacles and difficulties. Psychologist Angela Duckworth and her colleagues (Duckworth et al., 2007) are proponents of the concept and assert that it is a better predictor of success than traditional measures such as IQ or talent, and is a key factor in achieving long-term goals.

In recent times, grit has gained significant attention in the field of positive education as it helps students overcome obstacles and persevere in the pursuit of their future aspirations. Educators have a crucial role in fostering the development of grit in schoolchildren. To achieve this, teachers can use various strategies to encourage students to engage in challenging activities that require perseverance. One effective approach is to inspire students to set specific goals and consistently work towards achieving them, while providing feedback and support to help them overcome obstacles along the way. By nurturing grit in their students, teachers can equip them with the necessary skills to develop sense of purpose and direction in life, overcome adversity and reach their full potential.

Although grit and growth mindset are distinct concepts, they are often viewed as complementary because they reinforce each other's development (Park et al. 2020). Having a growth mindset, which is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, practice, and perseverance, rather than being fixed traits, can motivate individuals to set ambitious long-term goals and persist in achieving them (i.e., exhibit grit). Additionally, the reverse may also be true; grit may enhance growth mindset. Individuals who possess a strong sense of grit are more likely to persevere in the face of obstacles, leading to improved skills (Duckworth et al., 2011). Through continual engagement in challenging experiences, demonstrating mastery, and persisting despite setbacks, gritty individuals can prove to themselves that their hard work and persistence will ultimately lead to success, thereby developing a growth mindset.

Mindfulness

In recent decades, there has been a notable surge of interest in the application of mindfulness within education. This surge has led to the development and implementation of various initiatives, programs, and delivery approaches worldwide. Mindfulness has increasingly become a prevalent topic in schools, kindergartens, schools of education, teacher training programs, and higher education, leading to more widespread exploration, application, integration, and research

projects in this field (Sheinman & Russo-Netzer, 2021). According to McCall (2021), the attention

given to mindfulness is considered one of the gifts of the positive education movement.

The roots of mindfulness can be traced back to the Satipatthana Sutta, one of the most

significant texts in Buddhist teaching (Wright, 2017). This ancient Pali text, dating back to the time of

the Buddha, explains the term Sati, which describes mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to be

fully present and aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations without judgment or

distraction. This quality is originally cultivated through the practice of Vipassana, a form of

meditation taught by Gautam Buddha over 2,500 years ago.

Today, mindfulness has expanded beyond Buddhist communities and is now widely adopted

across multiple domains, including psychology, medicine, and education. Within education,

mindfulness-based programs are specifically designed to foster children's wellbeing, social-

emotional development, prosocial behavior, coping strategies, and resilience (Sheinman & Russo-

Netzer, 2021). Studies conducted by Lyons & DeLange (2016) demonstrate that introducing

mindfulness practices in the classroom can significantly improve self-control, emotional wellbeing,

and academic performance in students. These benefits, when integrated from an early age, have the

potential to shape a person's life trajectory well into adulthood. It is worth noting that the original

teachings of Buddhism, which form the foundation for mindfulness practice, offer a valuable

resource for implementing this approach in education to enhance physical, psychological, and social

wellbeing for students, teachers, and the broader educational ecosystem (Ditrich, 2017).

The aforementioned approaches represent the most commonly used strategies in positive

education programs. However, positive education encompasses a broader range of approaches, and

there is no one-size-fits-all solution for enhancing the wellbeing of school communities. Therefore, it

is crucial to consider the unique needs and context of each school community and carefully identify

key components when selecting an appropriate framework. Open dialogue and friendly debate

among educators, researchers, and practitioners can be an effective way to identify best practices

and to tailor positive education programs to specific contexts (Slemp et al., 2017; Green et al., 2021; Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021).

Implementation Strategy

Geelong Grammar School in Australia is renowned for its *whole-school approach* on implementing positive education. Rather than being a separate program or a part of the curriculum, positive psychology principles are integrated into every aspect of school life. The school's daily routines, policies, and practices are all designed to develop a culture of positive education. This includes the entire curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management, sports, social events, and physical environment. Geelong Grammar School's whole-school approach to positive education is widely regarded as an exemplary model for promoting students' well-being and academic success, allowing them to flourish in all areas of their lives.

Learn it, live it, teach it, embed it is a mantra that describes the four levels of implementing the whole-school approach to positive education at Geelong Grammar School. The first level, *learn it*, involves providing opportunities for the entire school community to understand and engage with the science of wellbeing. The second level, *live it*, involves putting evidence-based wellbeing practices into action in one's personal life. The third level, *teach it*, involves providing students with dedicated time to discover and explore the key domains of wellbeing. The fourth level, *embed it*, involves adopting long-term, school-wide policies and practices that support and nurture wellbeing. Each level is crucial for creating a supportive and nurturing environment that promotes wellbeing for both students and staff. The *learn it, live it, teach it, embed it* model has become a widespread approach for schools that decide to implement positive education as a whole-school approach.

Discussion

Positive education represents a paradigm shift from the conventional education system, which primarily focuses on academic achievements, to a more comprehensive approach that prioritizes students' holistic development. This approach recognizes that academic achievements alone cannot ensure students' wellbeing and flourishing lives. Therefore, it emphasizes the

cultivation of positive qualities and mental strengths critical to achieving these outcomes. Positive education values each student's unique strengths and talents and seeks to identify and foster them through various interventions and practices. By promoting positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments, positive education aims to enhance students' overall wellbeing and prepare them to thrive in their personal and professional lives.

Positive education plays a crucial role in promoting mental health among adolescents, helping them reach their full potential. By cultivating positive emotional traits such as optimism, hope, and resilience, positive education equips young people to cope with negative emotions, commonly experienced during adolescence, reducing the risk of developing mental health issues. This approach is akin to letting a candle ignite: with cultivation of positive emotional traits, negative emotions can be counteracted, ultimately promoting better mental health. If the effort is on letting the candle ignite, there is no need to worry about the darkness – by focusing on cultivating positive emotional traits like optimism, hope, and resilience, positive education serves as a source of light that can help counteract the darkness of negative emotions.

Incorporating positive education approaches into a school requires a comprehensive framework that includes several essential components. Firstly, the school's top-level management must demonstrate full commitment to the positive education initiatives, which should be reflected in the allocation of adequate resources, and practical actions towards implementation strategies. Secondly, both teaching and non-teaching staff should possess a deep understanding of positive education practices and know how to effectively integrate it into all facets of the school environment, including classroom activities, school culture, and student support systems. Training and workshops focused on positive education can help staff develop the skills, knowledge, and practice needed to successfully implement positive education approaches in their daily work with students. Moreover, schools must consider their unique context, including cultural and community-specific factors, when implementing positive education initiatives and should embrace the strategies

accordingly to create a conducive and supportive environment for all students, fostering their wellbeing and academic success.

Overall, positive education represents a significant shift from the conventional education system, emphasizing the importance of students' holistic development, wellbeing, and flourishing life. By placing emphasis on positive emotions, fostering engagement, promoting positive relationships, cultivating a sense of purpose, and encouraging accomplishments, positive education can equip students with essential skills and abilities to excel in both their personal and professional lives.

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