



BY LIZ MUSGROVE

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH POSITIVE EDUCATION

This paper will concentrate on the integration of Positive Psychology with Best Practice Education, termed Positive Education, within Australian Schools which enlarges the curriculum to teach students wellbeing as well as traditional literacy and numeracy. Although the scope of this paper limits the application of Positive Psychology to education, there is an increasing body of robust scientific evidence of the beneficial outcomes of this branch of psychology in the treatment of depression and in building culture within businesses and organisations. Positive Psychology is an attitudinal tool which builds character, resilience and culture and belongs to a wellness model in comparison to a therapeutic model of psychology.

Today Australia's youth is living in a global community threatened by terrorism and climate change as evidenced by increased natural disasters; on a national level by rising unemployment, terrorism threats, increased immigration changing the social milieu and on a personal level by cyber bullying, changes to the definition of a nuclear family, media influences on definitions of body image and sexual orientation, and so much more. The percentages of children from traditional nuclear families within schools are becoming increasingly lower as the number of blended families and single parent families increases with all the emotional stresses and strain those circumstances can evoke.

Technology, particularly social media, has the potential to isolate our children into a cyber world increasing their vulnerability to peer pressure and negativity regarding self-image, predatory behaviour and decreasing real, face to face, social connectivity and belonging. Australian Educators are also

concerned about the falling literacy and numeracy standards within schools. Teachers report that dealing with behavioural problems becomes a primary task in classrooms with teaching being secondary.

Professor Lea Waters, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne in a recent article in *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist* (2011. p 75) quotes the following alarming statistics:

In Australia, 25% of our young people (aged 15–19 years) have a mental disorder and one in three young people experience moderate to high levels of psychological distress (Australian Government Office for Youth, 2009). Looking at the various ways in which this distress manifests itself, we find that 25% of young Australian people experience symptoms of

depression (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), 14% experience symptoms of anxiety (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007), 32% suffer body image issues (Mission Australia, 2007) and 13% report substance abuse behaviours (Mission Australia, 2007), to name just a few issues. Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard (2007) conducted an online study of 600 Australians (aged 10–14 years) and found that 46% of respondents did not feel confident or secure in themselves; 54% were worried about not fitting in; and 40% felt they were not performing well enough.

Contemporary Positive Psychologists are combining their skills with Educational best practice specialists to research the lasting benefits of the development of "the whole student" through social, emotional, moral

and intellectual development within a positive community (Catholic Education Melbourne, Wellbeing Landscape, 2010). Alongside homes, schools with combined teacher and peer relationships are one of the most important environments in which a student develops, (Gilmer, Huebner and Furlong, 2009) and is therefore intrinsically linked to student wellbeing and mental health. A collective positive and nurturing environment within a school has a great impact on student resilience, physical and mental health and wellbeing.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Martin Seligman is considered to be the founder of Positive Psychology. Seligman posits that prior to World War 11 psychology had three distinct missions; curing mental illness; making the lives of people more productive and fulfilling; and identifying and nurturing high talent. Seligman claims that post World War 11 psychologists have concentrated on studying weakness, damage and pathology to the neglect of the other two missional components (Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In order to rectify the imbalance Seligman turned his focus to studying how to make healthy people stronger and help humans actualise their potential (Ibid). Seligman's research identified three main characteristics which contributed to happiness.

- Positive emotion and pleasure
- Engagement
- Meaning

Recent research suggests that of these three characteristics, engagement and meaning are the most important in creating a fulfilled life (Peterson, Park and Seligman, 2005).

Recent psychologists use the word "wellbeing" rather than "happiness," to describe a fulfilled life as it conveys a better description of the satisfaction of finding meaning and fulfilment in life. "Happiness" is a more subjective term harder to measure and define. The definition of well-being is "the combination of feeling good and functioning well." (Huppert and Johnson 2010, p. 264)

Later in this paper reference will be made to the PERMA model of wellbeing used in school programs which includes the three characteristics mentioned above with the addition of relationships and accomplishment, making the five components of Positive Psychology.

Criticism of Positive Psychology is widespread especially in the academic realm. Professor Lea Waters (Warning Being positive is not for the Faint Hearted https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80U__KwX0iU) has endured much scathing criticism of her research even though it has been conducted using the same rigorous scientific parameters as any other branch of psychological research. Positive Psychology seeks to distance itself from positive thinking, faith, self-deception and other self-help programs like QUIT, and current anti-bullying programs as

it a philosophy which empowers for the whole of life. It seeks to strengthen the personal character traits which create human strength and resilience and protect from mental illness (Ibid).

Strengthening individuals (or building resilience) is best achieved in a supportive social context which models those strengths in an optimistic culture. The development of optimism (Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson, 2005) combines cognitive, emotional and motivational components. People who are high in optimism have better moods, are more successful, persevere more, and experience better health. The aim in combining positive psychology and education is to link the strengthening of personal positive traits with an optimistic culture.

Positive Psychologists who study strength based development are aware of the effects of over emphasis on the model. For example, Peterson poses the following questions: "how does an overly pessimistic culture affect the well-being of its members?"; "Does overly optimistic culture lead to shallow materialism?" (Ibid). One of the criticisms of Positive Psychology is that it is overly optimistic, however, the model does not seek to negate, deny or suppress negative feeling or experiences but seeks to build resilience, optimism and characteristics which enables the individual to overcome the difficulties and stresses of life as well as build those characteristics which will act as a buffer to mental illness.

Positive Psychology enhances understanding of the how, the why and the conditions in which positive emotions, positive character and the institutions that make them, flourish. (Seligman, Steen and Park, 2005)

Best practice teaching is traditionally engaged in delivering literacy success, accomplishment and discipline. Positive education seeks to also include the skills of wellbeing and achievement. The aim is Eudaimonia – a tradition which posits that wellbeing arises out of the actualisation of individual potential and fulfilling one's true nature (Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, Robinson, 2013). It entails personal growth, giving to others, and living in accordance with personal values (Ryff and Singer, 2008). The aim of positive education is to foster wellbeing and maximise the synergistic link between wellbeing and academic success (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, Linkins, 2009).

There are six wellbeing domains;

1. Positive emotions
2. Positive engagement
3. Positive accomplishment
4. Positive purpose
5. Positive relationships
6. Positive health

The wellbeing domains are underpinned by a focus on character strengths (Norrish et al.).

As an example Geelong Grammar School developed a wellbeing program which:

- Promoted skills and strengths valued by parents.
- Produced measurable improvement of student wellbeing and behaviour.
- Facilitated student engagement in learning and achievement.

Teaching wellbeing in schools is evidenced based and aims to

- Increase the student's ability to handle everyday stress.
- Encourage flexible thinking. (ibid)

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN EDUCATION

Positive Psychology is concerned with the development of positive individual traits or strengths such as love, courage, interpersonal skills, perseverance, forgiveness, spirituality, talent and wisdom, among others. The collective actualisation of potential includes the development of responsibility towards others, nurture, seeking the common good, tolerance, work ethic and moderation (Waters, 2011). The character strengths align with the fruit of the spirit as described in Galatians 5:22; love, joy peace, kindness, self-control, patience, forbearance and long suffering. Young people have pre-existing character strengths which when exercised, give them satisfaction. Duck and Seligman (Waters, 2005, 82) examined the strength of self-discipline (self-control) and noted that self-discipline out predicted IQ on academic performance (Quoted by Waters, 2011).

Geelong Grammar School build and teach character strengths by concentrating on one characteristic per week. This strength – for example self-discipline, becomes a focus of classes within that week. It is taught within literacy classes as Educators have designed the curriculum to focus on character strengths when discussing novels or films etc. Thus the awareness of character increases within the students and enables them to develop those traits which they possess.

There is a VIA strength test available on line at www.viacharacter.org/www/Positive-Psychology for students to use to identify their own character strengths which they are then encouraged to use to serve others and for personal growth.

Classroom feedback is encouraged to be constructive and affirmative of an individual's strengths. Research has shown that in order to flourish a ratio of 2.9-1 positive to negative statements are required (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reichich adnLinkin, 2009, 293-311).

OPTIMISM

The schools which have integrated Positive Psychology into their education have firstly engaged their teachers in the program. Positive Psychology combines both a cultural initiative and personal engagement. Whilst people can use this initiative for their own personal growth having a positive supportive culture which actively engages in teaching the keys to resilience achieves great results. The results of the combined Best Practice teaching skills and Positive Psychology shown in the ABC program Revolution School demonstrated the involvement and teaching of the teachers prior to implementing the program into classes.

Building resilience into young people requires activities sometimes best undertaken outside of the classroom. The remedial class shown in Revolution School did not achieve the desired results from the program in the classroom academically or behaviourally. The teacher organised a six-day hiking expedition with the class as an experiential lesson in endurance, perseverance, team work and courage. In the debrief session students identified what they had learnt through the process. For example, endurance through the middle sections of the walk over steep terrain gave a sense of achievement when the students completed the walk. Students were actively encouraged to take that specific learning experience into the classroom with excellent results. One student tasted success in one maths test after persevering to learn the basics. He began to seek further gratification of success over again resulting in an obviously more positive affect, joy, a rise in self-esteem and a more open mindset (Revolution School, ABC).



The following table represents those characteristics Seligman has identified:

Table 1

Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

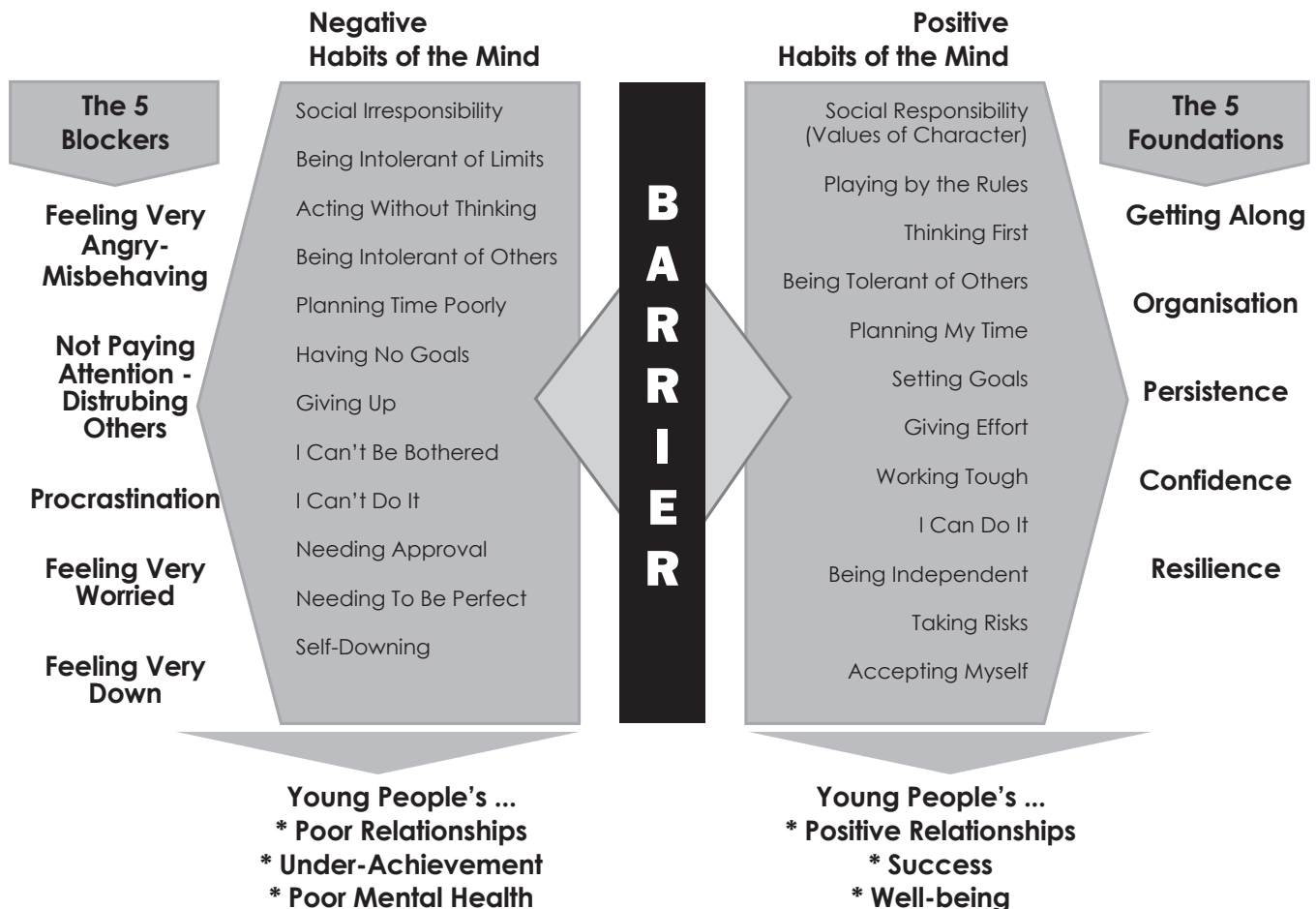
Virtue and strength	Definition
1. Wisdom and knowledge	Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
Creativity	Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
Curiosity	Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience.
Open-mindedness	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
Love of learning	Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
Perspective	Being able to provide wise counsel to others
2. Courage	Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
Authenticity	Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
Bravery	Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
Persistence	Finishing what one starts
Zest	Approaching life with excitement and energy
3. Humanity	Interpersonal strengths that involve "tending and befriending" others
Kindness	Doing favours and good deeds for others
Love	Valuing close relations with others
Social intelligence	Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others
4. Justice	Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
Fairness	Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
Leadership	Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
Teamwork	Working well as member of a group or team
5. Temperance	Strengths that protect against excess
Forgiveness	Forgiving those who have done wrong
Modesty	Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
Prudence	Being careful about one's choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
Self-regulation	Regulating what one feels and does
6. Transcendence	Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
Gratitude	Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
Hope	Expecting the best and working to achieve it
Humour	Liking to laugh and tease bringing smiles to other people
Religiousness	Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

(<http://www.michaelmurphypsychologies.com/seligman05ppprogressarticle.pdf>)

Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from stress and negative experiences. It also encompasses the ability to reach out with a positive attitude towards personal growth (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Building resilience reduces stress, depression and anxiety; which show alarmingly high statistics among our young people, as quoted in the introduction to this paper.

One program which is designed to build resiliency is the “You Can Do It” program.

The following diagram depicts the aims of YCDI. There is a link also to the brochure detailing the available resources for YCDI.



(<http://www.youcandoiteducation.com/whatis.html> accessed 28/7/16)

Another tool which is used is the cultivation of **gratitude**. Gratitude is defined as a “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, 554). Students are encouraged to think of three things for which they were thankful for each day. Then students were encouraged to reflect on those three things by asking questions such as “Why did this happen?” “What did it mean to me?” and “How can I increase the likelihood of this happening again?” Parents, teachers and students all reported an improvement of behaviour and engagement due to this exercise.

In some schools students were required to fill in a blessing journal where they wrote down the positive things that happened to them. Geelong Grammar School encouraged students to write

letters of gratitude.

In some classrooms **meditation** is taught as a practice which has been proven to allow time for personal insight, it expands attention, helps integration between thoughts and emotions reduces stress and assists with compassion. Meditation is defined as “a process of paying attention often to a particular object designated as the focus of concentration” (Campion ad Rocco, p. 47). Other benefits of meditation are an improvement of general health, self-kindness, self-knowledge and self-regulation of behaviour. (Davidson et al) Many students report that meditation is important to them as they feel calmer and more in control of their behaviour.

Mindfulness is another practice in which the student is encouraged to be present in the moment. Distracting thoughts and feelings are acknowledged in order to gain insight and

awareness of emotions and used to assist with regulating emotions and as a consequence somatic symptoms decreased. (Waters,)

Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset*, has proposed that there are two major mindsets which either enhance education or the lack of achievement. Some students have a closed mindset which prevents them from learning as any failure becomes defining in their psyche. A positive mindset (or educational resilience) can be taught whereby failure is replaced by an attitude that the student has not mastered a particular task yet but that with further attempt may do so in the future (Dweck, 2006). Dweck's work with students aligns with the Positive Psychology aims and has become an important work.

The exciting innovation and cooperation between Positive Education and the creation of an optimistic environment and community where students are encouraged by positive language, the development of positive character traits, and behaviours which Positive Psychology proves reduces anxiety and depression and delivers improved results in academia and wellbeing in our students is providing a very plausible response to the challenges which are facing our youth. Fixed mindsets are being changed to curious mindsets which seek to experience and explore learning in ways which are contrary to the classroom situations students have experienced for years.

The potential for Positive Psychologists and those trained in Positive Psychology to become team leaders and counsellors within the school system is growing as more and more schools are taking the challenge to follow this adventure. This is just one area of possibility for the strengthening of people by making therapeutic interventions a teaching tool for the future. Businesses, organisations and churches are also areas where Positive Psychology can be used. Hopefully this paper will whet the appetite for further discussion and investigation of this amazing tool.



References

- http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/revolution-school/About_Revolution_School.pdf
http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/revolution-school/Summary_Survey_And_Research.pdf
<https://www.ggs.vic.edu.au/School/Positive-Education/What-is-Positive-Education>
<http://www.cem.edu.au/learning-teaching/student-wellbeing/wellbeing-landscape>
www.viacharacter.org/www/Positive-Psychology
 (http://www.youcandoiteducation.com/whatis.html accessed 28/7/16) <http://www.youcandoiteducation.com/pdf/Brochure-US-3-08.pdf>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80U_KwX0iU Warning Being positive is not for the faint hearted
 Dweck, Carol S. (2006) *Mindset*, New York, Random House
 Gilman, Rich, Huebner Scott E., Furlong, Michael J. (2009) *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, New York. Routledge
 Norrish, J. M., Williams, P., O'Connor, M., & Robinson, J. (2013). An applied framework for Positive Education. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 3(2), 147-161. DOI:10.5502/ijw.v3i2.2
 Seligman Martin E.P., Ernst, Randal M., Gillham Jane, Reivicha, Karen, Linkins, Mark, (2009, June) Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions, *Oxford Review of Education* Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 293-311
 Seligman, Martin E.P., Steen, Tracy A., Park, Nansook, Peterson, Christopher, (2005 July-August) Positive Psychology Progress, *American Psychologist*, (pp 410-21)
 Seligman, Martin, Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000) Positive Psychology an Introduction, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60, No. 5, pp 410-421. DOI: 10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.5
 Waters, Lea. (2011) A Review of School-Based Positive Psychology Interventions, *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist* Volume 28, Issue 2, pp.75-90 DOI 10.1375/aedp.28.2.75

■ Liz Musgrove is a retired Registered Psychiatric and General Nurse with 25 years' experience in Aged Care specialising in Dementia Care. Liz has had a keen interest in education throughout her nursing career. Part of her role was to educate carers in the initial government initiative to educate carers. For two years Liz was part of the Aged Care Teaching team at TAFE Tasmania. In her management role Liz initiated innovative education in Business Management which gave all levels of staff a basic understanding of public relations and business and communication skills in order to enhance the care of residents and their families and culture within the Nursing Home. Since her retirement as a nurse manager Liz has taught *Engaging with Study*, *Introduction to Psychology and Accountability in Practice* at Tabor College Hobart. Liz has attended Kingborough Family Church for the last fifteen years where she is an elder and pastoral carer. Liz first heard of Positive Psychology this year prompting her to propose a dialogue within the Social Science stream for the inclusion of an intensive subject, Positive Psychology. The aim is to prepare students for possible employment within schools, businesses and church organisations as team leaders trained in Positive Psychology.

