

Positive Education:

Infusing Positive Psychology into the Classroom

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July 2015

Abstract

Core facets of positive psychology, such as learned optimism, social engagement, well-being, and resilience can mesh quite nicely with positive behavioral support and social-emotional learning. Teachers can now draw upon a growing base of research and application surrounding the use of positive psychology in the classroom, such as information stemming from the positive psychology teaching task force at the University of Pennsylvania. As educators, we can model and promote a positive psychology mindset in our classrooms and empower students with positivity for enhanced engagement and coping strategies.

Keywords: positive psychology, positive education, coaching psychology, positive mindset, positive institutions, student well-being

Creating a culture of positive psychology in the classroom

The tenets of emotional health and wellbeing tend to get ignored or at the very least, given short shrift in the current U.S. educational system. However, core facets of positive psychology (PPsy) such as learned optimism, social engagement, well-being, and resilience, can be taught with a minimum of increased cost and are of substantial benefit to students, teachers, and the community.

Indeed, introducing PPsy into classrooms need not be a radical departure from current educational precepts. PPsy dovetails nicely with positive behavioral support theories and social-emotional learning models. In addition, PPsy has been used quite effectively with students of diverse age groups, making it ideal for grades kindergarten through the university and beyond. The success of programs at primary schools indicates the possibility of furthering PPsy in various educational models, across cultures, countries, and socio-economic backgrounds. As educators, we can model and promote a PPsy mindset in our classrooms and empower students with positivity, allowing for more engagement in the classroom and better coping strategies for students.

What is positive psychology (PPsy)?

Early pioneers of PPsy include the academics Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, and Christopher Peterson, whose research shows that optimism and positivity can be learned, and that while our environment and life circumstances might shape our lives, we can learn ways to be happier and more productive. In an educational setting, students who are taught PPsy techniques and interventions are more likely to learn and are also able to recover more easily from educational setbacks, as well as having overall increased positivity (Seligman, Ernst, Gilhman, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

PPsy is therefore a developmental model, unlike the traditional disease/medical model that informs much of other psychiatric and psychological approaches/interventions. Instead of attempting to diagnose behavior problems, PPsy practitioners direct the conversation and classroom lessons toward what is right with the individual and what is good in one's life. More than merely about being "happy", PPsy's proponents work toward building a life that focuses on meaning and engagement, in addition to feelings of pleasure (Seligman & Steen, 2005).

The role of positive psychology in the classroom:

As well as promoting feelings of happiness and better moods, PPsy can also lead to increases in learning abilities for students. Multiple studies have shown an increase in attention when mood/happiness is at a higher level, as well as more creative thinking skills (Rowe, Hirsch, & Anderson, 2006). Schools are also an excellent place to introduce concepts of PPsy to children because they spend so much of their time in the school system, sometimes upwards of 35 hours per week. In addition, parents and educators routinely report that their most important goal in education is to help students to become responsible and caring citizens, and this goal can be supported with PPsy interventions. Studies show that when students are given PPsy methodology, their depression and anxiety rates decrease, even years later (Seligman, Ernst, Gillman, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Students, especially in primary school, revere and respect the teachers who command their full attention, and if given role models who cope with problems and setbacks using a PPsy mindset, then they will receive a toolset which can be used not only in the classroom, but also in the community and at home. O'Grady, referencing the work of the positive psychology teaching task force at the University of Pennsylvania, supports the practice of focusing on learning virtues such as wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence, when developing and delivering classroom curriculum (O'Grady, 2011).

What is positive education?

Positive education, a blend of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) and coaching psychology, is meant to enhance a student's subjective well-being, and has been shown to increase enjoyment of school (via curiosity, love of learning, and creativity). Also, and perhaps importantly for administrators, achievement scores increase after PPI's are introduced. As the authors of the research on this topic note, "increasing the skills of well-being does not antagonize the traditional goals of classroom learning, but rather enhances them" (Seligman, Ernst, Gilhman, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). As O'Grady emphasizes, there are three core ideologies drawn from positive psychology which every new educator should strive to understand and promote, these include positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (O'Grady, 2011).

Applied positive psychology techniques:

Core PPI's stem from Seligman's PERMA model, which stands for: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment/Achievement (Seligman, Flourish, 2011). These concepts provide a framework for PPI's in the classroom. The classroom teacher provides instruction and examples of PPIs in order to create a PPsy mindset. He/she provides opportunities for the student to practice skills and build confidence surrounding applied PPsy. In the PPsy school programs that have been extensively studied, teachers have successfully incorporated PPI's into the classroom as part of regular classroom instruction, and not as a separate class or lesson. Examples of such programs include: Geelong Grammar School and Gray's Point Public School in Australia and Wellington College in the United Kingdom (Green, 2011).

Positive psychology techniques to build optimism and resilience

▪ Strengths based approach:

Recent research suggests that two PPsy interventions are of particular value for use in the classroom. Seligman and Steen report that using signature strengths in a new way and using the

three good things exercise leads to “—increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months” (Seligman & Steen, 2005). Strengths must first be measured, either using the *Values In Action – Individual Strengths Assessment (VIA-IS*, of which there is a version for children) or the *Behavior Emotion Rating Scale*, which measures children’s strengths in five different areas. It is also possible for the teacher or educator to measure strengths in their own way by spending time with each individual student. Once strengths are known, they can be employed in various exercises.

The *Three Good Things* intervention consists of asking students to write down three good things that happened that day, and then to reflect on each with any of the following questions: “Why did this good thing happen?”, “What does this mean to you?”, “How can you increase the likelihood of having more of this good thing in the future?” (Seligman, Ernst, Gillman, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). An additional idea would be have students, especially those in the upper grades, act as wellbeing monitors on the playground and the classroom, using their signature strengths to guide others (Green, Robinson, & Oades, 2011).

Strengths-based journaling, a wall that lists students’ strengths, and a strengths sharing circle could also be implemented. A strengths-based sharing circle, especially, can promote students’ wellbeing, as they learn how to see others via their strengths, and to be seen in a positive light in return. Journaling encourages students to discuss how they used one of their strengths in a specific instance, and to elaborate on their own unique positive attributes. All of these activities help to refocus on the positive aspects of each student, and have shown much promise in the redirection of behavioral issues (Rawana, Latimer, Whitley, & Probazanski, 2009).

Another teacher who implemented PPsy into his fifth grade classroom, Eric Hoops, used simple strategies to great result, amongst them celebrating student successes instead of focusing on “problem areas” or “needs to be worked on” in student progress reports. For instance, he included a note taped into the student’s agenda regarding recent successes. He also used the *VIA*

Strengths Survey for Children, and then asked the students to write about their strengths in their journals, giving examples for their named strengths. In addition, he fostered a classroom environment that gave each student an opportunity to use their strengths. Both parents and students found this approach of benefit (Hoops, 2014).

▪ **Negative Thought Stopping:**

Negative thought stopping is another useful technique for teachers and educators. During classroom instruction or sharing, if negative thoughts (“I can’t do this, I’m not good at this, I’ll never be able to do this”) are mentioned, then a teacher can model Seligman’s ABCDE model of optimism, as an extension of Albert Ellis’ work: (A) explaining adversity, (B) recognizing the negativity of pessimistic beliefs, (C) thinking about the usual consequences of those thoughts, (D) disputing this belief, and then (E) energizing a new set of beliefs (Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, 1991). Students can then use these techniques themselves and in helping others.

Conclusion

I can think of two apparent weaknesses to infusing positive psychology into the classroom. First, if the educator has not been properly trained to blend positive psychology interventions into the curriculum, there will be a lack of substance to his/her approach to positive education. And second, a teacher may not genuinely accept and embrace the art and science of PPsy and may come across to students as insincere. In leading a classroom, the professional educator must put forth concerted effort to teach and promote the PERMA model, PPsy ideologies, and learning virtues, as opposed to a simplistic message of “think happy thoughts”. It is my belief, however, that any shift by the educator to introduce PPsy into the classroom ultimately presents a focus on development and well-being and therefore enhances the student’s learning experience.

Using science-backed interventions to improve the classroom environment, as well as to increase overall well-being for both teachers and students, is of benefit for all involved in a

classroom setting. As we prepare our students for future learning and leading, it is fitting for those of us in the education system to teach students healthy and positive mental health concepts and practices. As I see it, by using positive education, the blending of PPsy and coaching psychology, we can assist in transforming the student's mindset to embrace positivity and enrichment in learning and life.

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