

Flourish and Learn: Positive Education

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CONTACT
Teacher Learning Network
PO Box 363
112 Trenerry Crescent
Abbotsford 3067
tel (03) 9418 4992
email: admin@tlN.org.au

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- | | | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|--|
| 3 | Flourish and Learn
Bert van Halen, Victoria University and Michael Victory, TLN outline the need for Positive Education in the community | 23 | Talking About Four Rooms
Kate Chinner writes about the second school in which she has implemented the emotional intelligence program – The Four Rooms to improve student engagement |
| 5 | A Positive Psychology Framework
Psychologist, Maria Ruberto maps the psychological framework from which Positive Education has emerged | 26 | Positive Education and Staff Development
Maria Chrisant describes how the implementation of a Positive Education program has enhanced staff development at Kew High School |
| 8 | A System Wide Approach to Positive Education
Lea Waters and Helen Stokes write about an approach to scale up Positive Education from school projects to system wide implementation | 28 | An Effective Learning Community
Positive Education has application across all sections of the school community, an approach that is evident in the work initiated by Scott Watson at Euroa Secondary College |
| 10 | Positive Education and Teacher Development
Marcelle Cacciattolo and Jeanne Carroll show how Positive Education is influencing the shape of postgraduate courses for teachers | 30 | Positive Education: whole of school approach
Phil Doll sets out the plan for The Peninsula School to implement Positive Education at every year level |
| 14 | Just Breathe – Mindfulness Improves Critical Listening
Greg Aronson shows the wide application of Positive Education in setting out how he used mindfulness with his music students | 32 | Building Connections through Character Strengths
Jane Mersey, Trafalgar High School shows how using character strengths with staff and students has increased connectedness to school |
| 16 | A Positive Education Network
Simon Murray describes the beginning of PESA and invites schools to join the Positive Education Schools Association to collaborate and improve practice | 34 | Bringing the positive into the classroom
Janis Coffey, Geelong Grammar, sets out 10 Positive Education strategies that you can use in your classroom tomorrow |
| 18 | The Way Forward: empathy and forgiveness
John Hendry, Geelong Grammar, one of the innovators in Positive Education in Australia writes about the philosophy that underpins wellbeing for all | 36 | Resilience in Early Childhood
Talli Kimelman provides several strategies that can be used to build resilience in early childhood settings |
| 20 | Positive Education: an intentional focus on wellbeing
Justin Robinson, sets out the philosophy of 'Live it, Teach it, Embed it', that is at the heart of Geelong Grammar's initiative in Positive Education | 38 | Why Positive Education?
Nathan Chisholm, Buckley Park Secondary College argues the case for the importance of Positive Education when things are going well and when there are major challenges in school. |

Flourish and Learn

Bert van Halen, Victoria University with Michael Victory, TLN

Flourish is such a beautiful word, it is rounded, it is rich, it lingers in the air with promise and possibility. It is the central word in the emerging philosophies of Positive Psychology and Positive Education. It is just one word in the new language that is now open to us as educators seeking to contribute to the wellbeing of the people with whom we are in contact – our students, their parents, our colleagues.

What is Positive Education?

Positive Education begins with the assumption that as educators we want to improve the quality of life of our students and the people in our education community. We want to improve their quality of life and their engagement with others, including with their teachers.

There are definitions for Positive Education available on the web (eg. Australian Psychological Society) and the articles from Marcelle Cacciattolo and Jeanne Carroll (p.10) and Maria Ruberto (p.5) provide comprehensive definitions of Positive Education and Positive Psychology. I will define Positive Education as a “*holistic focus on the wellbeing of the people with whom we interact in education communities*”. It enables a holistic approach for all education and learning processes.

Positive Education is a theory; it is a philosophy; it is an approach to life that says that we can have better quality relationships and a better life if we aim for those things and take deliberate steps to achieve them. Positive Education provides a framework for schools and education settings to implement programs to achieve the goal of wellbeing for all. The article from Lea Waters and Helen Stokes (p. 8) provides examples of projects schools have implemented.

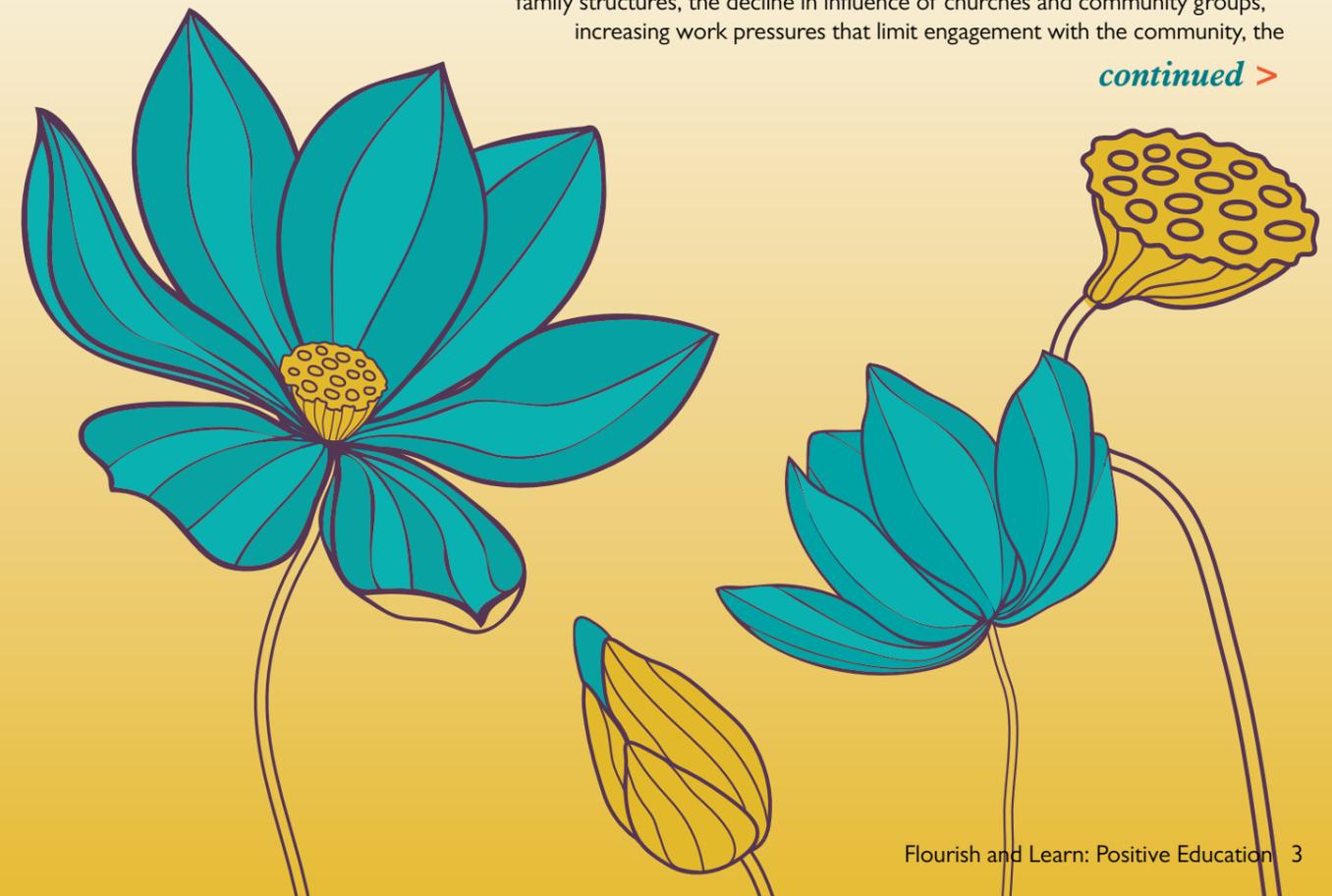
There is nothing new about Positive Education. It has its antecedents in self esteem programs from the 1970s, social skills in the 1990s, and resilience in the 2000s (McGrath 2009). As it has evolved in the 2010s it gathers all of the contributions to the studies of resilience into one coherent process.

There are people who question Positive Education as a fad. I would encourage those people to review the work of Carol Dweck on the impact of Positive Education on student academic achievement. Research indicates that mindset impacts on goal selection, help seeking, achievement and motivation and ultimately impacts feelings of self-efficacy, outcomes achieved and levels of personal wellbeing (Dweck 2006). Thinking Traps, Active Constructive Responding and Finding Flow are other evidence based tools to ensure that the work goes beyond being a fad. It is about the science of learning.

Why do we need Positive Education?

We need it because our students need it. There are many indicators in our society that suggest we can do things better, suicide & depression in teenagers and adults, anxiety disorders, disaffection with public society expressed in criminal and destructive behaviour. We can speculate on causes of those behaviours – increasing breakdown of family structures, the decline in influence of churches and community groups, increasing work pressures that limit engagement with the community, the

continued >



isolation of urban living, 'fly-in fly-out' lifestyles. All of these and other influences have increased pressure on young people and caused thinking educators to ask if we are genuinely educating our students for the 21st century. These were the initial questions asked by key thinkers at Geelong Grammar before embarking on their world wide innovative work on Positive Education (see article by Justin Robinson on p.20 and John Hendry on p.18).

Young people need a higher level of personal skill to navigate through the contemporary world. There is greater exposure to the global community through travel, through technology and through traditional and social media. There is less certainty and fewer rules. The world is 'bigger' and requires more negotiation than was required in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and even the 1980s when many current educators were growing up. We should be asking, "what are the skills and life orientations that people need to flourish in the contemporary world?"

It is possible of course to say that we all survived school without Positive Education. Sure, but teachers are the success stories of education in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. We are back in schools and education – a sure sign of our early success. There were many of our contemporaries who were not so successful, who did not flourish. Positive Education offers the capacity to help more students achieve real success in life by having a quality of life through quality relationships.

The second stream to the answer of why we need Positive Education is related to the capacity to gather data. Positive Psychology has now given us the capacity to generate data on:

1. Character strengths
2. Wellbeing
3. Mindsets
4. Positive emotions
5. Relationships
6. Meaning
7. Accomplishment

These measures can assist schools who have challenges in their attitude to school survey indicators.

With this data schools are able to measure the impact of the programs that they implement. There are instruments that enable schools to measure the success (or otherwise) of what they do within a wellbeing framework.

Helping people to have better lives is important – but what is also valuable is being able to demonstrate at a system or global level the impact of Positive Education. Just as NAPLAN results and ATAR results are collated and published we should be able to publish wellbeing results. The community wants to know what difference schools are making – we have the capacity to give them data to support what we know intuitively is important. We now have the theory, the framework, a process and the evidence to show that this approach works.

Implementing Positive Education

Positive Education promotes proactive behaviour. Positive Education is not about 'shiny, happy people'. It is about character strengths, resilience, mindfulness and lives well lived.

There are many ways that this can be achieved. The programs set out in the journal that are at work in schools are examples of how teachers and schools have sought to bring the strengths, the character traits of individuals into prominence. In working with students to develop character strengths we give them the best chance of demonstrating resilience, endurance and wellbeing when they are under pressure.

In the articles in the journal you will see:

1. Immersion programs for staff, encouraging staff to model the desired behaviours/lifestyle at Geelong Grammar on p.34 and Kew High School on p.26 and Talli Kimmelman on p.36.
2. Whole of Curriculum approaches at The Peninsula School on p.30
3. Individual Programs – see Kate Chinner's article on p.23 and Greg Aronson on p.14
4. Organization culture – see Nathan Chisholm's article on p.38 and Jane Mersey on p.32
5. Whole community approaches –see Euroa Secondary College on p.28 and Simon Murray on p.16

There is no question that some schools have committed substantial funds to building a Positive Education program through their school, but equally much can be achieved when teachers work collaboratively.

So in the end what is Positive Education?

A theory and process drawn from evidence that provides us with a common language to talk about and to act to help our students and those in our education communities to build better quality lives.

Bert van Halen is a former Principal of secondary schools in the western suburbs of Melbourne, he currently lectures at Victoria University and is a hub for Positive Education for Schools. Bert facilitates a network of Positive Education schools. He can be contacted at bertvanh@bigpond.com

References

References for this article can be found on page 22 of this journal

A Positive Psychology Framework

Maria Ruberto, Psychologist and Education Consultant

Positive Psychology is the most recent branch of psychological science that investigates human potential, positive health, emotional competency and the ability to thrive and flourish.

At a Glance

- Living the best life possible
- Wellbeing not happiness is fundamental
- Strength based approach

Wellbeing not happiness

The media has latched onto a narrow view that positive psychology grants all your happiness wishes. It is consistently reported that time and valuable taxpayers' money is being 'wasted' on trying to make people 'happy, or 'happier'. Newspapers and their editors fused the words 'happy' and

'psychology', and went on a rampage to argue social engineering and people's right to be sad. Some of this is true, most of it wasn't. We fear what we don't know.

However, some journalists became bored with the defensive reporting and, like oppositional adolescents, moved on to take in what science was actually finding. Even Richard Eckersley, positive psychology's best critic has stated, "Once skeptical, I now agree we need these school-based programs...when social conditions are hostile to wellbeing, as they are today, individuals and schools on their behalf, need to take more responsibility for looking after it." Positive psychology is not a program, it is a philosophy. However, we need school programs, and as Norrish and Vella-Broderick [2009] point out, "a priority is to develop, test, and refine positive psychology interventions so that they cater specifically for adolescents." We are onto it. Maturity is a wonderful thing; it's taken almost ten years for Australia to warm to the idea that wellbeing, not happiness, is fundamental to human health. Well, that's not true either, is it? Some people, perhaps most people, already knew that, explicitly or subconsciously. Research is providing security.

The main difference between the clinical and positive methodology is that the latter applies a strengths-based approach to identifying and improving wellbeing rather than a deficit-based approach to solely treat illness. It does not ignore the symptoms or afflictions, but simply does not use the absence of deficits to describe the presence of an optimal quality of life. This framework magnifies the influence of relational resilience and the critical importance of character and connectedness to build strong social-emotional capital. This is the theory founded by Professor Martin Seligman in 1998 and has attracted medical, political and global interest with pioneering research into fields such as affective neurobiology, neurogenesis and plasticity, and mindfulness. It is an organic approach to living the best life possible. Aaron Antonovsky referred to Salutogenesis, the origin of health, in the late 1970s. He described it as a movement toward wellness in understanding and managing our lives with greater resources, developing stronger resistance and creating a solid sense of coherence. Positive psychology is the next developmental stage. It is about optimal mental health, peaceful societies and flourishing lives. Positive psychology as a label sits uncomfortably with me. For a paradigm that has invited some of the greatest insights into positive human functioning, the title falls short of the characteristics it espouses. This is the title, however, coined by Seligman, and who are we to argue with the big blue genie?