

## POSITIVE EDUCATION: EDUCATING FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND FOR A FULFILLING LIFE

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*La educación tradicional se ha centrado en transmitir las herramientas necesarias para el éxito académico y profesional del individuo, y el progreso del alumno se mide de acuerdo con su desempeño dentro de este paradigma limitado del éxito. Varias décadas de investigación rigurosa internacional nos han demostrado que existen herramientas para generar los elementos del bienestar, y que estas se pueden enseñar y aprender. Más aún, estas herramientas se deben enseñar, ya que el bienestar tiene valor intrínseco (el ser humano innatamente desea la felicidad) y valor instrumental (la felicidad genera beneficios como salud física, éxito profesional y personal, mejores relaciones con otros, y menor violencia y consumo de drogas entre adolescentes, entre otros). Utilizando métodos del máximo rigor científico, la educación positiva enseña las herramientas y el conocimiento que el individuo necesita para tener una vida académica y profesional exitosa, así como para florecer como ser humano y tener una vida plena.*

**Palabras clave:** Éxito académico, Bienestar, Vida plena.

*Traditional education has focused on teaching individuals the tools to succeed academically and professionally, and students' progress has been measured according to their performance within this limited paradigm of success. Various decades of rigorous international research have shown that skills exist for building the elements of well-being, and that these can be taught and learned. Furthermore, these skills should be taught, since well-being has both intrinsic value (human beings innately desire well-being) as well as instrumental value (well-being generates desirable life outcomes, including physical health, professional and academic success, better relationships with others, less violence and drug consumption, among others). Based on the most rigorous scientific research, positive education teaches the skills and knowledge that individuals need to have successful academic and professional lives, as well as to flourish as human beings and live a fulfilling life.*

**Key words:** Academic achievement, Well-being, Life satisfaction.

**E**ducation transforms the human being. Through the transfer of knowledge and skills, education changes the individual from their present state to a different future state. Therefore, education involves the changing and growth of individuals in a certain direction. The important question, when addressing the issue of education is this: in what direction do we want to transform the individual cognitively and emotionally during their educational process? In other words, what is the purpose of education and what can and should be its goal?

Common sense, along with more rigorous studies in fields such as positive psychology, tells us that overall well-being is a fundamental goal in human life, and arguably the most important. However, regardless of ideologies or moral beliefs, it is undeniable that we live during a time when progress is measured largely based on the accumulation of money and material goods, from individual success to the level of national development. The vast majority of current educational systems reflect this conception of progress in the way they prepare the individual, especially during their most formative years: childhood and adolescence.

Education systems try to prepare students for productive lives, but they do not provide them with the tools to have healthy and fulfilling lives with meaning and purpose.

Positive psychology recognizes that economics is an essential engine for the functioning of our society, and that it is necessary to prepare human beings in order for this economy to prosper in a sustainable and egalitarian way. Nonetheless, positive psychology also recognizes that it must be economics that is at the service of the individual, not the other way around. Thus, education must provide learners with the knowledge and tools to have both a fulfilling and a productive life. Well-being is not a threat to economic progress; on the contrary, it is a complement that amplifies the productivity of the individual throughout his life, which in turn increases his life satisfaction. There is extensive research that shows that well-being contributes significantly and positively to physical health, creativity, productivity, innovation, and social relations (Howell, Kem, & Lyubomirsky, 2007; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Therefore, an educational system that promotes the well-being of students and their community, while promoting traditional economic progress at the same time, will give individuals the skills to enjoy productive and fulfilling lives. This is the foundation of positive education.

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The intersection of positive psychology with education presents us with a simple and fundamental question: educating for what? Positive education answers this question using decades of scientific studies and millennial wisdom based on contemplation and reasoning: educating for the general fulfillment that human beings innately desire, regardless of their culture or epoch. After years of rigorous research on the skills for well-being, positive education empirically postulates that well-being *can* be taught and learned. Moreover, positive education proposes that, due to its intrinsic value and its instrumental value (the positive effects of well-being), the tools and knowledge of well-being *should* be taught.

### POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable human beings, their organizations, and their communities to flourish. One of the strongest criticisms of positive psychology comes from the misperception that this discipline studies only the positive emotions. Caused in part by the media and books of pop culture that focus only on increasing positive emotions, positive psychology is often considered a “new age” movement, separate from fields with scientific rigor such as physics or biology. In her book *The Science of Happiness*, Lyubomirsky (2007) clearly describes positive psychology’s commitment to rigorous science.

“First, the compass of the science of happiness is science, and happiness –increasing the strategies that other social psychologists and I have developed– is its key support element. My story is that of a research scientist, not a doctor, a life coach, or a self-help guru... The science of happiness is unlike many self-help books to the extent that it represents a synthesis of what researchers of the science of happiness, including myself, have found in their empirical research. Every suggestion I offer is supported by scientific research”.

Undeniably, one of positive psychology’s multiple goals is to increase individual happiness, which involves the person having positive emotions more frequently and negative ones less frequently. Although one of the pillars of positive psychology is the positive emotions, as a number of empirical studies have been conducted over the last two decades, positive psychology has evolved and its understanding of well-being and happiness have been refined. Well-being is now conceived not only as positive emotions, but also as enjoying multi-faceted flourishing in many areas of life and the human experience (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2003).

Ryff (1995), one of the first to propose a multidimensional understanding of well-being, proposes a model with six components of well-being (self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth). At the social level, Gallup has created the

*Healthways Well-Being Index*, which includes variables such as life evaluation, emotional health, physical health, healthy habits, work environment, and basic access (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has created the *Better Life Index*, composed of 11 themes that are considered essential to quality of life (housing, income, work, community, education, environment, government, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance). The index allows each country to identify the most important subjects to them (Kerényi, 2011).

Analogous to these models and focusing on adults, Seligman (2011) more recently suggests a five-part model of human flourishing (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, or PERMA). Notably, each of these models and indices suggests that well-being is composed of profiles across multiple domains, and not simply a single number (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011). Individuals, organizations, and governments can decide which items are most important, see how they compare to each other, and devise strategic ways to increase or decrease them.

A missing element in each of these models that focus on the well-being of the adult is their obvious precursor: the well-being and functioning of youth. Child and adolescent psychology has focused mainly on developmental psychopathology and minimizing the negative effects of mental illness, and little on the well-being of young people and how to promote it. Adolescence is a particularly formative period and has often been ignored in contemporary psychology. The well-being and progress of young people are often measured only through their academic performance (e.g., grades and other academic qualifications).

Just as several components are needed to define and understand the well-being of the adult, Kern and colleagues (2014) suggest that a multifaceted approach to the well-being of the individual during childhood and adolescence is necessary. To this end, these authors have recently developed a theoretical model of the positive psychological functioning of young people, consisting of five factors that reflect the five domains of PERMA, characterized by the acronym EPOCH: engagement (complete absorption in what one is doing and interest in life activities), perseverance (the execution of objectives until they are achieved, despite the opposition and challenges), optimism (hope and confidence in the future), connection to others (satisfying relationships with others that provide a sense of reciprocal support and love), and happiness (joy, confidence, calmness, and enthusiasm).

As shown in Figure 1, EPOCH reflects the five-factor structure of PERMA, with domains of meaning and goals achieved that are more relevant to adolescents: optimism and perseverance, respectively (Figure 2 shows the original models in English). Meaning and goals achieved are not domains of well-being that have much relevance for the majority of children and



adolescents. Instead, the most optimistic young people show greater future meaning (Steinberg, 2012); also, perseverance or determination (“grit”) is more predictive of academic performance than intelligence, traditionally measured using the intelligence quotient (IQ) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

**POSITIVE EDUCATION**

Schools have a key role in establishing and maintaining cultural and social values. Many children and adolescents spend most of their waking time in school environments. Most educational systems often set a negative tone, albeit well-intentioned. Students must sit quietly and behave or face disciplinary action. Teachers often spend a great deal of time and energy on issues such as student victimization, bullying, fighting, and disruption, which create stress and frustration for teachers, and a hostile environment, which is not conducive to learning. Eventually, a significant portion of students, teachers, and administrators become disillusioned with the school process. A recent study examined the words used by adolescents on social media such as Twitter and Facebook when they talking about their schools, and the most commonly-used words include “boring”, “stupid”, and “hate” (Schwartz et al., 2013).

Positive education presents a new paradigm and emphasizes positive emotions, positive character traits, the meaning and purpose of studying, and the personalized motivation to promote learning, in order to provide students with the tools to live a full life, within the academic environment and beyond it.

This paradigm is based on educating in both the traditional skills of academic achievement and the tools for integral well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Schools often teach children and adolescents the tools they need for professional success in the future. Positive education teaches these traditional skills for success, and also the tools that allow the individual and their community to prosper and flourish. Based on the growing field of positive psychology, positive education focuses on cultivating well-being in students, teachers, and school administrators, to create an environment that promotes the growth of students and the academic community. This approach is parallel to the simultaneous teaching of skills for traditional academic performance (e.g., good grades and academic qualifications).

Positive education posits that well-being must be taught, because of its intrinsic value and its instrumental value.

Although the external conditions (e.g., economic growth, access to health, and education) have improved in virtually the whole world over the last 50 years, overall satisfaction with life has remained essentially stable in most countries (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2007). During this same period, the prevalence of depression has increased at an alarming rate. Some studies claim that depression today is nearly ten times more common than it was 50 years ago (Wickramaratne, Weissman, Leaf, & Holford, 1989). Not only has the overall prevalence of clinical depression increased during the past five decades, but also the average age of a first episode of depression has gone from adulthood to adolescence. Today, one in five teenagers has an episode of clinical depression before finishing high school (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Seeley, & Fischer, 1993; Weissman, 1987). These results affirm the urgent need for an educational paradigm that directly addresses the psychological well-being of adolescents.

Apart from the alarming statistics for adolescents worldwide, which demonstrate the urgent need for a new educational paradigm that is aligned with the current realities, there are academic benefits of increasing the psychological health of young people. In general, happy people learn better. Negative emotions produce limited attention, negative and critical thinking, and analytical perspectives. In contrast, positive emotions generate creative and holistic thinking, and full attention (Boite, Goschke, & Kuhl, 2003; Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1994; Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991; Kuhl, 1983 and 2000; Rowe, Hirsh, Anderson, & Smith, 2007; Seligman, et al, 2009).

Psychological research tells us that positive affect (e.g., joy, confidence, calmness, and enthusiasm) and negative affect (e.g., sadness, frustration, stress, fear, and anxiety) are factors that are independent of the emotional state of a person at any time –the elements of positive affect and negative affect may

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE PARALLEL DOMAINS OF EPOCH AND PERMA (STEINBERG, 2012)**

ADOLESCENT	ADULT
Happiness	Positive Emotions
Engagement	Engagement
Connectedness	Positive Relationships
Optimism	Meaning
Perseverance	Achievement

**FIGURE 2**  
**MODELOS ORIGINALES EN INGLÉS (STEINBERG, 2012)**

ADOLESCENCE	ADULTHOOD
Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion
Engagement	Engagement
Relationships	Relationships
Optimism	Meaning
Perseverance	Accomplishment



be present simultaneously (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). Therefore, the presence of positive affect is favorable in educative moments and life events that require creativity and broad and holistic thinking, whereas negative affect is favorable during events that require critical and analytical thinking. Negative emotions are already generated by most educational environments; however, these environments do not yet generate positive affect. Having the whole range of emotions available and being able to activate these emotions when dealing with different problems and decisions is an art that can be learned.

Beyond the strictly academic benefits of happiness, well-being contributes significantly to other positive consequences of life. Research has shown that:

- ✓ People with greater life satisfaction enjoy better physical health, higher professional achievement, better social relationships, and greater economic contributions to society (Howell, Kern & Lyubomirsky, 2007; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005).
- ✓ Optimists have better physical health, including faster recovery after surgery, less frequent illness, lower risk of mortality, and lower incidence of consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs (Fry & Debats, 2009; Shen, McCreary, & Myers, 2004).
- ✓ People with more positive emotions show better social relationships and healthier behaviors (Howell et al., 2007; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000).
- ✓ People who feel more gratitude experience fewer somatic symptoms (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).
- ✓ Positive affect reduces prejudice toward members of other racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005).

To date, positive psychology has focused mainly on adults, and few studies have investigated the well-being of young people. However, some studies on adolescents have found that:

- ✓ Self-esteem and positive emotions produce positive effects on physical health in adolescents and children (Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012).
- ✓ Keeping socioeconomic levels, grades and other life factors constant, happy teenagers earn substantially more money than less happy teenagers 15 years later in life (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas & Sandvik, 2002).
- ✓ Significant positive relationships with adult figures protect adolescents against negative consequences such as depression, gang membership, juvenile delinquency, sexual risk behavior, and substance abuse (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).
- ✓ The most persistent adolescents show healthier behaviors, better educational performance, greater success in the workplace years later, stronger marriages, better health in the present (fewer injuries and hospitalizations), and fewer

health problems 25 years later (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Kern & Friedman, 2008; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi & Goldberg, 2007).

Positive education not only postulates that the tools for well-being must be taught, but it is also based on the empirical grounds that well-being *can* be taught.

A large number of studies have shown that well-being depends partly on genetic factors and partly on skills that can be taught and learned throughout life (Seligman, 2002). Beyond what the genetic lottery gives each individual, there is evidence that positive education increases well-being and improves the behavior of students, increases their participation in the classroom, teaches them the tools to achieve objectives that most parents value, and also improves academic performance (Seligman et al., 2009).

### POSITIVE INTERVENTION IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

There are several studies that show the impact of interventions of positive education. The main intervention is the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), developed at the University of Pennsylvania. Its curriculum and syllabus teach students various skills for a fulfilled life, such as optimism, creativity, relaxation, decision making, assertiveness, problem solving and communication. In the past two decades, more than 20 studies involving over 2,000 students have evaluated the impact of the PRP compared with a control group (Seligman, et al., 2009). The results show that:

1. The PRP reduces and prevents symptoms of depression, desperation, and anxiety (Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008).
2. It works equally effectively for young people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008).
3. It is more effective when there is adequate training of leaders and teachers, and constant monitoring of the progress of the group (Gillham, Brunwasser, & Freres, 2007).
4. It reduces behavioral problems (Seligman, et al., 2009).

A second intervention of positive education that has less empirical evidence than the PRP, but has some significant results, is the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum (SHPPC). The objective of the curriculum is to enable students to identify their character strengths and encourage them to use these more in their daily activities, both inside and outside the classroom. The character strengths are identified using the Values in Action (VIA) questionnaire, an inventory of human attributes that Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest have been valued by most cultures, if not all of them, through different periods. Examples of character strengths include creativity, perseverance, love, justice, and self-control. The SHPPC shows evidence of increasing the social skills of students, as well as increasing their participation in and enjoying attending school (Seligman et al., 2009).



## MEDITATION, MINDFULNESS, AND ALTRUISM

Meditation is a practice that has its origins in Buddhist and Hindu cultures and has shown its benefits through the millennia, together with mindfulness and altruism generated by the practice of meditation. Meditation is a firmly established practice and it can indisputably be taught and learnt, inside and outside the school context. There are educational institutions that have included meditation in their formal curriculum, and there are also increasing numbers of non-academic institutions that offer meditation classes of all types (see examples in the next section of this chapter).

Many studies over the past two decades have scientifically established the relationship between meditation, altruism, mindfulness, and well-being (Myers, 2000; Diener & Seligman, 2004). For example, the studies by Martin Seligman indicate that the joy of performing an act of selfless kindness produces deep satisfaction (Seligman, 2002). In this study, a first group of students were given a sum of money and asked to go out and have fun for a few days while a second group were told to use the money to help those in need (the elderly, the sick, etc.), and all of the students were asked to write a report a few days later. The study showed that the satisfaction caused by a pleasant activity, such as going out with friends, watching a movie, or enjoying a dessert was much smaller and lasted less time than the well-being caused by performing acts of kindness. On a day when they carried out a kind and spontaneous act, the students reported that they had a better day, they were kinder to others, more appreciated by the people around them, and better friends and partners.

Collaborative research between neuroscientists and Buddhist meditators has resulted in numerous publications that have established –with scientific credibility– the link between meditation and its effects on emotional balance and other components of psychological well-being. In the words of American neuroscientist Richard Davidson, “the research on meditation shows that the brain is malleable and can be physically modified in a way that few people could imagine” (Kaufman, 2005). For example, when meditating on kindness and compassion (Lutz et. al., 2004), the most experienced meditators showed a large increase in high frequency brain activity (gamma waves) in brain areas related to positive emotions and empathy.

Barbara Fredrickson has shown the positive effects of learning to generate positive emotions through meditation. She worked with 140 volunteers with no previous experience of meditation and randomly assigned 70 of them to the practice of meditation, thirty minutes a day for seven weeks. The results were compared with the other 70 subjects who did not practice any type of meditation. The result was robust and impressive. In her words, “when people with no experience of meditation learn to calm and quiet their mind and expand their capacity for love and

kindness, there is a transformation from within the individual out. They [those who meditated] experienced more love, more commitment, more serenity, more joy, more fun –more of all of the positive emotions that were measured. And although usually meditated alone, they experienced the heights of their positive emotions when interacting with others. Their lives described an upwards spiral” (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Further experiments have confirmed that the mechanisms underlying these effects are related to neurological and physiological connections that affect individuals’ brains and other parts of the body (Kok & Fredrickson, 2010).

The scientific literature indicates that selfish people are more focused on enjoying hedonic pleasure than cultivating comprehensive psychological well-being and, therefore, they only enjoy a transitory and short-lived well-being. On the other hand, people who reduce their selfish tendencies enjoy a life of greater satisfaction, peace, and serenity (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011).

## POSITIVE EDUCATION IN ACTION

Fortunately, positive education is being implemented in more and more places, including individual classrooms, whole schools, non-formal education forums, and education systems on a national level. It is crucial to understand that, in order to reap and enjoy the maximum benefits of the multiple interventions that exist, each intervention must be adapted to the context in which it is applied. The intervention designs are malleable, and the multiple interventions must be adapted to the cultural, social, and economic differences for maximum impact.

The tools for generating individual and community well-being have been passed from generation to generation for millennia. For example, some of the earliest written records of meditation come from the Hindu traditions around 1500 BC (Everly & Lating, 2002). Since then, meditation and a variety of other practices, which have now been scientifically proven to be effective, have been taught in monasteries, schools, health and welfare centers, prisons, and other types of organizations and institutions.

Positive education (using the definition of the intersection of education and positive psychology) was formally founded by Martin Seligman (also the father of positive psychology), when he began to investigate the impact of different interventions at the individual classroom level in the United States. Once there was enough evidence regarding which interventions were effective and which were not, the first schools to implement this group of interventions (Penn Resilience Program, or PRP) at the level of the entire institution were two schools in Australia: Geelong Grammar School and Saint Peter’s College (Adelaide). Since then, schools in several countries have been implementing all kinds of positive interventions and infusing their curricula with positive psychology. These countries include (for now) the United



States, Australia, India, Nepal, Canada, Mexico, the UK, Holland, China and Bhutan (Adler et al., 2013).

The only country that has incorporated positive education at the national level is the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Since 1972, this country has used gross national happiness (GNH) instead of gross domestic product (GDP) as its index of national progress. This index is the guide for the institutional structure and public policy in Bhutan. This alternate philosophy of well-being and national progress is also permeating the education sector. The motto of the Ministry of Education of Bhutan is "Educating for GNH". Of all of the students in the country, 95% attend public schools, and all of these schools have adopted a complementary curriculum to the traditional academic curriculum, which includes tools for well-being, such as meditation, resilience, effective communication, decision making, compassion and empathy, critical and creative thinking, and self-knowledge. Just as students take classes in traditional subjects like math, literature, and science, they also take classes in these tools and skills for living a full life.

Bhutan is a microcosm of what it means to build an educational system with an empirically informed (and philosophically and morally noble) answer to the question: educating for what? Education is a central pillar of human development and the social and moral fiber of our communities. If we want a society that empowers the individual to have as productive and fulfilling a life as possible within healthy and happy communities, then positive education provides an empirically grounded path to achieving that worthy goal.

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