

Positive Psychology in the Geography Classroom

Paper presented at AGTA Conference, Rotorua, NZ, January 2015

by Robert Ritchie (Head of Humanities, The Southport School)

In the new millennium, increasing research attention has been paid to the field of 'positive psychology'. This branch of psychology aims to understand factors which lead to optimal human functioning, or what Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania calls in his latest book, 'flourishing' (Seligman, 2011). Unlike traditional psychology which focuses on mental illness and fixing people's problems, positive psychology focuses on equipping people with the tools to achieve their potential and thrive.

The author's interest in the field of positive psychology stems from his involvement in the Research and Implementation Group (RIG) which, over the last three years, has led the design and implementation of a whole community Well-being Strategy at The Southport School (TSS) where he currently teaches. TSS is an Anglican boys' boarding and day-school on the Gold Coast. Opened in 1901, it is one of the Greater Public Schools (GPS) of south-east Queensland, a Round Square School, and a member of the International Boys' Schools Coalition. At this school, the author is the Head of Humanities and Senior Geography teacher, and shares the role of Senior School Wellbeing Leader.

For educationalists concerned with the development of the 'whole person', the field of positive psychology offers an expanding number of useful concepts and a common language for teachers and students, as well as powerful insights into whole-school processes and classroom practices that underpin productive teacher-student relations and optimal student learning.

This paper aims to introduce readers to the concepts and theories contributed by key researchers in positive psychology, and to discuss the implications of these understandings for improving outcomes for students, especially through the vehicle of the Geography classroom.

SIX KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

1. An individual experiences well-being to the extent that five elements are present.

Seligman (2011) built on his earlier work on 'authentic happiness' to identify five elements of well-being, for which he derived the acronym, PERMA, in which R is for Relationships; E for Engagement; M for Meaning and Purpose; A for Accomplishment; and P for Positive Emotion.

In his book, 'Flourish', Seligman dropped the word 'happiness' in favour of 'well-being'. Well-being, he argues, is a construct (like 'weather' or 'freedom') which must be measured, not just by one measure, but by many. At TSS, the order of the elements has been switched to REMAP, to emphasise the importance of Relationships for learning, and to promote the idea of reframing one's mind to a new way of thinking.

For teachers as well as students, it is important to reflect upon each of the five elements of well-being in their lives. For example, 'M' requires teachers to find meaning in their work. When that meaning or purpose aligns with the vision of the school and the strategic directions the heads of the school are taking, then individual teachers can experience greatest sense of well-being. Thus, it is important for leaders implementing change in a school to explain their vision, so staff can 'buy-in' and align personal purposes with organisational purposes. 'Team TSS' is a term frequently heard in our school.

2. Successful people share common habits, which can be practised by everyone.

(a) Habits of Mind

Art Costa and Bena Kallick developed 16 'Habits of Mind' which they believed underpinned the success of all high-performing people. According to Aristotle, excellence is what we repeatedly do. Thus, excellence is a habit, and like any habit argue Costa & Kallick, can be learned with practice.

At the website <http://habitsofmind.org/course/an-introduction-to-habits-of-mind/>, one can access a free introductory course titled, 'Secrets of Succeeding with Habits of Mind'.

At TSS, a large poster of the Habits of Mind adorns every classroom, and each week, a prefect speaks on one of these at the School Assembly. The language is now embedded across the school, and many Humanities Faculty test questions and research tasks in Junior History in particular, ask students to identify and provide evidence of three or four Habits of Mind behind the accomplishment of various historical figures, including Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Columbus, and Martin Luther King.

(b) Habits of Well-Being

Seligman's PERMA framework is best unpacked for students into a number of things they can DO in order to increase their well-being. At TSS, we derived three or four behaviours for each, and called these the 'Habits of Well-Being'. The term, 'habits', was chosen because of the earlier success in embedding the 'Habits of Mind' across the school. Now, every classroom also has a poster on the Habits of Well-Being.

(c) Complaint-Free World

Another interesting habit-related tool which being introduced into our school is Will Bowen's program, 'A Complaint-Free World'. His mission is to train people to give up complaining by swapping a purple wristband from one wrist to the other whenever they complain, until they can go 42 days without complaining. More information and the bracelets can be gained online at <http://www.acomplaintfreeworld.org/>

3. People work best and experience greatest well-being when they use their strengths.

Unlike the traditional view that students should spend the most time on those things at which they are weakest, current thinking is that success and well-being are more likely if one focusses on one's strengths and manages one's weaknesses.

When one is using a strength and becomes totally immersed in that activity, one is said to be experiencing 'flow', a term coined by Mikail Csikszentmihalyi (1992). Flow occurs when engaged in an activity which is enjoyably challenging.

There are several readily-accessible tools by which teachers can help students identify their strengths, and indeed, identify their own strengths.

(a) Multiple Intelligences

In the past, we asked, "How intelligent are you?". Now, thanks to the research by Howard Gardner, we ask, "How are you intelligent?", recognising there are multiple intelligences. Students' well-being is enhanced when they appreciate that they are intelligent in particular ways, and spend more time using the intelligences in which they are strongest.

Blackline masters to deliver a test to your students to help them identify their intelligences can be printed free from <http://www.lauracandler.com/free/misurvey>

At TSS, all Year 7 and 8 students are surveyed to help them identify how they are intelligent.

(b) Signature Strengths

Peterson & Seligman's 'Values in Action (VIA) Project' (2004) led to a useful survey tool which identifies an individual's 'signature strengths' from a list of 24 character strengths. This survey, for which there is an adult version (the VIA Survey) and a children's version (VIA Youth Survey for ages 10-17), can be taken for free via the web. Register first at <http://www.viacharacter.org/Survey/Account/Register>

Seligman (2011, p. 84) contends that, "...you can get more satisfaction out of life if you identify which of these character strengths you have in abundance and then use them as much as possible in school, in hobbies, and with friends and family."

At TSS, all Year 9 to 12 students have completed this survey.

(c) *Realise2 Strengths*

One of Peterson's students, Alex Linley, has since developed an even more powerful tool, *Realise2*. This self-report survey is based on 60 strengths, which are assessed on three dimensions – what one is good at, how often one uses a particular strength, and the extent to which one is energised by using a strength. The dimension of 'energy' makes this tool a very useful one, as it is not sufficient for well-being to just do what you are good at; it must also energise you. This survey identifies realised strengths which are being overplayed and are hence currently draining, and importantly, unrealised strengths, which you are good at and energised by, but which you are currently under-using. These offer a pathway to increased well-being. In Australia, the Langley Group conduct training to accredit Realise2 practitioners on behalf of CAPP. Go to

http://www.langleygroup.com.au/images/Realise2_Practitioner_Acceditation.pdf

For further explanation of the Realise2 Model, check out

<http://www.cappeu.com/Realise2/TheRealise24MModel.aspx>

This tool might be too expensive for schools to use across their student body, but may choose to use it for selected staff. TSS has two accredited practitioners, and will be testing staff who request it in 2015. In particular, we are encouraging staff to undertake this survey to assist them in their performance appraisal process. Teachers are being encouraged to develop goals that can make use of their unrealised strengths, rest their over-played realised strengths, and make greater use of their energising realised strengths.

(d) *Myers-Briggs Personality Test*

This test is widely used in the corporate world to help teams to operate more effectively, and is misused as a recruitment tool. It classifies people on four dimensions, using a self-reported questionnaire to determine whether one prefers Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I), Sensing (S) or Intuition (N), Thinking (T) or Feeling (F), and Judging (J) or Perceiving (P).

The Myers and Briggs Foundation website is at <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>

For schools, the Myers-Briggs Test provides insights into different learning styles. Teachers can benefit from knowing more about who is sitting in front of them, for example, by altering their teaching style, and students can benefit by a greater appreciation of differences in how people prefer to learn and how they process information. Individual students can also maximise their learning by doing more of what works for them.

At TSS, four teachers have been trained as Myers-Briggs practitioners, and in 2014, purchased and delivered the test on a class by class basis across all Year 10 -12 classes. The data was collated so that each teacher was given a profile, not only of each student, but of each class they were teaching with suggestions on teaching strategies most appropriate for each particular class.

Although not as robust as the paid test, a free test based on the Myers-Briggs classification is available at <http://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>.

4. Well-being through Engagement requires the basic needs for self-motivation to be met.

(a) Self-Determination Theory

A significant theory embraced by positive psychologists is Self-Determination Theory, derived by Deci and Ryan (1985). This theory contends that, for people to be intrinsically motivated to achieve their goals, three basic needs must be met:

- (a) Competence – they have the capacity to master their environment eg do set tasks in class.
- (b) Autonomy – they have some power to choose what they will do, or the way it is done.
- (c) Relatedness – they have some mutually supportive interpersonal relationships.

(b) Unrealised potential of Autonomy

More recently, Daniel Pink (the former speech writer of Al Gore of 'An Inconvenient Truth' fame), has emerged to challenge traditional thinking in American corporations which favours extrinsic rewards such as a pay-rise to motivate staff. Pink argues that 'autonomy' is the major motivator. Check him out on YouTube – just type 'Daniel Pink' and 'Motivation'. Essentially, Pink's thesis is that people are most motivated when doing something rewarding rather than rewarded.

5. Positive emotion can be cultivated to increase well-being

(a) Broaden-and-Build Theory

To the field of positive psychology, Barbara Fredrickson (author of 'Positivity' in 2009), contributed 'Broaden-and-Build Theory'. This theory proposed that positive feelings were more than fleeting feel-good moments. Frederickson argued that the experience of positive emotions (eg joy, love, hope) puts people in a ready state to try new things, derive more creative solutions, or meet new people. Positive emotions *broaden* our awareness, and the resulting openness to new experiences *builds* our social and personal resources. For example, a joyful experience may lead a person to try a new activity, where she makes new friends, with whom more positive experiences might be had, or she gains renewed confidence to try more new things. Similarly, having fun in a classroom with a teacher may open up new lines of communication for some students, and a greater openness to learning in the next lesson.

(b) Losada Ratio

Fredrickson and Losada (2005) discovered the magic ratio of 3:1 or higher (known as the Losada Ratio) necessary for well-being. That is, three positive emotional experiences for every negative one. This has implications in our classrooms, for the well-being of our students and for our own well-being. Importantly, too, it recognises that there is a place for constructive negative feedback, provided it is balanced with positive emotions.

(c) Mindfulness

Ellen Langer (1989) contributed the view that well-being stemmed from a particular way of going through life, with attention and openness she called 'mindfulness', in contrast to moving through life mindlessly on automatic pilot. Being fully present and aware during our daily activities opens us up to hear alternative views, experience new things, and savour the moment. Mindfulness allows one to appreciate the here and now, rather than waiting for something important to happen in the future. Note mindfulness is used in a different sense here to that of Buddhism, which teaches mindfulness through meditation that involves non-attachment to thoughts, images and sensations.

(d) Savouring

Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff (2007) identified savouring as a form of mindfulness, which might be experienced in any of four ways:

- (a) Basking (in praise or congratulations)
- (b) Marvelling (getting lost in the wonder of the moment)
- (c) Luxuriating (indulging in a pleasant sensation)
- (d) Thanksgiving (expressing gratitude).

(e) Expressing Gratitude

In her 2008 book, *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, reported the findings of her vast research on the topic of long-term personal happiness, including the finding that the regular expression of gratitude is a significant contributor to personal well-being.

In positive schools, lessons may begin or end with the teacher asking, ‘Tell me three good things that happened today’, to build students’ positive emotion.

(f) Learned Optimism

Martin Seligman, in his book, ‘Learned Optimism’, introduced the concept of ‘explanatory style’, meaning how a person explains events that occur in their lives. He distinguished between an optimistic and a pessimistic explanatory style, noting that the optimists explained good things as the result of their own capacities and pessimists dismissed them as luck. Conversely, the pessimists explained bad things as their fault, while optimists tended to blame external factors. Seligman identified three dimensions – the three P’s of permanence, pervasiveness and personal– related to explanatory style. Any bad thing that the pessimist experienced was perceived as permanent (‘It will never get better’), all-pervading (‘My life is ruined’), and personal (‘It’s all my fault’).

He suggested that optimism could be taught and learned, through practising the ‘A-B-C-D-E’ model of thinking. A is the adverse event; B is the belief you form; C are the anticipated consequences of that belief; D is to dispute your negative thinking (asking yourself, is it really permanent? Is it really affecting all parts of your life? Is it really your fault?); and E is the energising that you experience by disputing your thinking and reframing the adversity.

6. Well-being through Accomplishment requires effort, grit and a growth mindset

(a) Effort

Angela Duckworth is credited with the simple formula that “Achievement = Skill X Effort”. This sends a powerful message for all students about how the personal habits of self-discipline, determination and persistence can yield improved results. As Seligman (2011, p. 125) explains: “The real leverage you have for more achievement is more effort... how much time you devote to a task comes from the exercise of conscious choice.”

Angela Duckworth and colleagues (2007) further contributed the concept of ‘grit’, a function of persistence and passion. In studies of military cadets and spelling-bee contestants, she found ‘grit’ was a better predictor of academic performance than IQ or SAT scores.

(b) Growth mindset

Carol Dweck (2006) distinguishes between a ‘fixed mindset’ and a ‘growth mindset’. The first is cemented by praise for a skill or ability, but can lead some to protect their image by not risking failure on new or difficult tasks. The latter is built by praising effort and engagement, and encourages students to stay humble and open to new learning. Those with a growth mindset are more likely to persist with tasks they find difficult, since they are open to new challenges and do not perceive these to threaten their self-image or reputation.

Students with a fixed mindset can exhibit learned helplessness. For example, the belief that “I’m no good at Maths” can be self-reinforcing through the subsequent lack of effort in class and the failure to do homework. As well, students who consider themselves good at Maths, but who possess a fixed mindset, might shrink into their protective shell when faced with a problem they cannot immediately solve. Beware of this in your gifted and talented students. Always praise effort, not ability.

Implications for the Geography Classroom

As a discipline, Geography deals with many topics which can leave students feeling pessimistic about the future, and powerless to solve global problems. Topics range from development issues such as famine, pandemic diseases, desertification and refugees, to environmental issues such as global warming, water pollution, deforestation, species extinction, overfishing and soil erosion, and to urban issues such as crime, traffic congestion, air pollution, poverty, and social alienation. All could be read as bad news! Hence, it is even more important for the Geography teacher to embed positive psychology in their classroom.

The 'positive classroom' has the following characteristics:

1. *It is a place of Relational Learning.*

The positive classroom is a place in which students feel a sense of belonging, care and mutual respect.

Teachers can build Belonging by using the word 'we' instead of 'I'; being genuinely interested in students' whole lives; creating a safe place for discussion; and standing up against incidents of bullying, sexism, racism and homophobia.

It is wise for teachers to remember the student voice which says: "I don't care what you know until I know that you care."

From their 2008-2009 study across schools in six countries, commissioned by the International Boys' Schools Coalition (www.theisbc.org), Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley reported five strategies teachers used to build relationships with boys:

- Being alert to and reaching out to meet individual students' needs
 - Acknowledging and expressing interest in boys' special interests and talents
 - Disclosing, where appropriate, teachers' own interests and experiences
 - Accommodating, within practical limits, a measure of opposition
 - Admitting fault when appropriate, revealing vulnerability.
- (Reichert & Hawley, 2014, p. 171).

2. *It is a place of Choice.*

Positive psychology recognises the importance of a degree of autonomy in motivation. In the positive classroom, students are able to exercise a degree of choice over, for example, the topics taught, how they take notes, the assessment topic, the mode of presentation of research, and the tasks they work on in some lessons.

Importantly, too, teachers foster the belief that students have choices in their lives about their tertiary options, where they will live and the type of work they will do.

3. *It is a place of Engagement.*

Applying understandings from Self-Determination Theory, derived by Deci and Ryan (1985), the teacher in the positive classroom ensures students' basic needs for Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness are met every lesson.

When lessons are not working, the teacher might be wise to reflect upon which of these needs is missing, and try to add that in future. This author's experience over many years in

the classroom is that students' misbehaviour is generally an attempt to have their unmet needs met. Simply, each lesson, students experience Competence when they achieve success in some form; they experience Autonomy when they feel they are given some choices (eg homework to be done over the next week, rather than that night); and they experience Relatedness when they feel a sense of belonging, that the teacher is on their side, that they have supportive friends in the classroom, that the teacher cares about their progress and goals, and that they have some fun together as a group.

Efforts by teachers to build relationships with students outside the classroom (eg through involvement in sporting teams or cultural activities) pays dividends in the classroom.

4. It is a place where productive habits are nurtured

Teachers in positive classrooms display the Habits of Mind and Habits of Well-Being, and constantly draw students' attention to them. They point out the links between these habits and successes experienced by students.

Of the Habits of Mind, in particular, the habit of perseverance is worthy of consistent emphasis, while the Geography teacher might also emphasise the habit of seeing wonder and awe in nature and in human endeavour. In particular, Geography excursions provide students opportunities to savour.

5. It is a place where individual strengths and differences are valued

The positive classroom displays students' results in tests where no one type is better than another, helping students to value everyone and appreciate differences.

At TSS, classrooms show students' Myers-Briggs profiles and Multiple Intelligences strengths, packaged as 'preferred learning styles'.

6. It is a place where effort is praised

From Angela Duckworth's research, the positive classroom rewards efforts, not ability. Praise students who do a good assignment or perform well on a test for their diligent effort, their conscientious approach to homework, or the many hours they spent on the drafting process. Show everyone by doing so that, if they apply more effort, improved performance may follow for them too. Effort in collecting data and in taking photographs on their Geography field work is one area you can praise that probably translates into a Report of a high standard.

7. *It is a place of Mindfulness*

Mindfulness encourages us to be in the moment, fully present. When student concentration is lagging, mindfulness exercises relax bodies, and ask students to temporarily put the worries of the day, of the past week, or of the coming week away for just a short while, and give their attention wholly to the present. At the start of a lesson where students seem unengaged (for example, on a hot day after lunch), ask them to close their eyes, concentrate on their breathing, and listen to your words about being mindful.

8. *It is a place of Hope and Optimism*

The positive classroom is a place where students are exposed to the progress being made by governments, companies and individuals in addressing the challenges of the world; and are encouraged to be excited about the opportunities that exist for them to contribute to the solution of global issues. The history of human endeavour and the success of technological advances in addressing past challenges, and the unconquerable spirit of human beings, is emphasised. (For example, check Dr Brilliant's TED Talk about ridding the world of smallpox).

The geography teacher can engender hope in students by focussing on progress that is being made in so many fields, for example, towards the Millennium Development Goals, towards sustainable agriculture, urban planning, lifting people out of poverty, improvements in health and education, natural hazard management, international philanthropy, public transport, water management, and parasitic disease control.

Because of the wide scope of topics covered in a Geography course, students can hope to find a career here that will help give their lives meaning and purpose, another pre-requisite for well-being according to Seligman's PERMA Model.

Conclusion

Positive psychology is a rich source of concepts and theories which can be of great benefit to your students. Online resources are plentiful. Each of the researchers mentioned feature online, through TED Talks or on YouTube, and their key understandings can be readily conveyed to fellow teachers and students through these visual means.

In the reference list below are a number of books you might encourage your school to purchase.

I further encourage you to develop in your school a Well-Being Strategy, building on the many things that your school, no doubt, is already doing to nurture the well-being of its

community. If your school leaders would like to consult with me further on this process, please ask them to contact me on my email address, robert.ritchie@tss.gld.edu.au. On behalf of the Headmaster of The Southport School, I extend an invitation for you to visit our school and see firsthand what we are doing to build our 'positive school'.

Finally, I want to reinforce for you that a large part of student well-being begins with strong relationships with teachers, and I encourage you to adopt the concepts from positive psychology to enrich your Geography classroom. Always remember that your classroom is the vehicle you have to do the good work that is your mission as a teacher of tomorrow's leaders, parents, spouses, voters, volunteers and decision-makers.

References:

- Boniwell, I., & Ryan, L. (2012). *Personal well-being lessons for secondary schools: Positive psychology in action for 11 to 14 year olds*. Maidenhead (UK): Open University Press.
- Boniwell, I. (2012). *Positive Psychology in a nutshell: The science of happiness*. Third edition. Maidenhead (UK): Open University Press.
- Bowen, W. (2013). *A complaint-free world*. New York (NY): Three Rivers Press.
- Bryant, F., & Verhoff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experiences*. Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Compton, W.C., & Hoffman, E. (2013). *Positive Psychology: The science of happiness and flourishing*. Second edition. Wadsworth (CA): Cengage Learning.
- Costa, A.L., & Kallick, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Learning and leading with Habits of Mind: 16 essential characteristics for success*. Alexandria (VA): ASCD.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1992). *Flow: The psychology of happiness*. London (UK): Rider.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985) *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour*. New York (NY): Plenum.
- Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M., & Kelly, D. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101.
- Dweck, C. (2006). *The psychology of success*. New York (NY): Random House.
- Fredrickson, B.L., & Losada, M.F. (2005). Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *American Psychologist*, 60(7), 678-686.
- Fredrickson, B. (2009). *Positivity*. New York (NY): Crown.

Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York (NY): Basic Books.

Langer, E.J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Reading (MA): Perseus.

Linley, P.A., & Harrington, S. (2006). Playing to your strengths. *The Psychologist*, 19, 86-89.

Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness*. London: Sphere.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington (DC, USA): American Psychological Association.

Reichert, M., & Hawley, R. (2014). *I can learn from you: Boys as relational learners*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard Education Press.

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2006). *Learned optimism*. New York: Vintage Books

Seligman, M.E.P. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and well-being and how to achieve them*. New York: Free Press.