

Chapter 1

Surveying the Landscape of Positive Psychology for Children and Adolescents

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1.1 Introduction

As we write, it has been almost 14 years since Martin Seligman inaugurated the emergence of positive psychology as a discipline, with his Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association. Despite the intervening decade and more, we are surprised at how little attention – in relative terms at least – has been dedicated to positive psychology theory, research, and applications as they pertain to children and adolescents. Looking back, this is perhaps reflective of positive psychology's *de facto* roots in social and clinical psychology, and its limited foundations in developmental and educational psychology, which are of course the disciplines where we might expect to find the most work in relation to children and adolescents.

While the first edition of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder and Lopez 2002), contained just three chapters on children and adolescents (Masten and Reed 2002; Roberts et al. 2002; Schulman 2002), it is notable that the second edition of this volume (Snyder and Lopez 2009), contained five chapters addressing the question of resilience in child development (Masten et al. 2009), the prevention of disorder and promotion of well-being through childhood development (Brown Kirschman et al. 2009), positive youth development (Lerner 2009; see also Chap. 15 by Rusk et al., this volume), family-centered positive psychology (Sheridan and Burt 2009), and positive schools (Huebner et al. 2009).

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Clearly, then, there is an increasing shift towards greater attention being paid to positive psychology as it relates to children and adolescents. Broadly, this focus can be seen across three distinct but related areas: teaching, schools, and education; subjective experience (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction) and strengths; and intervention for positive development, whether at the individual, therapeutic, group, or policy level. In this introductory chapter, we will provide a brief synopsis of research and theory across each of these three domains, before moving on to show how the current volume builds on and extends this body of knowledge.

1.2 Positive Psychology in Teaching, Schools, and Education

The role of positive psychology in education started to become better recognized in the school literature, driven in part by the publication of positive psychology special issues of *School Psychology Quarterly* (2003) and *Psychology in the Schools* (2004). The role of positive psychology in education is primarily focused on encouraging and rewarding the multitude of talents and strengths a child has, by presenting opportunities for displays of these talents and strength each day, rather than for penalizing them for their deficits (Chafouleas and Bray 2004; Clonan et al. 2004; Huebner and Gilman 2003).

Theory and research in the positive psychology of education extends to all aspects of the educational experience and curriculum. For example, Clonan et al. (2004) outlined a vision of the positive psychology school, concentrating on areas of prevention (to reduce stress), consultation (across the curriculum and different service providers), and competency development (in academic skills and positive peer experience and interaction). However, the challenge for positive psychology is to establish what the key components of positive psychology “looks like” within a school, how the teaching and natural environment can be used to capitalize on positive psychological principles, and how a school can maintain and plan for sustained change (Clonan et al. 2004).

The focus of positive psychology applied to education has also been extended to consideration of the role of effective upward social comparisons in learning, growth, and development (Cohn 2004); teaching students to make wise judgments (Reznitskaya and Sternberg 2004), and the effective teaching of positive psychology as a subject in its own right (Baylis 2004; Fineburg 2004).

Furthermore, driven in part by the positive psychology movement, attention has also focused on what we might do to make schools happy places (Layard 2005; Martin 2005; Noddings 2003). This increasing focus on children and adolescents can be traced through the publication of the magnum opus of the field for work focused on positive psychology in schools, the *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (Gilman et al. 2009).

1.2.1 Applying Strengths in School and College

Within education, there have been specific attempts to apply and celebrate strengths in the classroom, with college students, with secondary students, and with younger

children (Liesveld and Miller 2005). The Gallup Organization has developed and delivered the *StrengthsQuest* educational program (Clifton and Anderson 2002) across a variety of higher education colleges and universities. The program has been extended to secondary students (Anderson 2005), and preliminary reports from teachers using the program have been positive (e.g., Austin 2006; Henderson 2005).

Within the UK, a project has been run across a group of primary schools (ages 5 through 11 years), under the title of *Celebrating Strengths* (Fox Eades 2008). This project has linked strengths to specific festivals and events throughout the school calendar, and has included activities such as the strengths-based classroom (recognizing the strengths of all class members), victory logs (record books noting students' achievements), and celebrations of "what went well".

Again in the UK, in a quasi-experimental treatment-control study with a total of 319 adolescents aged 12–14 years, C. Proctor et al. (2011) showed that *Strengths Gym*, a series of character-strengths development interventions for adolescents, led to increased life satisfaction over a 6-month time period with corresponding increases not observed in a no-intervention comparison group (who were students at the same schools and in the same years, but not receiving the intervention).

Strengths Gym is a series of activities constructed around the 24 character strengths described by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The aim of the Strengths Gym program is to encourage students to build their strengths, learn new strengths, and to recognize strengths in others. The included activities for students are called Strengths Builders and Strengths Challenges. For each lesson, there is a definition of the character strength being focused on, two Strengths Builders exercises for students to choose from, and a Strengths Challenge as follow-up activity.

1.3 Subjective Experience and Strengths in Children and Adolescents

Just as positive psychology generally has helped increasing attention be paid to the questions of happiness and well-being, the same is also true for positive psychology research as it relates to children and adolescents. For example, C. L. Proctor et al. (2009) reviewed the literature on adolescent life satisfaction and concluded that, in general, research indicates that youths who report high levels of life satisfaction have better social and interpersonal relationships, engage in healthier behaviors, exhibit less antisocial and violent behavior, and develop fewer externalizing problems following stressful events than those with low life satisfaction. Building on this, C. Proctor et al. (2010) explored the benefits of very high levels of life satisfaction in youth and found that youths displaying very high levels of life satisfaction benefit from increased adaptive psychosocial functioning, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social relationships, academic success, and decreased behavior problems (see also Gilman and Huebner 2006; Suldo and Huebner 2006). Further, life satisfaction has been found to be positively associated with multiple school related variables, including school satisfaction, teacher support, and perceived academic achievement, competence, and self-efficacy (see Suldo et al. 2006 for a

review). Other notable work on positive subjective experiences in children and adolescents has been conducted by Froh et al. (2010) who have demonstrated that youths high in engaged living (social integration and absorption; i.e., having a passion to help others and be completely immersed in activity) are more grateful, hopeful, happier, prosocial, and report elevated life satisfaction, positive affect, self-esteem, school experience, and grade point average, as well as, tend to be less depressed, envious, antisocial, and delinquent.

Similarly, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) have long stressed the importance of encouraging adolescent participation in activities that facilitate “flow” – a mental state in which the challenge of an activity matches skill, such that neither anxiety or boredom occur. The flow state is an innately positive experience, one which is linked to academic success, diminished delinquency, physical health, and satisfaction with life (see Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002).

In relation to character strengths in young children, Park and Peterson (2006a) showed that it was possible to assess character strengths in children as young as 3 years of age through using parental descriptors which were then subject to content analysis. Park and Peterson (2006a) examined the associations between character strengths and happiness in some 680 children (aged 3–9 years), showing that the strengths of love, zest, and hope were significantly associated with happiness.

For the assessment of strengths in adolescents, Park and Peterson (2006b) developed the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth, and more recently, Brazeau et al. (2012) developed the Strengths Assessment Inventory – Youth, which assesses 11 content scales (e.g., Strengths at Home), and 12 empirical scales (e.g., Commitment to Family Values).

1.4 Intervention for Positive Development

Early work in the positive psychology canon in relation to positive development was focused on the role of resilience in childhood (Yates and Masten 2004) and positive youth development (Larson et al. 2004), both of which were themes that subsequently featured in the second edition of the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder and Lopez 2009), as well as being the focus of a special issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology* (Emmons 2011).

Earlier positive intervention work had been conducted by the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) in Australia. The Positive Parenting Program is a family intervention program that is designed to prevent behavioral, emotional and developmental problems in children up to the age of 16. It aims to achieve this through promoting and developing the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents (Sanders 2003; Sanders et al. 2002).

Sanders et al. (2000) reported on the effectiveness of a 12-episode television series, *Families*, that was aimed at improving disruptive child behavior and family relationships. Each episode of *Families* lasted for approximately 20–30 min, and included a feature story about family issues, together with a segment of 5–7 min that presented parents with guidelines and instructions for using a range of parenting

strategies to address common child behavioral problems, to prevent problems from occurring, and to help teach children to learn new skills and master difficult tasks. These segments also presented the viewer with a modeled demonstration of the suggested strategies. The initial report, based on 56 parents of children aged 2–8 years, showed that the prevalence of disruptive behavior dropped from 43 to 14%, with the effects being maintained at a 6-month follow up.

1.5 The Plan for This Volume

Our aim in preparing this volume was to bring together the latest evidence, thinking, and insights from positive psychology as they apply to children and adolescents. In establishing the content, we were mindful of the imbalance in the publication of research findings, applications, and interventions among children and adolescents in comparison to adults and aimed to fill the current need for a volume that would benefit a wide range of professionals working with children and adolescents.

Our contributors were invited to contribute chapters within their area of expertise as it relates to research, applications, and interventions for children and adolescents, drawing from their explicit experiences and research. Contributors were further encouraged to share their broader perspectives on their invited topics. The contributors represent a broad range of individuals, including clinical and academic psychologists, researchers, teachers, therapists, and program leaders, to name a few, and provide a unique and varied look at the current landscape. The result is a volume that brings together the latest knowledge on positive psychology as it pertains for children and adolescents.

This volume was not edited with preconceived or rigidly defined elements in mind, but with openness and freedom of content. The result is a body of work that not only contains exemplary reviews of the current literature and provides unique and varied demonstrations of applied positive psychological theory, but also contains personal experiences and events of immense importance to understanding positive psychology among this population as it occurs in the real world context.

Although this volume has been written from a positive psychology perspective, the content is by no means restricted to academics and professionals of psychology alone. The topics covered are broad and are of benefit to a wide range of professionals, including educators, clinicians, psychologist, social workers, students, and many others working with children and adolescents.

1.6 The Content of This Volume

In Part I (*Strengths and Well-Being*), Carmel Proctor (Chap. 2) presents a review of the literature on character strengths and a brief discussion and introduction to character strengths interventions in education. This chapter introduces the importance of

good character as it pertains to positive youth development and well-being. Scott Huebner and colleagues (Chap. 3) address the assessment and promotion of perceived quality of life, or life satisfaction, among children and adolescents. A model for more comprehensive assessment of children's life satisfaction is presented along with research on key determinants of individual differences in life satisfaction among young people. These authors provide examples of interventions as they pertain to the empirically established determinants of life satisfaction and argue that more comprehensive assessments and targeted intervention programs are required across primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention contexts. Lisa Edwards and Jessica McClintock (Chap. 4) introduce us to hope and hope theory and its relationship to positive outcomes in youth. Theory, measurement, and research about hope among youth are reviewed and intervention programs developed for youth described along with direction for applications.

In Part II (*Interventions and Applications*) Andrew Howell and colleagues (Chap. 5) review research focused upon positive indicators of youth mental health. In this chapter, predictors of youth's scores on mental health dimensions of functioning and interventions aimed at boosting these scores are presented along with a discussion of the interplay between mental health and mental disorder dimensions of functioning in youth. Tayyab Rashid and colleagues (Chap. 6) address strengths-based assessment and the benefits of exploring character strengths by underscoring the shortcomings of a deficit model of assessment for children and adolescents. These authors present a model of assessing signature strengths and evaluate the impact on boosting life satisfaction, well-being, and social skills among young people. Nathaniel Lambert and Amanda Veldorale-Brogan (Chap. 7) conclude this section with their examination of gratitude and gratitude interventions focused research among children and adolescents.

In Part III (*Family, Friends, and Community*) Shannon Suldo and Sarah Fefer (Chap. 8) examine the links between parenting practices and youth well-being and well-being and parent-child relationships in the context of positive psychology. Aspects of the parent-child relationship and indicators of youth well-being are reviewed along with applications and interventions that promote positive outcomes for youth. Bradford Brown and Michael Braun (Chap. 9) review evidence of peers' contributions to healthy behavior and development and discuss implications for interventions and research. Colin Maginn and Seán Cameron (Chap. 10) present the Emotional Warmth Model of Professional Childcare. The Emotional Warmth Model seeks to address the problems experienced by looked-after children and draws on positive psychology to teach carers to find creative ways of helping children to utilize their strengths more effectively.

In Part IV (*Positive Education*) Ian Morris (Chap. 11) presents a case for well-being as the central aim of education and argues that schools must have an underpinning philosophy and practice of well-being to bring about the flourishing of both students and teachers. This topic is expanded further by Hans Henrik Knoop (Chap. 12) through his review of scientific evidence relating to positive education as an educational approach where individual strengths, well-being, and positive social relations are taught and used as the foundation for the pedagogy, with the aim of facilitating

the flourishing of every student. Lisa Green and Jacolyn Norrish (Chap. 13) continue this theme by considering how positive psychology and coaching psychology can compliment each other in order to create comprehensive and sustainable applied positive education programs for schools in their effort to support the development of well-being among students.

In Part V (*Positive Youth Development: Practice, Policy, and Law*) John Gibbs and colleagues (Chap. 14) discuss the EQUIP program, a group-based cognitive-behavioral intervention designed to facilitate sociomoral development and positive youth development for behaviorally at-risk or antisocial youth. Natalie Rusk and colleagues (Chap. 15) review organized youth programs that provide opportunities for adolescents to develop life and career skills. Their focus is on adolescents' development of skills for managing emotions and how program leaders facilitate youth's active learning process through emotion coaching and effective organized programs facilitate positive youth development. Roger Levesque (Chap. 16) concludes the volume by reviewing how the legal system could benefit from optimal policies for ensuring positive youth development. Using the laws in the United States as examples of limitations and possibilities, the chapter provides the groundwork for understanding the foundations of which laws, policies, and practices relating to adolescents must rest, and the many ways that social institutions have the legal power to influence the development of youth.

This volume offers valuable information to a wide range of professionals in diverse fields and students in the social and behavioral sciences. It promises to be a valuable resource in the development of the field as it applies to youth.

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