

The Positive Educational Practices Framework: Leadership Transforming Schools Through Optimism

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Introduction

The school leadership literature continually refers to the challenge that all school leaders face in initiating and sustaining change in their schools. Senge (1999) writes that 95% of change initiatives in organizations fail. The failures to sustain organisational change indicate the need for a different approach: *to have the courage to see freshly*.

This paper draws on the new field of positive psychology to provide a Positive Educational Practices (PEPS) Framework. Positive psychology was officially launched by Professor Martin Seligman in his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association. The focus of this new approach was to ask different questions and develop new practices for building and sustaining wellbeing. The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, conduct an audit of current practices, focus on what's going wrong, seek an explanation for what's not working and then find a solution. Positive psychology on the other hand transforms the question to 'what's working' and draws on available research that shows how to build positive and sustainable conditions that allow individuals, groups and organizations to thrive and flourish.

The Positive Educational Practices (PEPS) Framework provides an innovative and optimistic approach to whole school planning for schoolwide wellbeing. Positive Psychology, when applied to schools, focuses on the intentional cultivation of staff and student wellbeing and resilience through four basic goals:

1. The generation of positive emotions (eg satisfaction, pride, belonging, and enjoyment)
2. The development of mastery and competence through a skills-based approach
3. Engagement with school by working with strengths
4. The development of a sense of meaning and purpose

PEPs provides a positive, strengths-based framework for whole school and class practices that can energise, and empower staff and students in contrast to a deficit, problem-based focus that de-energises and disempowers. Effective school leaders, according to Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004):

- Define a clear vision for the direction their school should take
- Develop people and relationships and
- Redesign the organization of their school to align with their school vision.

The PEPS framework is offered as a useful organiser for this purpose by helping leaders to identify and implement school and class practices that develop people's positive emotions, skills and strengths and articulate a sense of meaning and purpose in what they do at school, whether the focus is on students or staff or the whole school community.

Using positive questions within a PEPS framework strengthens a leader's capacity to understand, and develop individual, group and school potential. PEPS facilitates positive conversations where people collaboratively create a new vision, name their idea and map out how it can come to fruition. As individuals work together to look deeper into what they value most in their school, relationships build. This experience (according to Cooperrider & Sekerka 2003) generates positive emotions, focuses attention on strengths and gives people a sense of meaning and purpose. These three factors form the foundations of the Positive Educational Practices that provide the framework for positive questions, positive practices and transformational change.

1. DEVELOPING POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive emotions are an important active ingredient in any recipe for wellbeing. Until the advent of Positive Psychology, empirical psychologists had little interest in positive emotions and attitudes. They focused more on how to manage negative emotions and attitudes (eg depression, anxiety and anger) rather than how to amplify positive emotions. However recent research highlights the role of positive emotions in broadening people's capacity to learn and building an organisation's capacity to thrive (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Positive emotions enhance people's capacity for optimistic thinking, problem solving and decision making and lead to more flexible, innovative and creative solutions (Isen 2001, 2003).

Positive emotions can also predict the success of an organization. Losada and Heaphy (2001) conducted a content analysis of team meetings in sixty organizations during their annual strategic planning. They measured the number of positive versus negative statements. The twenty flourishing companies made three positive statements to one negative statement and were rated highly in terms of positive emotions. In comparison, the twenty failing companies made a high number of negative statements and negative emotions. The importance of school leaders modelling positive statements, maintaining optimism and positive emotions is obvious. A school leader's positive emotions are contagious and predict the group or organization's performance (Goleman, 2000). Positive emotions also help people to be more resilient and recover more quickly after setbacks (Fredrickson & Tugade, 2004).

A focus on whole-school wellbeing draws leadership attention to strategies to build positive emotions and a positive school culture that contribute to higher productivity, improved problem solving and better learning. As Fullan (1997 p.226) has asserted:

If we dig deeper into the roles of emotion and hope in interpersonal relationships, we will gain a lasting understanding of how to deal with change more constructively

Specific leadership strategies for building positive emotions associated with a positive school 'spirit' or culture are outlined in McGrath and Noble (2003 p.78 -79).

Teachers and positive emotions

Asking teachers positive questions such as:

- What do you like best about teaching?,

- When are you most engaged in teaching?
- Can you tell me to a story about the class you most enjoy teaching?

can focus attention on what is working and on the positive emotions evoked by such experiences. A recent large scale UK study (Morgan 2006) on teacher engagement in and satisfaction with their profession highlights the role of positive emotions when teachers are asked questions that focus on their positive experiences of teaching, not their negative ones. Most teachers felt the following emotions when they were teaching:

- *Excitement* due to the daily variety and broad range of interactions
- *Satisfaction and pride* as a result of helping young people develop (as well as contributing to their own self development and happiness), and
- *Enjoyment* due to the immediate and long term pleasure gained from positive interactions and feedback from students, colleagues and the broader school community.

School leaders can facilitate teachers' acknowledgement and reflection of the role of their positive emotions in their engagement and their sense of meaning and purpose in their profession. Such reflections might be prompted in staff meetings, through dialogue, through staff review processes, in newsletters and so on.

Students and positive emotions

Negative emotions narrow our perspective and keep us focused on the current 'problem' whereas positive emotions can 'broaden' our thoughts, actions and problem solving behaviour. In other words, positive emotions can increase 'behavioural flexibility' and build cognitive and emotional resources. When students experience positive emotions they are more likely to build positive relationships with others. If they are focusing on a negative emotion, such as fear, anger or anxiety, they are more likely to withdraw, want to get even and avoid the situation that's causing concern.

Positive emotions also contribute to physical wellbeing. Research has demonstrated that positive emotions have the ability 'to undo' the effects of stress and encourage both emotional and physical resilience. This research correlates strongly with the resilience research and school effectiveness research that identifies the critical role of positive emotions and positive relationships for all students, but especially for those students more at-risk in terms of a academic and/or social and emotional learning. Many research studies have identified the quality of positive student-student and teacher-student relationships as a highly significant factor in encouraging student engagement and appropriate behaviour (Rowe 2004; Trent 2001).

Positive emotions that can be fostered as students participate in school include: that students can experience at school are:

- *Feelings of safety*: This occurs when schools work towards the development of positive and safe school cultures in which students feel connected to their school and their peers and feel safe from bullying and putdowns.
- *Feelings of satisfaction and pride*: Schools can provide opportunities for student success and for celebrating student success that help students to feel proud of what they have achieved. Clearly to provide such opportunities schools need to value different domains for children to excel in, not just the traditional academic or sports domains. Student success also needs to focus student attention on effort, not just ability.
- *Feelings of belonging and connection*: Developing positive student-student relationships can be achieved by using random grouping, cooperative group work and circle time and by providing opportunities for students to really get to know each other within classes and across year levels.
- *Feelings of enjoyment and fun*: Strategies for helping students to experience feelings of enjoyment include the use of outdoor games, educational games, and humour.

- *Feelings of optimism:* teachers can teach optimistic thinking but also commit to modelling a positive explanatory style for students which focuses on things that are going well and effort, not just ability. They can also challenge children's negative or pessimistic thinking and helplessness and help them to track even the small good things in a difficult situation or what they've learned from mistakes.
- *Feelings of being supported and cared for:* This positive emotion can be achieved through strategies such as developing positive teacher-student relationships and establishing peer support structures such as cross age buddies, peer tutoring, peer mediators, and circle of friends (for students with special needs).

The following positive questions can be asked of both teachers and students to help them focus on their positive experiences that evoke positive emotions about school:

1. Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt most excited and enthusiastic here at school? It may have been in the classroom or not. (*If necessary, ask What was happening? Who was involved? What were you doing?*)
2. Can you share a time here at school when you knew that you mattered and it helped build your confidence. How did this make you feel?
3. Can you think of a story that demonstrates the caring atmosphere at school?
4. Can you share a time when you felt proud about what you had accomplished at school?

2. DEVELOPING MASTERY AND COMPETENCE THROUGH A SKILLS-BASED APPROACH TO SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Students achieve at a higher level, engage in more positive behaviour, act more confidently and have higher levels of wellbeing when they have a sense of mastery across many school-related areas. A skills-based approach focuses on explicitly teaching students the social-emotional skills that lead to a sense of mastery and competence. These skills include:

- **Social skills** that contribute to positive relationships (eg respectful disagreeing, negotiation, conversational skills, conflict management skills).
- **Resilience skills** such as optimistic thinking, courage, coping skills, helpful thinking & skills for managing strong feelings.
- **Skills that lead to mastery and a sense of success** (eg study skills, the use of mnemonics, thinking skills, reflection and metacognition etc).
- **Goal-achievement skills** such as planning, setting time-lines, solving problems and seeking assistance or more information.

Students' confidence and their sense of self-efficacy start to build as they become more competent in these social-emotional skills.

Recent research (eg (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004) highlights the strong interdependence of these skills and students' academic success. Students who are explicitly taught these social-emotional skills demonstrate improved school attitudes, school performance and school behaviour. Improved attitudes to school and learning include a stronger sense of community, higher academic motivation and educational aspirations, better understanding of consequences of behaviour, and a better ability to cope with school stressors. Improved school performance includes improved mathematics, literacy, and social studies skills, higher achievement in overall results, improved learning-to-learn skills, better problem solving and planning ability, greater use of higher level reasoning strategies and improvements in reading comprehension (CASEL 2006; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004).

The recognition of the strong interdependence of social-emotional wellbeing and students' academic success is leading to more schools implementing wellbeing programs. *BOUNCE BACK! A Classroom Resiliency Program* (McGrath & Noble, 2003) is an example of a

wellbeing curriculum program which is designed to be integrated with a range of curriculum areas and embedded in the daily life of a school. The program has 3 levels of classroom materials organised in 10 curriculum units that provide developmentally appropriate curriculum resources and activities from school entry through to the end of the junior secondary level. The program is based on the acronym BOUNCE BACK which incorporate ten coping statements that promote the use of resilient thinking and behaviour for both students and staff.

Positive questions that help students to focus on the skills they have mastered include:

- Can you tell a story about when you helped someone at school,
- Can you tell a story about when you helped your group work well to achieve a goal
- Can you tell a story about when you were able to bounce back when you made a mistake, or experienced some kind of setback
- Can you tell a story about when you worked hard to achieve something that was difficult for you

(If necessary, ask 'What was happening? Who was involved? What were you doing?')

Teachers, mastery and competence

Through teaching their students the social-emotional skills and understandings associated with wellbeing and resilience, teachers also develop a deeper understanding of how to improve their own wellbeing and resilience both personally and professionally (McGrath and Noble 2003). For example in teaching the BOUNCE BACK acronym, ten coping statements to develop student resilience in the *Bounce Back Classroom Resiliency* program, not only were teacher's understandings of resilience enhanced, but they also developed a sense of professional competence in their counselling of students (McGrath and Noble, 2003).

Two recent studies demonstrated that teachers who teach social-emotional learning strategies and programming in their classrooms or who are members of a school community using social-emotional practices schoolwide are generally happier and more likely to stay in the teaching profession (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer 2004; Murray 2005). However teachers' enthusiasm for the implementation of any wellbeing program is highly influenced by the active, engaged support and direction provided by the school principal (Kam, Greenberg and Walls (2003).

3. MAXIMISING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

A 'strength' can be defined as a natural capacity for behaving, thinking and feeling in a way that promotes successful goal achievement. When individuals engage their strengths they have a greater sense of wellbeing (Seligman 2002). Strengths are usually *cognitive* or *personal* (ie about 'character'). In the past educational intervention has focused on correcting weaknesses rather than building or extending strengths. The PEPs Framework is based on the premise that using one's strengths in schoolwork or in one's job is far more enjoyable and productive than working on one's weaknesses, especially for those students who have low academic self esteem and learned helplessness. In fact using one's strengths has been shown to make learning easier, quicker and to take less effort. People also perform better, are more interested, have a greater sense of satisfaction and experience a greater sense of mastery and competence when they engage their strengths. They are also more likely to experience 'flow' (Clifton et al in Compton 2006; Peters & Seligman 2004).

Two frameworks that are useful for school leaders for identifying both staff and student strengths are Gardner's model of multiple intelligences for *cognitive strengths* and Peterson and Seligman's model of *character strengths*. Gardner's model has been widely adopted by educators since its publication over twenty years ago to help them identify the different intellectual strengths of their students. MI theory identifies eight cognitive domains of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial-visual, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal.

Student Strengths and Engagement

Gardner's model of Multiple Intelligences (MI) not only assists teachers to recognise and celebrate student differences but to also develop a differentiated curriculum to provide different entry points into the curriculum for students with different strengths. The MI framework encourages teachers to develop a greater range of learning and assessment tasks than do other models of intellectual strengths.

A differentiated curriculum based on Gardner's multiple intelligences model has the capacity to build positive school and class communities where students value and celebrate student differences and, for students who struggle with learning, achieve more academic success (Kornhaber, Fierros & Veenema, 2004; McGrath & Noble, 2005; Noble, 2004). A study (by Mindy Kornhaber in 2003) of forty-one schools who had been using MI theory for curriculum differentiation for at least three years identified significant benefits of an MI approach in terms of improvements in student engagement and learning, student behaviour, and parent participation. There were particular benefits for students with learning difficulties who, in the classroom based on MI differentiated curriculum, demonstrated greater effort in learning, more motivation and improved learning outcomes.

The revised MI/Bloom Planning Matrix (McGrath & Noble, 2005) integrates the eight intelligences with the six levels of complexity identified in the revised Bloom's Taxonomy to produce 48 cells, each containing sentence stems and ideas for planning to meet specific learning outcomes. The more interesting and personally relevant learning activities are, the more motivating and engaging they will be. The rich diversity of tasks produced by using the matrix ensures that all students can be appropriately challenged in their area of strength and also develop deeper understanding of their area of relative weakness. It also provides opportunities for students to make meaningful choices about the learning task, the learning process and the learning product.

Personal or character strengths

As well as intellectual strengths leaders can also help people to identify their character strengths such as their courage, kindness, and leadership strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) argue that when we engage our top strengths we have a sense of ownership and authenticity, a rapid learning curve as we first practice the strength and positive feelings of being invigorated, excited and enthusiastic as we continue to engage our strengths.

Psychological flow when engaging strengths

Individuals are more likely to experience psychological flow when they are engaging their strengths (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Flow is more likely to occur when people use their strengths and skills to engage in challenging tasks, and their skills match the challenge of the task. Flow is described as a sense of deep involvement and satisfaction in one's learning. Students are most likely to experience 'psychological flow' during challenging school work for them or activities such as hobbies or sport that engage and challenge their strengths. Relaxation and pleasure may be experienced when there is low challenge and low engagement of their strengths or skills, but their sense of competence and their concentration peak when they are in 'flow'. Anxiety is experienced when the task is too hard and they don't have the skills to successfully complete the task and boredom or apathy is experienced when the task is too easy. The importance of teachers matching student skill level with task challenge also highlights the importance of their skills in differentiating the curriculum to cater for the diverse students in any classroom.

Teacher Strengths and Engagement

Using MI theory as a tool for a team of teachers to collaboratively plan differentiated units of work not only develops teachers' sense of professional competence in catering for different

students in their class but also helps them to value their colleagues' different strengths (Noble 2000). The Multiple Intelligences Checklist for Adults (MICA) (McGrath & Noble, 2005) is a useful tool to help teachers working with students to identify their own cognitive strengths. Other tools in *Eight Ways at Once* (McGrath & Noble, 2005) can help children to identify their own MI strengths.

A useful tool for teachers to identify their character strengths is Peterson and Seligman's online VIA (Values in Action) Signature Strengths Questionnaire (www.viastrengths.org). A children's version of the questionnaire is also available on the website for children from 10 years to 17 years of age. This scale identifies six virtues and 24 character strengths endorsed by almost all religious and philosophical traditions (Seligman 2002).

Positive questions to promote awareness of strengths and engagement are:

- What are your top strengths? (Can you tell me about a time when you were fully engaged using those strengths in your schoolwork? How did you feel when you were using your strengths?)
- Can you tell me about a time at school when you were so stimulated and absorbed by a task that you were able to easily concentrate. You were challenged, you had lots of ideas and everything went smoothly and you really enjoyed what you were doing?

4. DEVELOPING A SENSE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

Individuals have a sense of '*meaning*' when they are engaging their strengths and using these strengths in doing something for others. They have a sense of '*purpose*' when they pursue worthwhile goals.

Students and sense of meaning and purpose

Most current curriculum initiatives such as Productive Pedagogy (Queensland), or Quality Teaching Program (NSW) focus on the importance of an authentic curriculum for students that has relevance, meaning or 'connectedness' to their lives.

Schools can assist students to experience a sense of meaning and purpose in a range of ways such as:

- Helping them to understand the relevance of their school progress to their short-term success and their long-term future
- Providing them with opportunities to experience meaningful and authentic tasks which involve teamwork (eg by using project-based tasks that are of use or interest to others in the school community or the local community also have a high degree of student ownership and research)
- Increasing their participation in cross-age activities and extra-curricular activities.
- Providing opportunities for them to become involved in service learning projects both within the school and outside the school.
- Encouraging them to become involved in peer support programs (eg peer mediation, buddy systems, mentoring systems)
- Finding ways for them to participate in class-wide or school-wide discussion, leadership and decision-making (eg circle time, classroom council, classroom committees, SRC).
- Arranging for student products and performances to reach a wider audience (eg posters can be displayed in a shopping centre, performances can be recorded on DVDs that can be bought or borrowed by parents, student-made books can be placed in the library)
- Directly teaching pro-social values such as respect, cooperation, compassion, honesty, inclusion and friendliness and promoting ways throughout the school community and within the local community for students to act in accord with these values.
- Developing their sense of pride in and commitment to their school.

Teachers' Sense of Meaning and Purpose

The essence of teaching is making a difference in the lives of their students. The resilience research consistently documents that teachers are often the ‘turnaround’ person who can help a student maintain optimism despite their adversity (Benard 2004).

School leaders can:

- Regularly remind their staff that teaching is one of the most important responsibilities in society.
- Find a range of opportunities to showcase ways in which staff are making a difference in students’ lives.
- Help staff develop meaningful relationships with students
- Create opportunities for staff to develop meaningful relationships with their colleagues eg mentoring or peer coaching with a colleague
- Help teachers to articulate their sense of belonging to a good school
- Encourage teachers to see their work as more of a vocation than just a job.
- Help staff to recognise how their communication of wisdom can make a difference to students’ lives.
- Encourage their staff to develop new teaching objectives for specific students or classes that give an additional sense of purpose and present them with a stimulating challenge
- Share leadership responsibilities and give teachers ‘a voice’ and autonomy

CASE: An Implementation Prompt for Schoolwide Wellbeing

A leader’s vision for whole school wellbeing based on the PEPS framework has the capacity to transform their school, their staff and their students. CASE is an acronym that organises and prompts awareness of the key components that lead to effective whole school improvement initiatives:

- **Customise:** Adapt any new initiatives to fit with the shared school dream or vision, the nature of the school and its community and values and the policies and practices that are already in place and working well. Ask positive questions based on the PEPS framework to not only help staff and students articulate what’s working but also to help them to develop a shared dream or vision of how current school practices can be improved to transform the school and enhance the likelihood of *school ownership* of any new initiatives.
- **Audit for Accountability:** By asking positive questions about ‘*what’s working?*’ and ‘*what could be?*’ and ‘*is what we are doing informed by available evidence?*’ school leaders can conduct an initial audit that serves as a motivating starting point for facilitating school change. Ongoing auditing creates an upward growth spiral where the PEPS framework facilitates building and broadening school improvement.
- **Sustain:** The PEPS framework with its focus on positive questions and positive practices facilitates staff optimism and schoolwide sustainability. Through a PEPS framework people discover that how they interpret the world and what they actually do can create the world in which they live. Relationships begin to build as individuals work together, look more deeply into what they value, and articulate a common moral purpose. These processes mean staff are far more likely to cooperate in any change initiatives and are far more likely to sustain their positive practices when ‘the going gets tough’. Sustainability is also more likely to occur even when current staff leave and are replaced by new staff who can be welcomed and inducted into a positive and committed professional culture in which programs, approaches and successes can be clearly articulated.
- **Embed:** By embedding wellbeing (via the PEPS framework) in the culture, curriculum planning, daily life of the school and teaching practices the opportunity to transform schools is created. School communities can focus on questions such as

‘What does respect look like in our staff meetings? In our school assembly? In Maths lesson? The importance of embedding whole school and class positive practices to seen as critical to build schoolwide wellbeing and sustain change (Greenberg et al 2003; CASEL 2006).

In Conclusion

PEPs is a framework for creating and developing positive change and transforming schools, not just in the short term but also in the long term. It is a framework that can be used to create and sustain positive schoolwide improvement as well as support individual students with special needs. A strong argument *for having the courage to see freshly* is reflected in current figures that ten to twenty percent of young people in Australia experience a mental health problem by the end of high school and many will never receive medical or psychological treatment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). PEPS schools are positive institutions where people feel connected, experience positive emotions, engage their strengths, develop a sense of mastery and competence and have a sense of meaning and purpose.

The quantity of wellbeing and happiness is not fixed. A school leader’s development of an individual child or staff member or a class or staff team does not mean others are deprived. Instead it is a positive-sum game where everyone can be better off. As the Buddha said: “Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared”. PEPS can provide school leaders with a framework to ask positive questions about what works, and to implement positive practices that build schoolwide wellbeing.

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