



# Review of positive psychology applications in the field of education

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## Abstract

Positive psychology emerged at the end of the twentieth century as a new trend in psychology. This new trend focuses on the positive traits and strengths of a person. It also argues that psychology aims not only to treat mental illnesses or problems but also to promote positive values, behaviours, and concepts. This paper focuses on the interventions and applications of positive psychology in the field of education. The most prominent forms and types of positive psychology interventions in education were reviewed through four types. They are (1) teaching positive psychology, (2) training students for positive skills, (3) enhancing positive skills for teachers, and (4) interventions to improve the school environment. For each type of intervention of positive psychology in education, there was one application addressed in this review. Finally, it was recommended to adopt educational strategies that concentrate on positive concepts and promote positive educational behaviours in the school environment.

## Keywords:

Positive psychology, positive education, positive interventions, positive application.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The attention of psychology and psychological studies in recent decades focused on human psychological problems and diseases that hinder human adaptation to their environment and time until the positive psychology movement emerged at the end of the twentieth century (Abdelati & Salama-Younes, 2016). Positive psychology tried to draw the attention of scientists and researchers to the fact that the goal of psychology is not to get rid of problems and the absence of mental illnesses. Rather, this new trend in psychology sought to focus on investing in the individual's positive abilities and employing them to reach psychological well-being (Salama-Younes, 2018).

Positive psychology aims to study the conditions and applications that contribute to achieving optimal performance for individuals and organizations, in addition to improving the levels of happiness and psychological well-being of individuals and groups (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Positive psychology focuses on highlighting the positive components of life as a whole by focusing on positive qualities such as courage, tolerance, love, happiness, gratitude ... etc. (Abdelati & Salama-Younes, 2016). Positive psychology is concerned not only with developing positive qualities of the individual but also with promoting the positive qualities in groups and institutions (Seligman & Fowler, 2011).

Researchers in positive psychology have attempted to propose theoretical models and research tools for understanding, explaining, and predicting psychological phenomena (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Positive psychologists have also benefited from the cognitive and theoretical structures in other various branches of psychology such as clinical psychology, educational psychology, and social psychology (Salama-Younes, 2018). This has led to the emergence of some applications and techniques that employ positive psychology concepts in other various fields of psychology (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003).

### **Positive Psychology and Education**

Many researchers point out that positive psychology has an active role in the educational process (Alaasemy, 2015; Lassoued, 2018; Terjesen et al., 2004). It seeks to develop learners' motivation and self-confidence and develop their positive, emotional, and creative aspects (Alaasemy, 2015), in addition to making them more optimistic, flexible, and hopeful for the future (Lassoued, 2018). Since the emergence of the positive psychology movement, many positive applications have appeared in the educational field (Seligman et al., 2009; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; White & Waters, 2015). Although many of the works in positive psychology have focused on adults, there are some studies of positive psychology in school. However, this field is still in its early decades (Huebner et al., 2009). The increasing research between positive psychology and educational science has led to the emergence of positive education as one of the most important terms in positive educational psychology (Pluskota, 2014).

O'Shaughnessy and Larson (2014) describe positive education as a quantum leap in the educational approach. Traditional education focuses on academic achievement only, while the proponents of positive education believe that education should focus on teaching well-being and teaching children ways to achieve happiness and psychological satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2009; White & Waters, 2015). White (2016) adds that positive education is a combination of education evidence positive psychology-based and best practices in learning and teaching. It is an umbrella term used to describe empirically approved interventions and programs from positive psychology that have an impact on student well-being (White, 2016). In other words, positive education is the teaching of educational skills and the development of the positive characteristics of the personality.

The relationship between educational psychology and positive psychology is very strong (White & Waters, 2015). Both seek to provide the individual with positive concepts about life (Alaasemy, 2015). The difference is that educational psychology only focuses on specific aspects of improving the quality of life (Lassoued, 2018). These aspects are relevant to students only. So, positive educational applications

seek to make the focus of education on positive concepts lifelong and not only during the period of educational attainment (Pluskota, 2014).

One of the most fundamental principles of positive education is that skills and behaviors that promote positive emotions, psychological resilience, well-being, and strengths can be taught and explicitly assessed by schools and educational institutions (Green et al., 2011; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Just as there are formulating practices and methods that are used to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, there are also methods and practices that can be used to teach well-being and positive behaviors (Seligman et al., 2009; White & Waters, 2015).

The role of positive psychology in education is not limited to the student only. However, extends to the teacher, educator, curriculum, and the entire school (Jenson et al., 2004). This is what makes us focus in this review on the applications and interventions of positive psychology in its various forms and types in the educational field. Shedding light on the applications of positive psychology, in its diversity, helps educators direct the educational process in favor of achieving the common goals between positive psychology and positive education, which are represented in achieving well-being, happiness, and psychological adjustment (Lassoued, 2018).

### **Positive Psychology Applications in the Educational Field**

Many positive techniques and applications are used in the educational field (Green et al., 2011; Lassoued, 2018). These applications build on the theoretical and cognitive foundations of positive psychology. It can be said that they represent the fruit of integration between positive psychology and education (Salama-Younes, 2018). Positive applications in the educational field take many forms depending on the mechanism and purpose of the application. In general, it can be summarized in four main forms. In each form, it will be limited to mentioning one program of applications of positive psychology in the educational field.

#### **1. Teaching the Concepts of Positive Psychology to Students**

Positive psychology has been keen since its emergence to introduce positive psychology to students from an early age. Because education is one of the cornerstones of positive psychology (Fineburg & Monk, 2015). Many teachers have transformed many concepts of positive psychology such as hope, strengths, gratitude, and flexibility, into lessons for students in schools (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2013; Fineburg, 2004). For example, Myers (2014) put the concepts of positive psychology in the school curriculum. Several courses explaining the concepts of positive psychology to students in schools were also offered (Fineburg & Monk, 2015). The applications that teach positive psychology to students include two levels: The first level is the integration of positive psychology topics within the current courses and curriculum by teachers. The second level is providing independent courses on positive psychology for students by teachers (Eyal & Epley, 2010).

Studies have shown that teaching positive psychology concepts to students such as resilience, hope, and strengths plays a role in the quality of students' performance and academic achievement (Duckworth et al., 2011; Gillham et al., 2007; Hodges & Clifton, 2004). The results also showed that teaching positive psychology concepts to students resulted in students' feelings of friendliness, fun, and vitality (Al-Mansoori et al., 2017). In addition, the involvement of positive concepts led to an increase in students' interaction with teachers, and this reflected positively on the creativity level of students (Duckworth et al., 2011).

Teaching positive psychology and its concepts to students in schools (whether within the courses or as independent courses) is one of the applications that seek to transform positive concepts into the behaviours of students. This in turn helps to make positive concepts more accessible to children and youth, which means turning them into a life habit that they use in all areas of their lives (Al-Mansoori et al., 2017).



## **2. Training Students for Positive Psychology Skills**

Many training programs aim to provide students with positive psychological skills such as Cultivate Hope in Students (CHS) (Marques et al., 2009) and Developing Character Strengths in Students (DCSS) (Park & Peterson, 2008). These programs focus on skills that increase students' well-being and adapting to their environment. The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) is a practical application for that (Pluskota, 2014). The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) is a program designed to include the prevention and control of depression among young people. It relies on a wide range of methods and tools that encourage the acquisition of optimism and personal development skills (Cutuli et al., 2006). The program is implemented through several pre-prepared sessions (ranging from 6-8 sessions). In its theoretical framework, the program relies on the psychological assumption that our convictions and interpretation of events not only affect our emotions but also our behaviour and the mechanism of response to the life stimuli around us (Pluskota, 2014). The experimental results that were conducted on the participants in the program indicate that there are long-term positive effects as a result of the intervention carried out by the program compared to the control group (Cutuli et al., 2006; Roberts et al., 2004). The results also promote an increase in children's psychological resilience, a decrease in feelings of despair, and a decrease in aggression among students (Pluskota, 2014).

## **3. Enhancing the Positive Skills of Teachers**

Positive psychology in education seeks to make a positive impact on students through the learning process (Lassoued, 2018). To achieve this, attention must be paid to teachers. Because teachers are the cornerstone of the teaching process (Lottman et al., 2017). If the teachers acquire positive skills and concepts, they will pass them on to the students. Many programs and applications aim to impart the concepts of positive psychology to teachers such as the Positive-Activity Model (PAM) (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013) and the Experiment of Positive Activities Workplace-Related for Teachers (Dreer, 2020). The application of Mindfulness-based Strengths Practice (MBSP) is one of the most important examples (Niemiec, 2014).

In this intervention, teachers develop the practice of mindfulness and strengths through several practical applications excerpted from Niemiec (2013). The first step of the application is conducting the Values in Action (VIA) survey for teachers to know their strengths. The results of the questionnaire are used as a guide to understanding the strengths of each teacher throughout the program period. Then teachers are asked to try to reflect on several work experiences in which they have exercised their strengths (Bishop et al., 2004).

One way to enhance teachers' understanding of mindfulness is to build teachers' awareness around the concept of autopilot (Lottman et al., 2017). The term autopilot refers to a mental state in which an individual acts without conscious intention or awareness of the moment (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). The individual's awareness of the present moment is cloudy and unclear. Individuals who are on autopilot act without thinking about what they are doing, because mostly they have done it many times before (Segal et al., 2002). The goal is to increase the teacher's sense of the current moment in his life, whether it is inside or outside the classroom (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). In this application, teachers develop their mindfulness practice and become aware of the strengths of their personalities through several special exercises (Lottman et al., 2017).

The ultimate goal of this exercise is to increase teachers' awareness and mental alertness when they use their strengths, as well as to promote positive feelings for them when they use their strengths in the pedagogical field (Jennings, 2015). At the end of the program, teachers are required to exercise their strengths while interacting with students in the classroom to achieve better results (Lottman et al., 2017). There is a close correlation between spreading strengths at work, increasing job satisfaction, and increasing well-being and higher meaning in life. This means that teachers' awareness of their strengths

reflects positively on their performance in school, which in turn affects the performance of the students (Jennings, 2015; Lottman et al., 2017).

#### **4. School Environment Improvement Programs**

The role of positive psychology in education was not only limited to students or teachers, but also it included the school environment in many of its interventions. Many programs and applications target the school environment as a whole "students, teachers, administrators, parents and curriculum" (Al-Mansoori et al., 2017). The results in the schools that implemented school environment improvement programs indicated positive effects on student achievement (Green et al., 2011). The model of Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia is an applied example of positive psychology interventions for improving the school environment (Seligman et al., 2009).

The GGS program is an applied activity developed over five years at an Australian school. The program focuses on the application of positive learning as an integrated school approach in the elements of the school environment. The program's applied interventions focused on six areas of wellbeing. They are Positive Emotions, Positive Attitude, Positive Relationships, Positive Engagement, and Positive Opportunity. 100 crew of GGS were qualified by Seligman and his team to be able to apply positive skills in their personal lives and school environment (Fineburg & Monk, 2015).

During the implementation of the program, three levels of implementation were focused on. (1) Explicit teaching of positive self-concepts in school curricula. (2) Implicit teaching of concepts on the positive self by integrating positive concepts within extra-curricular activities. (3) Positive practice by teachers and school staff that promotes positive learning and the practice of positive self-skills in and out of school life (Bențea, 2018; Norrish et al., 2013).

The model focuses on strengths and personality. It attempts to promote practices that promote positive behaviours for students, teachers, and the institution (school) as a whole (Bențea, 2018) and it seeks to improve the school environment that encourages creativity and improves school performance (Fineburg & Monk, 2015).

The applied results of the program indicate that parents and school staff have noticed an improvement in the interaction of students in the school. There was also an increase in the level of creativity, love of learning, and enjoyment at school, as well as an improvement in students' academic achievement. In addition, the program positively affected the social skills of students such as self-confidence, cooperation, and empathy (Al-Mansoori et al., 2017).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, we discuss the types and forms of positive psychology interventions in the educational field. The applications of positive psychology in the educational field began with the emergence of the positive psychology movement at the end of the twentieth century. When reviewing the literature on positive psychology interventions, the multiplicity and diversity of applications aimed at improving student well-being were noted. The types of positive psychology interventions vary for different target audiences. Four types of positive psychology interventions were discussed according to the target group. A positive application can be used in more than one type according to the target group. For example, positive psychology can intervene through training programs for teachers and training programs for students, and here positive psychology has combined two types of interventions, which are directed to teachers and directed to students using the same application. There is a need for more research on the impact of the interventions that took place during the last period, in addition to promoting the teaching of positive concepts to students from the early school stages. It is also recommended to adopt positive educational strategies that make the purpose of education to achieve human well-being and not just academic achievement.



### Statement of Researchers

**Researcher's contribution rate statement:** The author's contribution rate is 100%.

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