# Chapter 12
# Positive Education, or Just Education

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## 12.1 One and a Half Educational Paradigm

The quality, sustainability, and future perspective of any modern society depend on the quality of its educational system. The globalization of information, trade and travel, along with the increased level of competition following it, has put an immense focus on education everywhere. Cultures and societies stand and fall with their ability to foster citizens able to carry the torch further onward; and willing to, as they find it worthwhile. However, many of the initiatives taken to improve education over the last decades have failed to impress, and have often come at a high price, with many pupils and teachers suffering demotivation, stress, and even depression. Currently, the overwhelmingly dominating paradigm around the world is one of centralized control over content combined with decentralized economy, predominantly top-down-management, monitored through standardized testing, comparative statistics in form of rankings, often sadly tempered by a culture of low trust and a sense of diminishing professional autonomy. This paradigm is very much in line with the so-called New Public Management paradigm taken from organizational leadership studies, which in many ways function similarly to what is squarely known as privatization of public institutions dating back to the Reagan-Thatcher era in the 1980s. It is by and large an extension and elaboration of the industrial type of mass education that has been dominating for more than two centuries, but it has been continuously "refined" by use of still more detailed curricular demands and sophisticated evaluation technologies for centralized monitoring. The paradigm does hold some merit in that it is able to bring a population together in a shared "form", and teach specified content as to ensure common language, knowledge, values, and practices.

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This was initially important in order to transform a more analogue farmer culture into a more digital factory worker culture, and it is important today as the increasing cultural complexity poses a constant threat of cultural dissolution. In some cases, the strict monitoring of school performances also seems to prevent educational "catastrophes" yet, in most countries it seems to rather foster mediocrity than excellence, despite many attempts at the latter through targeted talent development, prizes for excellent performances, and sometimes combinations of the two in the form of television shows like "Britain's Got Talent", and so forth (e.g., OECD PISA [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Programme for International Student Assessment 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009]).[1] However, there are a number of far more controversial consequences of this paradigm also. The most important of these may be that it tends to stratify its population into layers, classes, tiers, and lifestyles based on differences in economic wealth. As such, what is reproduced by this model is the status quo rather than social reform, even if it does seem to have helped large population groups in many countries towards economic growth in the early phases of their industrialization, rising above recent extreme poverty and continues to do so to this day with Singapore and South Korea as two well-known examples. Even more relevant in this context though is that much of the psychology indirectly "applied" by this system flies in the face of what we know about effective learning and human flourishing. For example, the extensive use of extrinsic rewards almost certainly tends to undermine learners' interest in learning – a grave fact eerily in line with evidence from the business world showing how actions taken to *improve the efficiency of various outcomes by a third party's use of extrinsic rewards* have failed, and indeed been counterproductive in all markets studied to date (Winston 2006). It is on the shoulders of this paradigm that positive education comes into the world.

## 12.2   Positive Education as a Tentative Alternative in the Making

It is understandable if the term "positive education" sounds like the marriage of an insult to an oxymoron to many. How can such a term not insinuate that the rest of education is more or less negative, obviously offending some? Others may, based on their first-hand experience, seriously ask how something as dull as education can possibly be positive. Yet, it is precisely connotations to education implied in such sentiments that make the specific approaches of positive education so important today. For education worth its name needs to be everything but a negative and boring experience to pupils and teachers. Learning marked by negativity is almost by definition counterproductive in that it tends to shy people away from learning, and boring learning is at best highly ineffective. Education needs first and foremost to

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[1]OECD PISA (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009) results can be found at: http://www.pisa.oecd.org.

be a positive and inspiring experience if it is to serve the citizens depending on it, which is pretty much everyone. So what is positive education?

Positive education has been defined in a variety of ways but generally people seem to agree that it is about the application of psychological knowledge regarding individual strengths, well-being, social relations, and leadership in ways that go beyond what has been done so far, based on state-of-the-art psychological evidence. Obviously, it transcends the limits of this chapter to review all relevant evidence in detail, so in what follows, rather than presenting scattered studies from many subareas and with mixed results, I chose to outline some of the most robust positive psychological theories on which education, along with many other fields of practice, can confidently expect to benefit significantly, if only application is done properly. For the sake of overview I have roughly grouped these theories in those before the formal inception of the positive psychology movement around year 2000, and those that have emerged later, acknowledging the great overlap between the two. And as I hope to make clear, the psychological evidence presented is both strong, convincing, and peculiarly absent in much public debate about "what works" in education, one-sidedly focused on hard evidence regarding non-psychological features such as grades, rankings, drop-out-rates, and money.

## 12.3  Early Psychological Findings of Particular Educational Importance

Some of the first direct strides towards what eventually became positive psychology were made through the acknowledgement that people are not born as blank slates, that they are living organisms, with needs of their own – to be satisfied in order to live a full life. Abraham Maslow (1954), maybe stronger than anyone else, paved the way for this understanding by arguing for a third type of psychology, a humanistic psychology. Indeed, he even coined the term "positive psychology" as something close to being a synonym to humanistic psychology, focusing on human strengths rather than their deficits, as it was predominantly the case within the up until then highly influential behavioristic and psychoanalytic paradigms of psychology. To this day, many of Maslow's basic observations remain valid and much of what is known as "progressive" and "creative" in education has been strongly informed and inspired by humanistic thought of this kind, as has much of the so-called "human relation/resource management" in work-life. The growth-directed psychotherapeutical approach of Carl Rogers (1961, 1969) remains of premiere influence among therapists also and is but another example of how humanistic psychology continues to flourish. Indeed, Rogers expressed a humanistic approach to education as forcefully as anyone: "If we value independence, if we are disturbed by the growing conformity of knowledge, of values, of attitudes, which our present system induces, then we may wish to set up conditions of learning which make for uniqueness, for self-direction, and for self-initiated learning" (Rogers 1961, p. 24), echoing progressive ideas of John Dewey (1916/2009) half a century earlier.

On the shoulders of Maslow and peers, an almost equally important theoretical contribution has come from Ed Deci and Richard Ryan's (2000) work on self-determination.[2] Over more than 40 years they have developed a robust theory of human motivation elaborating and corroborating humanistic psychology, especially by convincingly showing how human beings are well understood as biological organisms that depend on an organismic understanding of themselves, strongly in line with Maslow, but also acknowledging that these organisms are very sophisticated mammals capable of, indeed fundamentally requiring, communication, social relatedness, learning, creativity and autonomous action at a level unparalleled in any other species on the planet.

Self-determination theory obviously has strong implications for education as, in the words of C. P. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) it

> …assumes that inherent in human nature is the propensity to be curious about one's environment and interested in learning and developing one's knowledge. All too often, however, educators introduce external controls into learning climates, which can undermine the sense of relatedness between teachers and students, and stifle the natural, volitional processes involved in high-quality learning … A large corpus of empirical evidence based on SDT suggests that both intrinsic motivation and autonomous types of extrinsic motivation are conducive to engagement and optimal learning in educational contexts. In addition, evidence suggests that teachers' support of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates students' autonomous self-regulation for learning, academic performance, and well-being. (p. 133)

Of particular educational importance here are numerous findings showing how individual and social flourishing in all age groups depends directly on the personal experience of autonomous motivation. In other words, self-determination theory argues forcefully for giving priority to intrinsic motivation in almost any kind of learning environment, if the particular type of learning is to be effective and joyful enough to be self-reinforcing (Deci and Ryan 2000). Many other findings from biology, evolutionary psychology, and systems science are in line with this research, and have produced insights compatible, or indirectly corroborating self-determination theory (e.g., Camazine et al. 2001; Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 1996; Kauffman 2000; Pinker 2002).

Almost "synergistically" with self-determination theory stands Albert Bandura's (1994) equally robust theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura 1995, p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy is a belief in one's own ability to meet coming and important challenges successfully. Self-efficacy has been proven highly predictive of individuals' performances in many different settings, ironically in line with the famous quote by Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't – you're usually right", and potentially directly related to placebo effects. Pupil's self-efficacy thus being the learner's expectation regarding own performance can meaningfully be understood as complementary to the teachers' expectation towards the learners yielding the so-called

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[2]See: http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org.

Pygmalion-effect, originally studied by Robert Rosenthal (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1992). Also Bandura's (e.g., 1977, 1994) work has fundamental implications for education, where most pupils have first-hand experience of insurmountable failure as they found themselves stalling, gradually being sorted into classes, categories, levels of status, as they saw their more competent peers proceed and advance themselves. The predictive value of self-efficacy, and its precise and rather easily manageable measures, compared to related but more vague concepts such as self-confidence, have made it popular not only in psychology but also in many bordering areas of study such as stress-research and preventive medicine (e.g., Zachariae 2011). Maybe the most important educational implication of the research on self-efficacy is that it provides an irrefutable argument for ensuring that all students experience school learning as an overall successful venture because self-efficacy grows from own experience of success, that is: for a learner, success requires previous success. This is another reason why rigidly standardized teaching, learning, and testing is bound to discourage a large percentage of pupils as they come to see learning as a no-win-game. In support of this point, Robert Rosenthal offers his only conclusion of prescriptive nature from his decades of research: "Superb teachers can teach the "unteachable"; we know that. So, what I think this research shows is that there's a moral obligation for a teacher: if the teacher *knows* that certain students can't *learn*, that teacher should get out of that classroom" (Rhem 1999, p. 4).

Contrasting, yet almost complementing, both self-determination theory and self-efficacy theory is the theory of learned helplessness (Seligman and Maier 1967; Overmier and Seligman 1967). This theory explains how it is possible to brutalize animal, and humans, into complete passivity and apathy by removing their sense of control over their own situation. Also this theory, though obviously running counter to any educational endeavor, has important explanatory power in the cases of young people burning out in school due to continuous failure to succeed meaningfully.

Of maybe unparalleled theoretical importance in expanding humanistic psychology towards the positive psychology movement, are the contributions of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1993, 1996). Csikszentmihalyi's work is best known though the concept of "flow", which is a construct developed to frame the optimal experience in which an engaged person is completely immersed in activity to a degree that the activity becomes autotelic, a goal in itself, ultimately completely intrinsically motivating, worth doing for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). A glimpse of how deep this theory goes, not the least in the context of education, may be given by a simple reflection on time and life quality. Thus, if one is asked what one finds really worth doing in life it quickly becomes clear that almost nothing done in a state of haste qualifies. By and large, hurrying things through it is simply not worthwhile – at least not for those who do it (others may cynically benefit from it, of course). Obviously, this is not the place for a detailed investigation of the philosophy of time, but the implications of this as regards an educational system being run by digital time-frames for over two centuries should be fairly clear even so. Moreover, flow-theory is embedded in a much deeper appreciation of complexity elaborated in the masterpiece *The evolving self: A psychology for the third millennium* (Csikszentmihalyi 1993). The groundbreaking understanding of flow and complexity

has had profound influence in many fields, but arguably most directly in education as the concept of flow serves as an almost perfect description of play in academic terms, with play being the preferred state of consciousness for children during their early years: as indeed it remains to be throughout life if the concept of flow is elaborated a bit to encompass also the play-like state people find themselves in when studying really exciting material, through curious exploration. There is massive evidence of the effectiveness of play and flow on learning, with the research of Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues specifically demonstrating that the more intrinsically motivated learners are: the more they enjoy learning, the more they will learn, the more inclined they will be to learn more, and the more inclined they will be to contribute to the greater good (e.g., Anderson et al. 1976; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993; Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005; Deci and Ryan 2000; Fredrickson 2009; Harter 1978; Knoop 2011; Ryan 1995; Shernoff and Hoogstra 2001).

Again, many other lines of psychological study contribute to the foundation of today's positive psychology, but those mentioned above have proven so robust that it will be unsurprising if they each prove themselves universal, and thus of universal importance to educators also. They provide a firm and congruent basis of understanding that does not reduce or discard important contributions from other domains of psychological inquiry, and most importantly, cannot be neglected if education is to function optimally. On a further note, the scholars mentioned seem to share an ambition of going beyond the "ism-game", gradually leaving the battle of psychological paradigms behind, aiming to synthesize psychological science at a higher level. To be sure, this has not prevented positive psychology from being perceived as a new paradigm by many, but it seems to be a widely shared ambition in the field to stay firmly within established scientific boundaries.

## 12.4   Recent Findings in Positive Psychology of Particular Educational Importance

More recent psychological evidence, of course still standing on the shoulders of what went before, include the authoritative mapping the negativity-bias – a tendency to experience bad (negative) aspects of life stronger than good ones, relating to almost every aspect of live (Baumeister et al. 2001; Rozin and Royzman 2001). This finding is so important that Linley et al. (2010) have described it as no less than the main challenge for positive psychology, almost the raison d'etre of positive psychology as it pervades every aspect of human life and interaction, and more than any other single factor explains why it is necessary to give special attention to, and foster, the brighter sides of life. The understanding of the negativity-bias has tremendous implications for education, in that an optimal educational experience requires positivity quantitatively overwhelming negativity in individuals, groups, and cultures, which seems downright impossible without an informed strategy for this.

Directly related to the pivotal challenge of keeping negativity within limits, are two ground-breaking findings by Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues regarding

positivity. First, the discovery of the link between positive emotions and learning though the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson 2009) stands out. The theory shows how humans react to positive emotions in ways that broaden their capacity to learn and consequently tend to learn more (build). Secondly, the mathematical exposure of the positivity ratio, stating that a person needs at least three times as many positive emotions as negative ones in order to flourish, is important (Fredrickson and Losada 2005). It is hard to find a better argument than these two theories for ensuring the individual experience of positive emotions as an essential part of any educational experience.

A third major contribution to positive psychology in recent years regards the mapping and advanced use of individual strengths. To be sure, within general psychology individual strengths have long been studied as traits, intelligences, styles, interest and values, but data from thousands of users of online surveys such as the Clifton Strengths Finder, the Values-in-Action – Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) measuring character strengths, and the Realise2[3] are opening inspiring both new theoretical developments and applications of strengths in daily life. In education these positive strength-approaches are running across the traditional divisions of disciplines lighting up a host of human qualities (strengths) that have hitherto been difficult to see because the sciences, arts, and crafts often do not readily reveal them. Thus, for instance the strength of perseverance may obviously be of great use in any domain but typically not a strength that is given particular attention, let alone that is graded in education (though it certainly can contribute to performances that are).

The VIA Classification (Peterson and Seligman 2004) and VIA-IS are used by researchers and practitioners around the world (Niemiec 2012), making it one of the most substantial initiatives to emerge from the burgeoning science of positive psychology to date. Research on the VIA Classification (Peterson and Seligman 2004) is flourishing and like other practitioners educators are working to find ways to apply the research to their practices while maintaining prudence with the findings, as this research defines fairly new territory. Research on character strengths across "educational" disciplines is seen in positive psychotherapy (Seligman et al. 2006); in various forms of coaching, ranging from executive to life, health, and parent coaching; use with children, adolescents, teachers, and school systems (Fox Eades 2008; Proctor and Fox Eades 2011; Park and Peterson 2009); in positive education (e.g., Geelong Grammar School and St Peters College in Australia; a significant number of schools in Denmark; the Penn Resiliency Program[4]); positive institutions, business, and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider 2009; Cooperrider and Whitney 2005); and faculty development and teaching (McGovern and Miller 2008).

When zooming in on the educational applications of strengths broadly, Lopez and Louis (2009) find that there are generally five recommendable principles of strengths-based education: measurement, individualization, networking, deliberate

application, and intentional development. Lopez and Louis (2009) argue that through a parallel process, educators practice the principles of strengths-based education when advising and teaching while students learn to put their strengths to work in learning and social situations. It should be clear how these recommendations are in line with the central elements of self-determination theory, that show how individuals function at optimal levels and are most authentically motivated when three psychological needs are met: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000). Lopez and Louis (2009) highlight how helping students understand the connection between their strengths and their personal goals, and offering guidance in the application of their strengths in the most effective ways, may elicit feelings of competence. Further, providing students with choices and opportunities for self-direction can support their need for autonomy: "When educators establish a learning culture where students view themselves and others through "strengths-colored glasses" (Clifton et al. 2006, p. 73), they help to foster appreciation for differences, highlight the value of collaboration and teamwork, and establish a powerful sense of relatedness." (Lopez and Louis 2009).

To sum up, all the elements of well-being presented so far, including positive emotion, engagement, meaning and positive social relations, positive expectations, and the individually energizing strengths found through surveys like the Clifton Strength Finder, the VIA-IS, and the Realise2 survey provide a basis for educational practice that obviously should no longer be neglected if education is to function optimally. The most important causal relations implied in the presented theories are illustrated in Fig. 12.1 in order to serve both as a kind of visual summary, and as a launch pad for the final part of this chapter sharing experiences and findings from application of positive psychology in Danish schools and a few more general ideas and concerns regarding the future of positive psychology in the broader societal context.

## 12.5   An Education to Its Fullest

Since 2005 systematic measures of pupils' positive emotions, engagement, meaning, social relations, and possibilities of individualized learning has been conducted as integrated elements in research-based school development projects (Knoop 2010). An estimated total of 20,000 pupils in elementary and lower secondary school have participated along with approximately 2,500 teachers and leaders at around 50 schools. This is not the place for a detailed description of these projects, but the common ambition as regards applied positive psychology in all these projects has been for high-trust collaborations between dedicated practitioners and researchers in order to optimize the well-being and thereby academic performance of the pupils and the teachers, as well as to allow the researchers anonymous access to substantial amounts of data. In other words, all these projects have had a double ambition of stimulating pedagogy while producing reliable data for scientific purposes. The results have been mostly positive, yet somewhat mixed, being highly dependent on the specific interest and sense of ownership of the teachers involved.
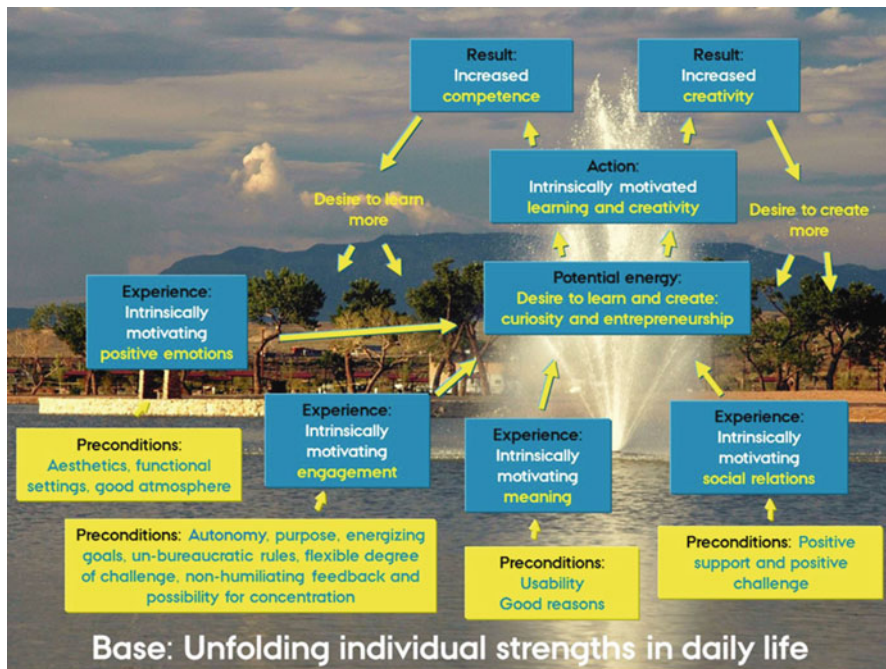
**Fig. 12.1** How well-being, learning, creativity, and performance is energizingly related in a person (*blue boxes*) – and how elementary organizational preconditions (*yellow boxes*) and the unfolding of individual strengths enables such human flourishing (Knoop 2009, 2011) (Color figure online)

The categories surveyed over 6 years are by and large those represented in Fig. 12.1, though revisions have continuously advanced the degree of detail and precision in line with scientific progress and practical feasibility. Currently, a whole new and very promising instrument is being developed under the name Live'n'Learn. dk[5] that allows for health, well-being and learning to be survey coherently (Knoop et al. in press). The academic rationale is to apply the most fundamental categories of well-being to schools by educating teachers in understanding and applying them, by facilitating teachers and pupils in administrating the web based survey, and by offering ideas and other feedback based on the survey-results – both immediately and in the longer term. Finally, it is no minor detail that we are doing this work in a cultural setting that may be hypothesized as being as supportive of well-being and strengths-based approaches as anywhere in the world. In brief, the basis for this assumption is that Denmark are among the highest ranking countries in the world regarding economic equality, personal autonomy, social trust, avoidance of corruption, satisfaction with life/happiness, flourishing, creativity, private homes online at broadband-level, and material wealth. Taken together this means that we have

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[5]See: http://www.Live&Learn.dk.

the chance of developing and/or using sophisticated measures of well-being and strengths in a context that to a very high degree seems to support many of the most important sources for well-being and strengths-based activity. To be sure, this rather fortunate basis may make it harder to improve on some measures but Danish education suffers more than enough even so and there continues to be all good reasons for infusing new energy, more intrinsic motivation, and more self-reinforcing quality in education.

## 12.6  Epilogue

So far, education has had three functions. Qualifying young people for life's challenges, socializing young people into cultural traditions, and selection of young people for different working positions available in society. It is strongly debatable how well education has succeeded in overcoming, or better: living up to these tasks, and one can (un-)comfortably argue, that only the last function is fulfilled if ever so unjust. That only the selective function has worked insofar people have been divided horizontally into domains and field and vertically into unequally privileged layers of society. To be sure, it is difficult to imagine a modern society where some kind of horizontal and vertical division of labor is not in place, but importantly in this context is to note how positive psychology harbors an ideal flying in the face of all graver forms of inequality as it aims at securing everyone sufficient social appreciation, everyone sufficient positive experiences, and everyone future perspectives making their lives worthwhile.

Positive psychology is clearly much more about optimizing specific types of processes to be applied generally rather than about specific aims and specific content. As such positive psychology is both apolitical and neutral as regards academic and professional disciplines. Yet, the findings coming from the research within positive psychology indirectly favor high levels of economic equality, and high levels of equality when comparing the social status of the many positions in the labor market. Because, simply, the evidence shows that high levels of equality in democratic (equal-vote-based, at least in principle) countries predict high levels of well-being, that high levels of equality among co-workers strongly furthers co-working, and that high levels of equality promotes social responsibility because it is broadly considered fair and therefore worth reciprocating. Other findings, like those pointing to the diminishing benefit of material good, may indirectly be seen as political messages as well. Yet, in this chapter I shall not discuss these important aspects further but limit myself to underscoring how positive psychology may be at odds with all of the three main functions of education as they have been managed so far: as already indicated the brute selection into very unequal positions in society does not sit well with the aims of helping everybody into worthwhile living; the socialization in factory-like settings that are of very little use in the future seems equally outdated; and the qualification process known by rote learning of academic content to be forgotten even faster than it is learned obviously can not be defended from any evidence-based finding coming from positive psychology either. As such, and quite

ironical, the sweet and smooth and harmless and mellow air of positive psychology perceived by so many at first blush turns out to have a strong critical edge, providing serious leverage to social and cultural reforms for those taking it seriously on board.

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