

# Chapter 21

## The Application of Positive Psychology and Positive Education in Schools: Moving Forward in Asia



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The recent COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how students' learning and well-being are inextricably related; this insight has been the core assumption of positive education (Seligman et al., 2009). Although this edited book was planned and initiated before the start of the pandemic, its chapters capture the growing enthusiasm and a real momentum of work applying positive psychology principles in schools in different parts of Asia.

The focus on positive education in Asia is significant in at least two ways. First, a quick glance at the published literature will indicate that research and application of positive psychology has been predominantly focused on WEIRD societies, or societies that are western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). This edited book features 19 chapters that involve students and teachers from diverse Asian countries and territories: China, Hong Kong SAR, Israel, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore. While these represent a small portion of countries in Asia, the studies also draw from the diverse types of schools, students and teachers in these countries and territories; thus, adding much needed diversity in the positive psychology and positive education research literature and extending the generalizability of the pertinent concepts and principles. While the generalizability of positive education principles is an important concern, the second way that the focus on positive education in Asia is significant relates to when such principles may not generalize to all cultures and educational systems. Studying positive psychology and positive

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education among diverse Asian students and teachers also points to how sociocultural processes may be influencing the meaning, processes, and outcomes of positive education. There have been published studies that already point to how the processes and factors relating learning and well-being in different groups of Asian students diverge from what the research involving western students indicate (see, e.g., Ahn et al., 2016; Bernardo et al., 2018; Caleon et al., 2019; King et al., 2015). We will discuss this point more deeply later in this chapter as it is one of the important themes that emerge from the chapters of this edited volume.

In this concluding chapter, we summarize the important themes that cut across the different chapters that are most relevant for teachers, curriculum developers, school heads, school counselors, psychologists, and other professionals working in schools. While we focus on important themes for practitioners, we wish to clarify that these themes also have implications for the theoretical precepts of positive education. But we believe that highlighting the themes for practitioners will go a longer way towards promoting positive education across schools in the Asian region.

## **Character Strengths as Foundations for Promoting Learning and Well-Being**

One of the key themes that runs through numerous chapters of this volume relates to how character strengths are important scaffolds for student learning and achievement. This proposition has long been suggested in the western research literature: Character strengths have been found to be robustly linked with well-being indicators (Park et al., 2004) and the indirect relationship between character strengths and achievement was found to be mediated by students' classroom behaviors, motivation, engagement in and enjoyment of learning tasks (Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Wagner et al., 2020). Thus, the development of specific character strengths is not just a valuable educational goal of positive education, but it is equally important to note that character strengths are associated with learning motivations and behaviors that are known to be contributors to learning and achievement. This proposition is the basis of important proposals to target character strength development in counseling and psychological interventions for students (Park & Peterson, 2008).

While there have been previous empirical studies supporting this important role of character strengths in achievement of Asian students (see, e.g., Datu & Mateo, 2020; Tang et al., 2019), several chapters in this volume extend the evidence and implications related to this important proposition as it relates to specific vulnerable student groups. In their study comparing low-ability and high-ability groups of middle school students in China, Chen et al. (2023) found that different character strengths of inquisitiveness, self-control, and belongingness were uniquely associated with each group and their school adjustment. Their study showed how these character strengths can compensate for the socioeconomic disadvantage of students in low-ability groups. In another study, Chen (2023) showed how the character strength of grit can boost

positive development of migrant children in Eastern China when paired with other protective factors like social support and temperamental effortful control. Especially as these can buffer the risk factors that migrant children face in school such as social discrimination, achievement disparity, and adjustment difficulties.

This role of character strengths as protective factors for students was also highlighted in the study of Caleon et al. (2023), which adopted a qualitative approach to examine Singaporean students' academic resilience including the protective factors and mechanisms that facilitate its development. These include goal-directed cognitions, managing failure, and social support. Two chapters pushed the argument of the important role of character strengths further by showing the efficacy of interventions that target particular character strengths in students. Nalipay et al. (2023) described their gratitude intervention for students that was aimed at bolstering both well-being outcomes and skills for their academic achievement. Lee and Jing (2023) also discussed the important role that schools and teachers have in creating a harmonious environment for students to develop kindness and a sense of belonging in primary school students in Hong Kong.

## **Effectiveness of Positive Psychological Interventions in Schools**

Positive education has been proposed as an important approach to enhance students' well-being and learning in schools, and positive psychology interventions (PPIs) have been suggested as important activities that can be integrated in schools as an integral component of positive education programs. Over the years, the benefits and limitations of PPIs on student learning and well-being have been documented (Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2016; Shankland & Rosset, 2017), and PPIs that focus on character strengths have been a strong focus of research studies (Caleon et al., 2017; Lavy, 2020). As expected, much of the research on PPIs involve samples from WEIRD societies (Hendriks et al., 2019), and the few published studies on PPIs involving Asian students did not always find evidence for the effectiveness of such interventions. While some PPI studies were found to be effective in shaping more adaptive student learning behaviors and motivations (e.g., Datu et al., 2021; King & Datu, 2018), others observed no significant positive changes resulting from PPIs (e.g., Khanna & Singh, 2019).

These trends suggest the need for further research on PPIs with Asian samples and several chapters in this volume represent important steps in this direction. For example, we earlier referred to the effectiveness of Nalipay et al.'s (2023) gratitude intervention. Such positive evidence is not isolated. In their systematic review of five studies conducted with preschools across Asia (Jordan, Korea, Singapore and Israel), Sun et al. (2023) showed the effectiveness of shared book reading on boosting socio-emotional learning in the school setting. They found that educators can use this approach to promote cultural awareness and empathy at a young age and build on

intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. In addition, Khng (2023) discussed other techniques that work hand-in-hand with socio-emotional learning such as deep breathing and mindfulness-based practices. While deep breathing is centered on the regulation of physical reactions, the second works on the regulation of cognitions and attention. She described these simple techniques as nurturing self-regulation and well-being from the “inside out.”

Aside from specific techniques and strategies, teaching styles can also lead to more positive student motivation; Lam (2023) reported the findings of her study on teacher autonomy support in Hong Kong. She found that the Confucian values like ‘jen’ (benevolence) and ‘yi’ (righteousness) were embedded in teachers’ classroom behavior along with cultivating student interest, enriching support and a sense of mastery.

## **Positive Psychology Interventions for Early Prevention**

Discussions on the effectiveness of PPIs have tended to focus on their effects on students’ motivations, behaviors, and learning achievement. However, such PPIs are also proposed to play an important role in developing protective factors against different forms of psychological distress (Terjesen et al., 2004), in addition to its possible function in remediation. The role of PPIs in early prevention has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Waters et al., 2022), but even prior to the pandemic, there has been documentation of the effectiveness of PPIs for prevention (Owens & Waters, 2020; Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020). But as we can expect, such studies have mostly involved students in WEIRD societies.

A couple of chapters in this volume provide detailed insights regarding prevention-focused PPIs. Ronen (2023) discusses the risk factors that children and adolescents encounter and further contextualizes this with the Israeli (Jews and Arabs) cultural components that affect their well-being. She also discusses the empowerment intervention plan that is implemented in the regular education system in central Israel along with a sports-based and music-based intervention program; it was found that interventions should focus on self-control skills, reduction of negative emotions, and expression of positive emotions. She highlights the need for early interventions not just to mitigate distress but also to promote flourishing. In a similar vein, Chye et al. (2023) propose their multi-tiered intervention for mental health with the first tier assuming a prevention approach and the second tier, a remediation approach. Using telehealth counselling, they are able to envision their positive psychology-based program (i.e., A-MINDSET; referring to Accomplishment; Meaning; Interconnectedness; eNgageMENT; Discovery of self; Strengths; Emotional Wellness) in the Singaporean context.

## Holistic Perspective and the Whole-School Approach

Some of the criticisms of positive education approaches have focused on the seeming emphasis of changing students' beliefs, thoughts, and other personal experiences, while ignoring the instructional and social contexts within which the students function. In response to such criticisms, proponents have advocated for a contextual positive education (Ciarrochi et al., 2016), that also emphasize not just the engagement of individual students and teachers, but also various levels of regulatory and governance functionaries in the school (Francis et al., 2021). Thus, rather than isolated interventions, there has been interest in adopting a whole-school approach to positive education (O'Connor & Cameron, 2017).

Several chapters in this volume also adopt a holistic approach to positive education by proposing a whole-school approach. A number of schools in Asia are joining the movement of incorporating positive education focusing on multi-dimensional models of well-being (e.g., PERMA model of Seligman, 2011). Kibe (2023) concisely reviews some of the efforts to apply positive education on a large scale. Several studies on the implementation of the whole-school approach had common procedures such as assessment of the needs of the school, setting goals, developing, modifying and implementing the curriculum, and continuously evaluating and involvement of relevant stakeholders. In a study involving a secondary school in Singapore, Lim and Chapman (2023) adopted a qualitative approach to focus on the educators' perspectives on positive educational practices. They found that based on the general tenets of the consortium, strategies include positive discipline, leadership development, rituals, positive class culture, positive communication through character and citizenship portfolios and student-led forums, affirmation, and relationships. These impacted both the educators and students. The educators became more self-reflective and aware of their sense of purpose. While the students became development-oriented (as opposed to event-focused), their academic performance improved and their outlook on their responsibilities changed for the better. In their study, Caleon and Chua (2023) present a positive approach to crafting a well-being curriculum in a public primary school in Singapore. Aside from proposing a framework (i.e., THRIVE—thinking mindfully, healthy coping, relating well, being in the moment, values driven-actions, and emotions of positivity; which is focused on students' flourishing), strategies were employed to promote competence and relatedness in the school administration, teachers, and staff. These include empowering them to be active role models, offering professional development programs to be equipped with aspects of positive education, and explicitly linking learning to the framework. They found that this school-wide approach was able to create a culture of well-being in the environment and holistic development in the students.

## **Focusing on Learners: Understanding Individual Differences**

While we emphasized the importance of the school contexts in positive education, several chapters in the volume still highlight the need to focus on how individual students' perceptions and beliefs influence how they construct and engage the positive psychological concepts and positive education activities in their schools. This focus on understanding how the learner notices and negotiates between personal (inner) and social (outer) experiences in school is also emphasized in contextual positive psychology models (Ciarrochi et al., 2016).

Some chapters in this volume point to the individual differences learners have and the effect these differences can make on functioning, intervention, and learning outcomes. Sumi and Sumi (2023) focused on the relationship between perceived need support and need satisfaction in Japanese university students learning Arabic language. They found that when students perceived their environment as supportive for the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they experienced greater satisfaction in those needs. They suggest that need support can nurture students' motivation and well-being through the mechanism of need satisfaction. Aside from differences in how students perceive their learning environment, individual differences in how students may perceive instructional activities are also important to consider. Frondozo and Yang (2023) focused on how Filipino university students' perceptions of feedback were associated with positive and negative learning outcomes. Among the four dimensions of feedback orientation, feedback self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of positive emotions; students who were confident in using the feedback they got from their teachers were more likely to experience joy, hope, and pride.

Aside from differences in how students perceive their learning tasks and environments, individual differences related to personality are also important to consider in considering positive education interventions. Kibe (2023), in her study of Japanese adolescents, investigated how differences in susceptibility was associated with mental health and intervention outcomes. At the baseline, higher susceptibility negatively predicted resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy and positively predicted depressive symptoms. Interestingly, after the resilience program, those who had higher susceptibility showed better resilience than those who had lower levels of susceptibility. Similarly, Chen (2023) explored the role of temperament in fostering grit. In a study of migrant children in Eastern China, the children's' innate effortful control positively predicted their use of grit which underscores the importance of developmental process of personality traits.

## **The Role of Relationships with Significant Others**

Consistent with the holistic perspective in positive education, it is not surprising that significant persons in the students' life—parents, friends, and teachers—play important roles in different positive education and positive psychological processes.

Teachers' emotional support and positive relationships with students have been shown to be critical factors associated with the effectiveness of PPIs for younger elementary students (Quinlan et al., 2018; Suldo et al., 2015) and adolescent high school students (Ruzek et al., 2016). There has also been cross-cultural research that shows the differing influences of social support of families and peers on students' well-being (Brannan et al., 2013).

It is not surprising that in Asian societies that emphasize relationship and interdependent self-construals, we find strong interest in the role of significant others in positive psychological experiences in schools. We see several expressions of this theme in the different chapters. Aside from innate personality traits of a migrant child (as discussed in the previous theme), Chen (2023) also found that mother and teacher supportive behavior uniquely contributed to a child's grit in their home and school environments. Support from mothers which involved a general sense of guidance was positively related to the child's consistent interest in learning; on the other hand, support from teachers which included more concrete instruction was positively linked to a child's continuing effort to enact their long-term goals. Bernardo and Cunanan (2023) also show how a student's hopeful thoughts expressed not just personal agency, but also conjoint or shared agency with their significant others. In a study of Filipino high school and college students, they used the locus-of-hope model to examine a relational view of hope. Interestingly, they found that the different loci-of-hope may act in a compensatory manner; for example, when external-peer locus-of-hope and internal locus-of-hope are not enough, a student may look to their family to promote their own agency and pathways to their goals. It is valuable to recognize how one's more secure sources of hope can compensate for the weakness of the others. Ronen (2023) found that for at-risk children and adolescents, their loved ones may serve as reliable partners to lean on when they are under pressure. In her discussions of workshops, she discusses how parents and family members can join in on activities for their children to develop resilience. These involved mindfulness, emotional sharing, positive thinking and behavior.

## Cultural Meaning of Well-Being

In recent years, there have been advocates of a cross-cultural positive psychology, or a positive psychology that pays more careful attention to the cultural dimensions and variations in how flourishing, well-being and other positive psychological experiences are given meaning (Lomas, 2015). In a manner of speaking, the argument of embedding positive psychological propositions within cultural systems is an extension of the holistic approach to positive education that understands that positive psychological processes are not just personal internal experiences, but experiences that are integrated in different layers of social contexts, including the broader culture in which the students and schools exist (Lomas et al., 2021).

This theme was not strongly articulated in most of the chapters in this volume. But two studies explicitly elucidate the cultural meaning of well-being in the specific

Asian educational context. Chue (2023) called attention to the inherent cultural biases in the assessment of well-being in Asia given that most instruments were developed and validated in western contexts. He used Hofstede's cultural dimensions to examine how Asian cultures emphasize different values for flourishing. Compared to those in individualistic societies, those in collectivistic societies might value social relationships more; therefore these are much more encouraged in schools through cultivating a sense of belongingness among the students. He also discusses that compared to feminine societies which focus on quality of life, masculine societies place more importance on a sense of accomplishment. Cultural biases may lead to methodological issues in measurement; time-based questionnaires may not give accurate perception of flourishing in comparing societies with long term orientations and short term orientations. Social desirability bias is an issue when asking those in indulgent societies and restrained societies about their levels of happiness. In Kibe's study (2023), she discussed the ways socio-cultural contexts can influence perceptions of well-being and culturally adapts a western-made resilience program to Japanese high school students accordingly. She took care to make two major changes to fit into the cultural context. First, case studies were changed to be more relevant to Japanese students. Second, to encourage students to willingly participate in the program, they switched the sequence to emphasize emotions first rather than cognitions. This was done since Japanese culture emphasizes relational aspects more than analytic aspects and adolescents are more likely to actively participate if they are engaged with their heightened emotionality.

## Conclusion

These are key messages to educational professionals who are interested in exploring and adopting positive education and positive psychological principles in their schools and school systems. First, character strengths and other positive psychological constructs are not just additional education outcomes to be considered; instead, character strengths enable the attainment of learning outcomes. They make a difference in students' attainment of the curricular objectives in the different domains of learning, so educators who ignore character strengths are turning their backs on a potentially powerful factor in student achievement.

Several key messages relate to positive psychological interventions (PPIs) in schools. First, there is evidence that they work. Second, they work not just to remediate deficits in the positive psychological concepts, but they develop protective mechanisms that enable students to better withstand the effects of different forms of psychological distress. Third, they work better if they not only focus individual students' inner personal experiences; PPIs work if they are aligned with the different aspects of the students' educational experiences and all educational actors engage with the basic principles of the PPI. Fourth, teachers, friends in school, and parents have diverse but important roles in supporting and sustaining PPIs. And fifth, individual differences in students moderate how they might engage in these PPIs. These



five points altogether highlight the need to engage positive education in a holistic way, understanding the role of different actors (i.e., not just the student) to fully appreciate the positive impact in the students' well-being, learning, and achievement.

The last theme that we observed was the least strongly articulated across the chapters, but potentially one that is most critical for educational professionals in Asian societies who wish to engage positive education and positive psychology for their schools. There has been a recent but thoughtful push to focus on how different cultures might give meaning to positive psychology concepts, and positive education practitioners in Asia need to be more mindful of how cultural norms, values, and meanings systems might be shaping how student and teachers in different countries and cultures perceive and experience positive education.

In relation to the last point, we wish to underscore that the Asian research represented in this volume is by no means representative of the varied range of Asian educational systems and cultures. Nevertheless, the 19 chapters in the volume provide a diverse snapshot of a few Asian societies, and how educators and psychologists in schools in these countries and territories are trying to make positive education take root in Asia. We hope the readers of this volume will appreciate how the chapters of this volume have effectively made the case for the viability and relevance of positive education in their respective educational contexts. More importantly, we hope the readers of this volume recognize how the application of positive education approaches are feasible in different scales of intervention that can be integrated in different classroom and extra-curricular activities of students.

The various chapters in this volume collectively underscore the prospect that positive education and positive psychology may help in achieving the goal of having every student attain their full potential—a goal that is shared by all educational systems in Asia. But the prospect is currently still limited to particular countries and territories in Asia, while positive psychology and positive education remains a vague concept treated with skepticism in other Asian educational systems. Advocates of positive education and the application of positive psychology in schools must continue to document evidence on the relevance of positive psychology concepts and the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions in Asian schools, so it will become more apparent that positive education is not just the current fad, but a true opportunity to achieve all students' full potential.

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