

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN SCHOOLS: A CHANGE WITH DEEP ROOTS

Raquel Palomera Martín

Universidad de Cantabria

La felicidad es un valor universal del ser humano y el campo de estudio de la psicología positiva nos aporta un conocimiento relevante acerca de su impacto en nuestras vidas, así como de sus correlatos. La escuela es uno de los principales contextos de desarrollo humano y por ello el lugar por excelencia para facilitar y promover la felicidad en todos los niños y jóvenes. Ahora bien, implementar la psicología positiva en la escuela requiere repensar en nuestro propio concepto de educación, considerar la felicidad dentro de los objetivos del proyecto educativo, e introducir modificaciones en la organización escolar y las metodologías docentes. Todo ello conlleva a su vez la inserción de dicho marco de trabajo en la formación inicial y permanente del profesorado así como la necesidad de profundizar en el conocimiento de la felicidad en la infancia y su papel en el proceso educativo.

Palabras clave: *Felicidad, Escuela, Organización escolar, Proceso educativo.*

Happiness is a universal human value and the field of positive psychology gives us relevant knowledge about its impact in our lives and its correlates. The school is one of the main contexts of human development and therefore the principal place for facilitating and promoting happiness for all children and young people. Implementing positive psychology in schools requires a rethinking of our concept of education, considering happiness within the objectives of the educational plan, and introducing changes in school organization and teaching methods. All this, in turn, leads to the inclusion of this framework within pre-service and in-service teacher training and the need for further knowledge about children's happiness and its role in the educational process.

Key words: *Happiness, School, School organization, Educational process.*

For over a decade, positive psychology has been seeking to understand positive emotion and proposing to study human behavior from a perspective focused on strengths (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Today, this branch of psychology has established a broad movement at international level, characterized by a rigorous scientific approach that is promoting research and application in important areas (Vázquez & Hervás, 2008), including education.

THE PILLARS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: THE OBJECTIVES

According to Seligman (2002), the three pillars of study of positive psychology are: positive emotions, positive traits (virtues, personal strengths and skills) and the positive institutions that facilitate the development of these emotions and traits. In recent years several authors have added another element to these three pillars: positive relationships (Peterson & Park, 2006). Thus we must be aware of the extraordinary possibilities that positive psychology offers for renewing educational practices based on a solid scientific foundation.

This approach is based on several studies that show how "positive emotions encourage creative thinking to solve interpersonal problems, promote cognitive flexibility, enable

assertive decision-making, develop responses of generosity and altruism, increase intellectual resources and counteract depressive tendencies" (Greco, Morelato, & Ison, 2006, p.81). Likewise, studies such as those by Westling (2002) or Sutton and Wheatley (2003) show how positive emotions can form an upward spiral that creates an appropriate classroom climate, a situation associated in turn with healthy development, optimal learning and decreased maladaptive behaviors. In this sense, as pointed out by Javaloy, Páez, and Rodríguez (2009, p.284), "positive interpersonal relationships generate happiness" therefore "it does not seem to be a coincidence that well-being is almost always linked to a social context" (Avia & Vázquez, 1998, p.43).

Positive psychology advocates the use of personal strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to achieve higher levels of well-being. That is, it proposes that people understand and are aware of their potential so they can learn to use their strengths, which act as a vehicle for personal and professional success (Jiménez, Alvarado, & Puente, 2013). The most notable features of personal strengths include that they are acquirable, measurable and they are exercised when the context requires, needs or facilitates them. It is relevant to mention some of the advantages that are related to the development of each strength. For example, the strengths of kindness and generosity, love and being loved, integrity, and teamwork are associated with greater empathy, with the establishment of promoting links of freedom, support, and security, and the configuration of positive

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Correspondence: Raquel Palomera Martín. Universidad de Cantabria. Facultad de Educación. Avd. de los Castros, s/n. 39005 Santander, Cantabria. España. E-mail: palomerr@unican.es



social relationships, the latter being a basic pillar for life satisfaction (Grinhaus & Castro Solano, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011). Also, perseverance (associated with optimism and hope), curiosity, love of knowledge and open-mindedness are related to academic achievement and school success, promoting learning and intrinsic motivation (Kashdan & Yuen, 2007). In turn, the strength of courage is linked to an increased internal locus of control (Jiménez, Alvarado, & Puente, 2013) and promoting physical and mental health (Peterson & Park, 2006). It should also be noted that self-regulation (which facilitates attention and concentration), prudence and the ability to forgive (which reduces anger and impulsivity) are related to a positive psychological development and a better adaptation in schools (Cilllessen & Rose, 2005). Similarly, humor is associated with increased assertiveness and competence in school and social contexts, while gratitude is associated with positive affect, optimism, social support and prosocial behavior (Froh, Yukewicz, & Kashdan, 2009). Strengths related to the virtue of justice, such as impartiality, leadership and citizenship, are also linked to higher self-regulation, empathy, and health (Garaigordobil, 2006; Gimenez, Vázquez, & Hervás, 2010). Love, hope and vitality are the strengths that are most related to high levels of happiness in children aged between 3 and 9 years (Park & Peterson, 2006a), while the virtue of humanity, especially love, is the most present in children between the ages of 10 and 17 years, as well as gratitude, which facilitates the creation of social ties at this stage (Park & Peterson, 2006b).

One of the advantages of the strengths proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), in addition to their transcultural character and that they are measurable and can be taught, is their intimate relationship with the three multidisciplinary core competencies of our educational system: the competence of autonomy and personal initiative; social and civic competence; and the competence of learning to learn (Arguís, Bolsas, Hernández-Paniello, & Salvador-Monge, 2010). In addition, practicing these strengths creates positive emotions for everyone, since we can all be “winners” when we act with our strengths and virtues, which undoubtedly contributes to personal well-being (Seligman, 2011).

The third pillar of positive psychology is that of the educational institutions. The school is the place where all children have the opportunity to learn and develop the skills and knowledge that will enable them to adapt to society, and it is the second most influential context during their childhood after the family. As Arguís, Bolsas, Hernández-Paniello, and Salvador-Monge note (2010, p.3), “the essential objective of every teacher is to enable children and young people to develop their positive aspects (their personal strengths) as much as possible and enhance their present and future well-being.” Various studies have shown that schools that offer extracurricular activities (Gilman, 2001), meaningful tasks structured by level (Maton, 1990), and security and control (Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 1989) predict higher

levels of childhood happiness. However, to borrow the words of Fernández-Domínguez (2009, p.249),

Our schools are often a place of suffering for teachers and students. For some, a source of stress and frustration; for others, a time of boredom and disengagement with life. Often school promotes competitiveness, performance, passivity, blind compliance and obedience, forgetting at times that students are individuals, with their own values, skills, needs and limits.

In this sense, we cannot ignore the important role played by the school, as long as it is not just a happy place where children enjoy themselves and attend with enthusiasm, but also a place where they learn to be happy (López, Piñero, Sevilla, & Guerra, 2011).

IMPLEMENTATION OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN SCHOOL

Hand in hand with the progress of the scientific findings about the benefits that positive psychology contributes to development and well-being, educational programs have been developed and implemented to promote these benefits in childhood and youth. Work on the abovementioned pillars of positive psychology has been integrated mostly in the form of specific programs implemented either in after-school hours or within the school timetable (e.g., during tutorials). In the best case scenario it has been transversely integrated as part of the content and activities of numerous subjects but rarely has it been defined formally within the educational objectives in the corresponding educational plan, and the corresponding curricular programming. It has remained hidden in the curriculum. Initially, most of the programs were aimed at the stage of secondary education, but more and more initiatives are including the earlier stages, thus they not only facilitate the primary prevention of the risks associated with adolescence but they also promote the benefits of the development of positive emotions and strengths from an early age. Examples of well-being programs developed and validated by the research team of the Positive Psychology Center (n.d.) of the University of Pennsylvania, led by Seligman, include the “Penn Resiliency Program”, which aims to promote young people’s ability to cope with the stressors and problems of daily life, through working with coping strategies, relaxation, decision making, controlling thoughts or assertiveness. Another program is the “Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum” in Philadelphia, which does not aim to prevent difficulties but rather to increase the positive emotions, helping to identify personal strengths and encouraging their use in daily life as well as promoting meaning and purpose in life. In other words, it is a more innovative program, consistent with the framework of positive psychology and far removed from the clinical approach. The first of these two programs has shown, through meta-analysis, its effectiveness in reducing and preventing depression, anxiety, hopelessness and behavioral problems, regardless of the ethnic background of reference (Horowitz & Garber, 2006). The same study showed how the effectiveness depended on the degree of training and supervision of the trainers/teachers and



their level of commitment and adherence to the program. The second program achieves positive results rather than preventive ones because it increases curiosity, the desire to learn, the interest in school, creativity, academic performance, and social skills (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). We must also mention Geelong Grammar School, one of the oldest boarding schools in Australia, where the same team designed a curriculum that revolves around well-being and where education is divided into three steps (Seligman, 2011): teaching it (discovering and using the personal strengths, developing more positive emotion through gratitude, savoring good memories, overcoming negativity, and the gratification that kindness produces), incorporating it (teachers incorporate it on the playing field, in literature, in individual tutoring, music, physical education, geography or in the chapel) and living it (sharing positive stories in order to spread good feelings). Another program to highlight in Australia is "Bounce Back!" (McGrath & Noble, 2011), aimed at students from kindergarten to the first years of secondary education with the objective of promoting well-being and resilience, or the US program "Smart Strengths" (Yeager, Fisher, & Shearon, 2011), aimed at detecting and enhancing the strengths of children and young people in primary and secondary schools. In Spain, the Happy Classrooms program (Arguís, Bolsas, Hernández-Paniello, & Salvador-Monge, 2012) is the only program specifically aimed at developing positive psychology through work focused on mindfulness and personal strengths in all of the educational stages, with the collaboration of families, and through work in tutorials, core competencies, values and different subjects in the curriculum.

This all reflects a positive transfer of knowledge to the applied field such as the school, but it is still necessary to develop rigorous research at the same time on the validation of the educational innovations that have been implemented, in order to clarify when and how we can be truly effective in achieving our objectives.

A CHANGE WITH DEEP ROOTS

Although working through educational programs that are systematic, progressive, explicit and focused on specific behaviors has been shown to be effective in emotional education (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), implementing positive psychology in schools also involves rethinking our own concept of education. It is about opting for an education that puts personal growth and well-being at the center of everyday life, and that permeates the teachers' attitudes, the methodological proposals and every daily moment of positive education (Arguís, Bolsas, Hernández-Paniello, & Salvador-Monge, 2012; Seligman, 2011). In short, "we need to build educational spaces that grow students' individual strengths for their personal and social growth" and for this the school must function as "a dynamic center that transcends its context and extends to the family and society" (Fernández-Berrocal & Extremera, 2009, p.104). At the same time, we must not forget

that we also need the well-being of teachers in order to achieve our educational objectives and to build positive and healthy school climates that facilitate this (Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Brackett, 2008), and all of this requires a profound change in the teacher training plans.

What should we encourage the school to do in order to promote well-being and thus learning in the educational community?

1. **Respect and value happiness:** following the approach of Coll (2010), we must be very conscious of the fact that the articulation between theoretical knowledge and educational practice has important implications for the training of education professionals and the actions that they carry out in their classrooms. That is, the teachers' thinking, both conscious and unconscious, is the guiding and driving force of their educational practice, so if happiness is not a valuable and necessary objective for them, in no case shall they promote actions to develop it in their students. If we value happiness not only as a main objective of education but also as a means of achieving a climate that promotes learning, it should be reflected at the formal level and in the day-to-day life of the center.
2. **Organizational models and methodological stimulants, flexible and varied:** In order to achieve schools that foster happiness and provide quality learning, it is essential to take care of the organizational and methodological conditions that are implemented. It is important that flexibility and democracy reign in the classroom; the students' initiatives must be supported. Assistance and cooperation should be encouraged, and positive and motivating relationship climates must be generated. Various methodologies must be present in order to accommodate the different learning styles, so that each child can demonstrate their strengths. Some methods that facilitate this include cooperative work, project work and play. Cooperative learning allows different ways of thinking and doing in order to reach the educational goal, uniting the strengths that characterize each of us, based on the assumption that not everyone can excel in everything, but together we can achieve higher goals. Project work is flexible and gives autonomy and limelight to the students, largely favoring flow states for all involved, especially if it is related to their daily lives. Greater attention and involvement are also achieved through play, in all ages, especially in childhood, as it forms part of their natural repertoire of behavior and facilitates working towards challenges with fun instead of anxiety. In short, we believe that this way of working can generate a motivating climate in the classroom, create group confidence and at the same time allow the development of fundamental skills for life in today's society. All of this can help children to feel good and also to learn better.
3. **Spaces for happiness:** the classroom must not be the only space for excellence in the school, as there are moments



when the conditions we need for learning are different. Therefore, areas such as the schoolyard, the garden, the library, and the surrounding environment must have a prominent place in the daily practice, since they are ideal places to investigate, and to enrich the students' relationships with their peers and with other adults. It is also important not to "lock ourselves" in our classroom and to open the doors to other colleagues, families and the community.

4. **Time for happiness:** it is important to spend a few minutes a day sharing happy experiences, and remembering and acknowledging the positive aspects we have been fortunate to experience throughout the day. This also means time for fun, since humor and joy are paths to learning. And finally, education must be unhurried, with room for reflection and relaxation. In short, it is extremely necessary to rethink the use of time in school, closely linked to the above points.
5. **Respect for the voices of children:** children must be active participants in their learning process and this means allowing them to make decisions for themselves and take responsibility. This respect for their ideas and preferences will generate great comfort in smaller children. In addition, their curiosity, tastes and interests must be a central axis in the teaching-learning process, therefore it is important to propose open-ended activities that satisfy their need to know, explain, understand and ask questions. From their reflections, children are transmitting that they have a great deal to say about their education, that they are aware of what makes them happy and that they can share their perspective on school. Therefore, we must take their proposals into consideration. We must keep in mind that our conceptions of childhood largely determine the institutions we create for children and the pedagogical work therein. Thus, "We must take children seriously. Active and competent, they have ideas and theories that are not only worth listening to, but they are also worth examining and, where necessary, questioning and challenging" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2005, p.87).
6. **The attitude and well-being of the teachers:** the role of adults as role models and mirrors is one of the key factors in education. One of the factors that have the greatest impact on the development of happiness is the modeling and molding to which the child is subjected, mainly by educators, who usually have a direct influence on the child's mindset through the processes of attribution that teachers carry out on the children's behavior or on their own events (Alloy, et al., 2001; Gillham, Reivich, & Shatté, 2002). Therefore, we have to act as positive role models, conveying to children the expectations of achievement and using positive language that speaks of opportunities and generates exciting realities. There are also multiple benefits that positive emotions can bring to teaching because they allow a better relationship to be established with the students, helping to reduce stress, manage conflict, improve participation and study, and communicate the contents more effectively, stimulating the attention, creativity

and memory (Fernández-Abascal, 2009). This approach is supported by research examining the effects of burnout on well-being and teaching quality, in particular, various studies that show how burnout negatively influences the performance of pupils and the quality of teaching (Vanderberghe & Huberman, 1999) and how it negatively affects the teacher-pupil relationship (Yoon, 2002). Thus, we must promote the contextual protective factors of teacher well-being such as social support and recognition (Botella, Longás, & Gómez, 2008), which means among other things, respect for their voices and greater participation in decision-making, as well as the promotion of organizational facilitators for teachers through support networks or training tailored to the demands (Arias & Jiménez, 2013; García-Renedo, Llorens, Cifre, & Salanova, 2006)

7. **Prior training:** in order to achieve the above, it is necessary that teachers receive prior training, because we cannot teach what we have not previously learnt (Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Brackett, 2008). In fact, a study by Peterson and Park (2009) related the effectiveness of teaching staff with the strengths of vitality, sense of humor and social intelligence. The training should promote engagement and a resistant personality among teachers using their strengths. This training is not only important so that teachers can go out and enhance strengths and encourage positive emotions in schools, it is also essential that the teachers themselves are happy. In order to achieve this, there already exist pioneering initiatives for teacher training, such as the Master in Emotional and Social Education and Creativity at the University of Cantabria (masteres.unican.es/edesc).

CONCLUSION

In short, the school is the place where both children and teachers have the opportunity to learn and develop the strengths and knowledge that will enable them to adapt to society and achieve personal well-being. Similarly, happiness brings many practical implications in schools. In order for happiness to be considered in schools, it requires the creation and implementation of validated programs to promote it, with consequent changes in the times, spaces (including the architecture and decoration) and methodology. When we make these changes, we not only achieve improved well-being for teachers and students, but we also encourage the learning of other curriculum objectives through pedagogical practices that similarly cater to diversity, as they are more flexible and allow for the inclusion of everyone, including all of our strengths. If we do this, we are promoting quality education.

In this context the teacher is shaping up as the core of the educational community and, therefore, as the coordinator of the whole network of relationships and educational processes that occur therein. It is for this reason that any change must begin with the initial and ongoing training of teachers and the achievement of their own well-being.



We believe that happiness as an educational goal should be included from the beginning of schooling in early childhood education, since the acquisition of values, attitudes and skills emerges fundamentally in the early years of our life. However, although childhood is a great opportunity that we must seize, the learning must be present throughout life. In addition, "When education is systematic, ongoing, and it is exercised in different areas and through the significant agents for the child, it is more effective and generates the true development of competencies" (Palomera, 2009, p.255).

It is strange how, despite the widespread value that is given to happiness, when we reach the reality of education, we have great difficulty investing time in designing an educational plan that facilitates it and this appears as a scientifically established truth, which is formulated through explicit goals (Palomera, 2009). Faced with this situation, our proposal is a commitment to change, and to the promotion of happiness, because this way we create a positive spiral that leads not only to more happiness, through the effect of the benefits associated with this emotion, but also greater learning through positive and healthy relationship climates.

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