



Positive Psychology in Schools with Focus on Adolescent Well-Being

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Abstract

The present population of young people is 1.8 billion and they comprise one quarter of the world population. Their age ranges between 10-24 and is currently the largest in the history. Adolescent (age 10-19 years) can be a powerful agent of personal change and community development, so focus on adolescent health is pertinent to meet global health targets. Personal, school, family, community factors effect adolescent overall health. The age of onset of puberty has decreased and the age at which mature social roles are achieved is rising amidst the huge impact of social media. This generation is taking a different path through adolescence from previous generations and is facing new challenges to their health and wellbeing. In last few years factors like socio-economic development, less mortality, high migration, breaking down of families, increase in terrorism and age of social media have added to more psychological problems. Hence there is an increasing demand to focus on adolescent mental health issues. As a clinical Psychologist and a school counsellor, I work with school mental health wellbeing teams to support mental, emotional, behavioural, and social wellbeing of students. I advocate positive psychology in schools and can confidently argue its many benefits towards enhancing overall wellbeing of students. In this paper, I have put forward a working "Positive Psychology Life-skills" curriculum triangular model (PPL model).

Keywords: Adolescent, World population, Psychological problems

Literature Review

Define adolescence

The word adolescence is derived from Latin *adolescere* which means growing up.¹⁻⁶ It is a transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood. The WHO defines an adolescent as any person between ages 10 and 19 and this age range falls within WHO's definition of *young people*, which refers to individuals between ages 10 and 24.^{1,2}

Problems faced by adolescents today

Since late 1900's there is dramatic increase in mental disorders among children and adolescents.^{7,8} As per WHO 2005 report prev-

alence of mental disorders among young people below 18 year is 8-20 %.⁹ Moreover, it is seen that many mental Health issues that commonly emerge during adolescence persist into adulthood.^{5,10} Mental health is at critical stage among adolescents.²

Suicide, self-harm, affective disorders,⁶ and depression¹¹ is highest ever recorded among 14-15 year old girls).² In united states nearly 1 in every 10 children have a depressive episode before their 14 birthday and 20 % of 16-17 year old have some form of anxiety or mood disorder or disruptive or substance use disorder.¹² Other issues are - low feelings of self -worth, identity gender conflict, low exam performance, friendship issues, appearance complexes, gaming addictions and illicit drug use.⁵

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It's since this same period, i.e., late 1900's that Positive psychology has come forward in understanding the youth dynamics involving overall wellbeing and positive mental health outcomes.^{13,14} This has led to constant studies, investigations, explorations into positive school-based prevention and intervention programs to reduce mental illness and increase wellbeing in school children.

Why well-being/positive psychology should be taught in schools?

If things are compared everything is better right now than it was 50 years ago. People are spending more, houses are bigger, there are more cars and people have better clothes.¹⁵ But the anxiety and depression have increased. The average Italian, Dane and Mexican are more satisfied with life than 50 years ago, but the average American, Australian and Japanese is not any more satisfied with life than he was some 50 years ago, and the average Briton or German is less satisfied.¹⁶ There is not significant increase in happiness quotient. Also seen is that being happy is not ecological, biological, and genetic. Being happy is subjective and can be taught.¹⁷⁻²⁰ Schools are valued as very conducive ground for teaching wellbeing as children spend almost 30-35 hours or more per week in schools.²¹ They spend a lot of time interacting with teachers-peers-coaches which can be a vehicle to promote the wellbeing programs. Also is seen that parents and educationists view building of character and development of responsible citizen as an important aspect of schooling which is integral to wellbeing.²²

Moreover, increase in depression and increase in happiness are not only two reasons to teach wellbeing in schools but also a third important reason that well-being enhances learning.

Increase in positive feelings/wellbeing is likely to fulfil the traditional goal of education which is increase in learning. It is seen that positive mood produces broader attention,²³ more creative thinking²⁴ and more holistic thinking.²⁵

Within the framework of positive psychology, among many there have been following few encouraging findings-

1. Self-discipline is twice a good predictor of high school success than IQ.¹⁴
2. Happy teenagers earn very substantially more income 15 years later than less happy Teenagers.²⁶
3. Factors like positive emotions, gratitude, hope, character strength and goal setting are linked to high feeling of subjective wellbeing among children and adolescents.^{19,27}
4. Daily exercise of writing gratitude diary, counting one's blessings can assist towards making day to day life easy and pleasant.²⁸
5. Positive behaviour in adolescence is associated with midlife

wellbeing, high social interaction and engagement and few emotional difficulties.²⁹

6. In last few years, many positive psychology-based school-based programs have been employed that have produced positive effects, like- "celebrating strengths", "bounce back", "positive coaching", "teacher coach".¹²

On the other hand, there has been ongoing criticism about positive education in schools. Few raised concerns are – the character-building values taught by schools /teachers might be different than family values, students time will be wasted that can be spent in academic learning and parents' money is wasted which can be utilized in other academic coaching. Nevertheless, the growing evidence strongly suggests that well ness produces positive results among children and adolescents and with children spending so much time in schools it should be taught in schools. In summary, positive wellbeing programs in schools can- 1. Promote skills and strengths which can prevent mental illness; 2. Show measurable improvements in student's happiness; 3. Facilitate learning and improve academic achievement. So, with this understanding and conclusion, this paper further delves into positive psychology.

Define Positive Psychology and its History

"Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development".¹⁴ This field is concerned with wellbeing and optimal functioning of all individuals.¹⁸ There is stress on strengths and a life full of meaning and purpose.

Before World war II Psychology mission was to understand and treat mental illness. After the war there were lots of changes in Psychology mission, along with mental illness, mental wellness took the centre stage.³⁰ Positive Psychology (PP) was born in 1998-2000 by work of two psychologists- Martin Selinger and Csikszentmihalyi. The years 2000-2012 saw early progress of positive psychology. In 2012, Martin Selinger, "Father of positive psychology" proposed significant PERMA MODEL that put forward the five pillars of wellbeing - positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. It was in 2008-2018 that positive psychology application was studied in many areas starting from psychology as its influence spread to psychiatry, neuroscience, health, business and education.¹⁸ Among many other theories, following five strength- based interventions in positive psychology were put forward- Strength-based cognitive behavioural therapy, Positive psychotherapy for depression, Mindfulness-based therapy, Acceptance and commitment therapy and Compassion-focused therapy. Last few years have seen their efficacy and increasing use in clinical as well as non-clinical areas.

The main criticisms of positive psychology (PP) are- the main proponents of positive psychology like happiness and life satisfac-

tion are not new as existential-humanistic schools have already spoken about it. The PP theories are less empirical/tested evidence based than any other school of psychology. The criticisms and limitations are only few and with increasing research the scope of positive psychology in all areas of life is advancing. In the following section, the proposed positive psychology based school program is discussed.

“Positive Psychology Life- Skill” Curriculum Triangular Model in Schools

Life skills play an important part in adolescent development.³¹ Life skills education in schools is a novel idea where they are taught to students via games, stories, worksheets, and other programs. To define life skills-“They are adaptive and positive behavior that can enable an individual to deal effectively with the demands, stresses and challenges of everyday life.”³² Shek in 2020 conducted a “Adolescent life skills” study on 2474 students from 20 Hongkong local secondary in grade 7 to grade 12. Few of the several observations were- 93% students responded that Hongkong students need to learn like skills, 90% students perceived that life skill knowledge is important, 87% students regarded moral character more valuable than academic skills and 96.9% teachers reported that life skills are important to teach in schools.

Theoretical framework

The development of the proposed PPL curriculum is theoretically derived and supported by two models in positive psychology. First is the Martin Selinger’s wellbeing model which states that wellbeing constitutes five domains- positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA). Human beings are happy when they do well in the above five domains.¹⁷ The second model is the mutual support model of character strengths and mindfulness. As per this model, certain character strengths like curiosity facilitate mindfulness and people with these character strengths will move on to path of mindfulness meditation more eagerly than others and the other way around.³³

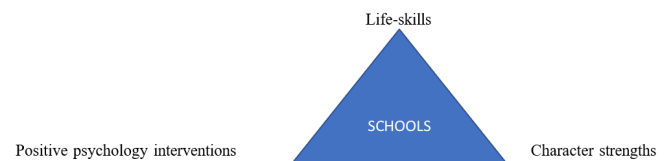
The Goal

To develop and implement a positive psychology-based “Positive Psychology Life- skill” curriculum in school.

Conceptualization

In this paper so far following has been argued- school is an important place to take care of children wellbeing, positive psychology is proven to be especially useful in education, well-being can be understood well vis a vis Martin Seligman’s PERMA model, life skills are important and can be taught and positive psychology character strengths are valuable, and they can be acquired via certain processes and skills. For example, its evidentially seen that

with skills like mindfulness students can learn character strengths easily and vice versa.³³ Based upon the above arguments and deriving from the chosen theoretical framework a positive psychology life-skill Curriculum Triangular model (PPL curriculum) is proposed. This curriculum will imbibe positive psychology interventions, life skills and character strengths as three important pillars of school wellbeing program. Its proposed that all three mutually feed each other, support each other are equally important in all student’s wellbeing.



Positive Psychology Life-Skills Curriculum Triangular Model Focus of the Curriculum

There are three major goals of the PPL curriculum

1. To develop character strengths
2. To enhance mental wellbeing happiness
3. To achieve high educational goals.

The curriculum targets strengths (like- courage, wisdom, kindness) that are mentioned in VIA classification.³⁴ The students are helped to identify their signature character strengths and encouraged to use these strengths in day-to-day life. The tools for achieving this are VIA youth survey³⁴, strength spotting and coaching³⁵ and training to use signature strengths in new ways.³⁶

Interventions

Lots of substantial research has shown that youth who has participate in positive interventions have experienced greater wellbeing. Few interventions that have shown great positive effects are- mighty me, circle of friends, gratitude intervention, write good thing about yourself, draw a best picture of yourself.^{12,20,32} In the proposed PPL curriculum, the below mentioned interventions will find place.

Strength based counselling (Richards & Huppert, 2011)29-

It is achieved by help of the school wellbeing team including counsellor, school nurse and the pastoral members. They will adapt a strength base model while treating mental health issues among adolescence. It will involve motivational interviewing³⁷ as its core component followed by positive psychological assessment by using the value in action inventory of character strengths.³⁴ The effective behavioural changes will be brought by processes like eliciting positive stories, giving positive responses, active listening, active-constructive responding, positive reframing, noting exceptions, exploring solutions, and calling for one’s own character strengths. To

provide help with depression and family pessimism positive cognitive behavior therapy would be put into place.

Integrating mindfulness and building character strengths (R Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012)³⁸- Mindfulness is aligning one's heart and mind inwardly towards awareness of the present moment.³⁹ It can be achieved via exercises like eating a raisin, body scan and mindful yoga, breathing space exercise, mindful speech and listening, mindful walking, mindful driving and mindful consuming. Evidence shows that cultivating mindfulness can help to build character strengths and the other way around.

Positive psychology Exercises- In positive psychology, development of flow and resilience is stressed upon. Following exercises can be used to empower school children to develop flow and resilience- controlling mind wondering via meditation, bravery via encountering negative emotions, zest via mindful meditation, perspective via self- knowledge /decentering self from emotions-cognitions-sensations, humility and humour via perspective, others- oriented character strengths like love, forgiveness, fairness, kindness via directing these oneself and later to others. The other few useful exercises can be- practice forgiveness, gratitude exercises, family journal and altruism exercises.

Processes

The PPL curriculum will be imparted in half a year and applied to whole middle school. This is done with evidential findings that pre-adolescence i.e., middle school is an evolving stage of formation of self-concepts. Any processes and interventions at this stage will help to bring lifelong positive changes more effectively than later when self-concept is more concrete.⁴⁰ In the beginning all students will be subjected to VIA strength character strength analysis and mental wellbeing measurement. Also, school grades, self- reports and interviews from teachers/parents will form part as measurement process. Every student will have a "wellbeing record" consisting of all the above. The above-mentioned processes will be intertwined in school's curriculum. At the end of six months, the same measurements will be put into place to notice the outcome.

Delivering a 45-minute session every once a week for 16-20 sessions.

Most lessons will involve meditation, yoga, mindfulness, and exercises of discussions of character strengths, in class activity, a worksheet, a role play, a homework sheet, group discussions, self-disclosure that encourage students to apply concepts and skills in their own lives and follow-up journal reflection.

Psychodramas in front of whole/school assemblies

This process is based upon the assumption that "facing obstacle" situations help us build our strengths and develop resilience. Every week based on any "one obstacle faced by students" a "role

play" is demonstrated by group of 5-6 students in front of a bigger group for others to relate to and for participants to relive.

Other Processes

To build character strengths other processes will be induced like- inviting motivational speakers, bibliotherapy, promotion of programs like -peer budding, shadowing in community and involvement in community help work to bring in here and now.

Measurements

The following instruments for measurement will be used in the PPL curriculum

1. As proposed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, character Strength measure for student's (VIA scale)- this will measure the pre-existing strengths of the students in areas like courage, humanity, justice, bravery, curiosity, forgiveness etc to build upon more.³⁴
2. Marsh wellbeing Profile (WB- Pro medium version)- this will measure wellbeing in areas of emotional stability, optimism, positive relations, prosocial behaviour, self-esteem etc.⁴⁰
3. School reports for measuring school achievement; 4. Socio-demographic measure via self-reports, interviews, observations from teachers, peers and parents.

Outcome

There is confidence that PPL curriculum implementation will bring better school achievement, enhanced happiness, decrease in general stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. As a by-product, interventions will strengthen self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism, and reduce interpersonal sensitivity symptoms.

Limitations

This curriculum has few limitations and setbacks, and they would be

- Backlash from parents, teachers, community that student's precious time/money is being wasted into developing so called soft skills whereas this time/money could be utilized in academic development.
- The core interventions would be delivered by teacher facilitators and counsellors who are trained by professionals' expert in mindfulness /meditation. The fidelity might be lost a bit.

These limitations can be reduced by keeping a continuous communication between school and parents and keeping parents educated about the benefits of the curriculum. Second, by assuring that the training facilitators are well versed and accredited experts in their fields.

Cultural Considerations

Wellbeing is tied to one's values and cultures. A professional need to be aware of these differences and consider the individual within the context of his/her social environment.

Following are the mentioned research that focus upon the cultural nuances in wellbeing

1. In individualistic cultures wellbeing is tied to having more wealth than collectivistic cultures.⁴¹
2. European American cultures are happier when independent goals are achieved whereas east Asians are happier when collective effort and interdependence is acknowledged.⁴²
3. American as considered as an independent culture whereas Japan as collective culture. Further it was found that US culture is high in experiencing meaning of life whereas Japanese culture is more involved with searching the meaning in life. Social norms are more predictable in collective cultures.⁴³
4. Positive emotional experience can differ based on cultural factors. For example, high arousal and excitement is valued more among Americans than Chinese who value calmness and low arousal.^{44,45}

Ethical Foundations

A final consideration concerns the ethical foundation for a model. There need to be caution against- Informed Consent. We must introduce the goal of the curriculum to the target population and their parents before starting. Let the targets and their parents/guardians freely decide whether to participate. Therefore, the informed consent of the target and/or their parents must be obtained before the commencement of the curriculum.

Do no harm

The greatest benefit to the children is to not to harm them psychologically, emotionally, and socially. Also, we must increase their sensitivity and pay attention to the risk-benefit ratio. If the possible risks outweigh the benefits, then we should abandon the curriculum. Facilitator be aware that any contact or intervention with vulnerable groups may cause distress or harm. For example, interventions like mindfulness and meditation to be used carefully among pre-existing depressed students if any.

Confidentiality

We must effectively manage the interviewee's private information. This is to respect the privacy of the interviewee. For example, their character strengths and any mental health issues should be kept confidential. For example, we can use all possible coding systems and consider appropriate and destroy them after two years.

Discussion and Future Recommendations

Education should facilitate overall development of students. Positive psychology in education may lessen the stigma attached to seeing the mental health professional in schools as positive psychology interventions can be seen more as strength building devises than clinical interventions. Through positive psychology interventions, awareness can be brought into cognition of students about being positive. This can itself enhance the self-efficacy, discipline of practices to stay positive and hence overall develop a positive attitude towards life.

There is lots of research to suggest that positive psychology has made its successful foray into many fields yet it still needs to extend more into child and adolescence wellbeing.²⁰ The scope for more evidential practices and more research-based interventions is vast and extremely optimistic.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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