Chapter 13
Enhancing Well-Being in Adolescents: Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology Interventions in Schools

Lisa Suzanne Green and Jaclyn Maree Norrish

13.1 Well-Being in Schools: Then and Now

There is increasing consensus that well-being is an important aspect of school life. Gill (2009) argues “human flourishing should be the core aim of education, and that education ought to be directed at the child as a whole, nurturing their diverse qualities and virtues as well as their inner integrity and harmony” (p. 6). Huntt (2010) also acknowledges the change of paradigm occurring in education whereby schools are now being seen as institutions whose role extends beyond academic competence to preparing the “whole child”.

This greater focus on the development of the whole child and the enhancement of well-being in schools is supported by a growing body of scientific research suggesting that well-being is related to social, emotional, and academic capability and prosocial behavior (Durlak et al. 2011). Additionally, research supports scientifically grounded well-being initiatives in playing a crucial preventative role in reducing depression, anxiety and stress within the school environment (Neil and Christensen 2007; Greenberg et al. 2003).

Green et al. (2011) suggest that historically schools have aimed for academic excellence as primary evidence for their success, however they note that there are growing numbers of schools who are now acknowledging the need to develop students in a more holistic way, with a stronger focus on well-being. For example, Geelong Grammar School and Knox Grammar School in Australia and Wellington College in the United Kingdom have made whole-school commitments to positive...
education programs that aim to help students to flourish psychologically, socially, and academically. Green et al. (2011) conclude that this recognition is also in response to the increasing statistics on psychological distress and mental illness in children and adolescents, and the need to take a more proactive rather than reactive approach to mental health.

Whilst well-being is not a new item on the school agenda, an historical review would suggest that the approach to well-being has primarily been deficit-focused. Akin-Little et al. (2003) note this particularly in regard to educational psychology services whereby they suggest these services are mostly available only after students demonstrate difficulties with learning or behavior. Damon (2004) argues that this problem-based focus in education and educational services has directed a huge share of the available resources to attempting to remediate the incapacities of young people with labels like Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and “learning disorder”. Morrison et al. (2006) suggest that this is hardly surprising given that educational systems and external agencies usually provide extra support services and personnel on the basis of documentation of a pupil’s assessed problems, deficits, and difficulties.

However, McGrath (2009) notes a shift in focus on well-being initiatives over time, beginning with the focus on self-esteem in the 1970s, which moved to social skills programs in the early 1990s, and then to resilience programs in early 2000. McGrath (2009) suggests from then on there had been a strong focus on anti-bullying initiatives, values programs, and student well-being initiatives including social and emotional learning programs. Noble and McGrath (2008) suggest that “… there are many examples of educational psychology practice slowly moving away from a model of deficit-focused service delivery toward more positive and preventative models that focus on the strengths of pupils, schools and families” (p. 121; Chafee and Bray 2004; Fagan and Wise 2000; Reschly 2000; Wilson and Reschly 1996).

This movement towards more positive and preventative models has been more recently supported by the emergence of positive education (Seligman et al. 2009). Initiatives that fall under the umbrella of positive education or “positive psychology in education” are aimed at increasing well-being and resilience. Such approaches do not ignore or discount the needs of students’ with specific difficulties or challenges but acknowledge the value of promoting holistic well-being in conjunction with supporting students’ specific needs. Moreover, it is proposed that helping students to develop their strengths and capacities has a beneficial and preventative effect on a wide range of challenges and difficulties that student’s experience (Jenson et al. 2004).

13.2 Positive Education

Professor Martin Seligman formally identified the field of positive education in 2009. Seligman et al. (2009) defined positive education as “education for both traditional skills and for happiness” (p. 293). Seligman’s interest in education began with rigorous research aimed at studying social and positive psychology (Seligman et al. 2009, p. 293). The Personal Responsibility Project (PRP; Brunwasser et al. 2007) and Positive Education Project (Seligman et al. 2009) are positive response to this question: it falls under the prevention, the most widely researched and the most widely researched. (p. 297), quoting the use of its use in reducing the stress and the promotion of well-being in this program are: (1) to increase student engagement and (2) to increase student engagement and enjoyment and engagement.

Seligman et al. (2009) state that positive education should be taught as a way of increasing life satisfaction and thinking.

More recently, it has been identified that positive education is a practical approach to addressing the psychological and educational needs of young people (Seligman et al. 2008). Whilst the study of positive psychology and its psychological constructs such as wellbeing may be seen as relevant to the development of high schools, the implementation of positive education in schools, beyond the well-being of young people, is particularly relevant.

13.3 School-Based Positive Education

The implementation of positive education in school is an important aspect of the role of the school. Positive education can be integrated into the school curriculum as a whole, or it can be introduced as a separate subject. There are a number of different approaches to positive education, which can be classified as school-based, community-based, or both. Positive education can be seen as a way of promoting the well-being of students and their families, as well as promoting the well-being of the school as a whole. Positive education can also be seen as a way of promoting a positive school culture, where students and staff feel valued and supported. While the field is young,
research aimed at solving the question “Can well-being be taught in schools?” (Seligman et al. 2009, p. 297). Seligman identifies both the Penn Resilience Program (PRP; Brunwasser et al. 2009) and Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum (Seligman et al. 2009) as two evidence-based approaches that give support to a positive response to this question. The PRP is designed to prevent depression and hence falls under the prevention banner. Seligman et al. (2009) notes that PRP is “one of the most widely researched programs designed to prevent depression in young people” (p. 297), quoting over 17 studies conducted over 20 years providing evidence for its use in reducing depression. The Strath Haven program has a stronger focus on the promotion of well-being. Seligman et al. (2009) suggests the major goals of this program are: (1) to help students identify their signature character strengths; and (2) to increase students’ use of these strengths in their day-to-day life. This program has also been scientifically evaluated and was shown to increase student’s enjoyment and engagement in school and improve their social skills.

Seligman et al. (2009) concludes that there are three primary reasons why well-being should be taught in schools: (1) as an antidote to depression; (2) as vehicle for increasing life satisfaction; and (3) as an aid to better learning and more creative thinking.

More recently, it has been suggested that a broader and more useful definition of positive education is “applied positive psychology in education” (Green et al. 2011). Positive psychology itself has been defined as an umbrella term encompassing theory and research in relation to what makes life worth living (Noble and McGrath 2008). Whilst the study of happiness falls under this umbrella, so do other psychological constructs such as meaning, wisdom, creativity and many more, all which may be seen as relevant to the school setting to assist in the understanding and development of high levels of psychological well-being in students, staff, and school. Beyond the well-being programs identified previously (i.e., PRP/Strath Haven), there are an increasing number of schools-based positive psychology interventions (PPIs) being created and utilized in schools in an attempt to teach and enhance the well-being of students.

13.3 School-Based Positive Psychology Interventions

The implementation of positive psychology in school settings is garnering substantial attention. As identified previously, schools are a central developmental context in adolescents’ lives and, along with their families and communities, play a critical role in the development of crucial life and social skills.

School-based PPIs are defined as initiatives that explicitly aim to enhance well-being or build competence within the school context. Whilst there has been substantial research into school-based programs that aim to prevent or treat mental distress, pathology, or risk behaviors (see Neil and Christensen 2007; Spence and Shortt 2007), studies into school-based programs that promote well-being are less common. While the field is young, PPIs focused on building capabilities and strengths, versus
approaches that aim to alleviate problems or fix deficits, are inherently attractive to educational professionals due to their constructive and holistic focus.

Positive psychology can be implemented in school settings explicitly, such as through structured programs or PPIs, or implicitly through practices that support positive psychology principles across various areas of school life. Thus far, the majority of research in school-based positive psychology has focused on explicit PPIs and programs. These programs can be divided into single-component PPIs that focus on one key construct, such as hope (Marques et al. 2011) or gratitude (Froh et al. 2008), or multi-component PPIs that integrate several key positive psychology concepts into a comprehensive approach.

### 13.3.1 Examples of Single-Component PPIs

Gratitude involves positive feelings, such as thankfulness or appreciation, which are related to perceived good fortune or the prosocial behaviors of others (Froh et al. 2010; Wood et al. 2010). In adolescent samples, gratitude has been related to beneficial psychological outcomes, such as high subjective well-being and optimism, as well as social benefits, such as pro-social behaviors and social support (Froh et al. 2009c). In a study of 700 adolescents (aged 10–14), Froh et al. (2010) found that adolescents with higher gratitude at one time point reported higher life satisfaction and more social integration 6-months later than those with initial low gratitude, supporting the benefits of gratitude over time.

There are two published studies of interventions that focus on cultivating gratitude in students. Froh et al. (2008) conducted a study of a counting blessings intervention where students were required to deliberately pay attention to up to five positive events daily for a 2-week period. Eleven classes of students were randomly allocated to the gratitude condition, a comparison condition that required students to pay attention to daily hassles, or a non-intervention control condition. Students allocated to the gratitude condition reported more satisfaction with school experience than students allocated to the other two conditions; and enhanced well-being relative to students in the hassles condition. In a second gratitude PPI study, Froh et al. (2009a) matched students (N=89; age range 8–19) by school grade and then randomly allocated them to a gratitude visit condition or a comparison condition that involved writing about daily events. Students allocated to the gratitude visit condition were invited to write a gratitude letter to someone who was important in their lives and deliver it in person. While overall there were no significant differences between the groups, a key finding was that positive affect moderated the relationship between the study condition and student well-being over the 2-month follow-up time period. This suggests that students with low initial levels of positive affect may benefit the most from gratitude PPIs.

Snyder (2002) proposed that hope is a cognitive-motivational process based on three interconnected components: (1) goals; (2) pathways or strategies to achieve the goals; and (3) agency or motivation to implement the pathways. Valle et al. (2006) investigated hope at the common after controlling for fewer internalizing indices, where 31 adolescents and 31 adolescents formed increased self-worth and at an 18-month.
investigated hope and life satisfaction in 860 students and found that high hope at the commencement of the study predicted high life satisfaction 1 year later after controlling for initial levels of life satisfaction. Hope was also associated with fewer internalizing behaviors over time. Marques et al. (2011) conducted a study where 31 adolescents took part in a 5-week hope program and a matched sample of 31 adolescents formed a comparison control. Students in the hope condition reported increased self-worth, life satisfaction, and hope relative to controls post-intervention and at an 18-month follow-up time point.

### 13.3.2 Examples of Multi-component PPIs

Multi-component PPIs focus on helping students to develop positive psychology skills in several key domains. An example is the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Program identified earlier, which integrates learning related to the 24 character strengths in the Values in Action framework (Peterson and Seligman 2004). The program runs over 20–25 weeks and integrates efforts to build character strengths, with efforts to cultivate positive emotions, explore sources of meaning in life, and develop resilience (Seligman et al. 2009). In an evaluation of the program, 347 year 9 students were randomly allocated to the Strath Haven curriculum or the school’s usual language arts condition (Seligman et al. 2009). Over the 2-year follow-up time frame, students who completed the Strath Haven curriculum demonstrated increased engagement with school, as measured by self and teacher reports, and improved social skills, as measured by mother and teacher reports; however, there were no significant improvements for symptoms of depression or anxiety. It may be that PPIs that aim to build strengths and capacities are most effective at promoting holistic well-being when used in conjunction with efforts to prevent or treat mental ill-health.

Strengths Gym is a similar example of a multi-component positive psychology program (Proctor et al. 2011). Strengths Gym provides a flexible curriculum for developing the 24 VIA character strengths through various strengths exercises and challenges, in-class activities, philosophical discussions, stories, and real-world homework activities (see Proctor, Chap. 2, this volume). Proctor et al. (2011) examined the effectiveness of Strengths Gym in a study of 319 adolescents (mean age = 12.98, SD = .50). Classes of students in two schools were allocated to the Strengths Gym condition or a comparison control condition. Teachers administered the Strengths Gym curriculum over a 6-month period. Post-intervention, students allocated to Strengths Gym reported significantly higher life satisfaction (r = .51) than students allocated to the comparison condition after controlling for age, gender, school, year, and baseline life satisfaction scores. In addition, while findings were non-significant, trends suggested benefits for the Strengths Gym condition in terms of positive affect, negative affect, and self-esteem. Taken together, these results provide promising evidence of the effectiveness of strengths programs in enhancing student well-being.
13.4 Evidence-Based Coaching as a PPI

The term "evidence-based coaching" was coined by Grant (2003) to distinguish between professional coaching that is explicitly grounded in broader empirical and theoretical knowledge base and coaching that was developed from the "pop psychology" personal development genre. Evidence-based coaching is underpinned by the field of coaching psychology. Coaching psychology is a complementary field to positive psychology, and similar to positive psychology, is also concerned with optimal functioning and well-being enhancement. Its focus however is on understanding and applying relevant psychological theories and techniques to a collaborative relationship to enhance goal attainment and increase self-regulation for the "normal, non-clinical population" (Grant 2005). Coaching psychology has been defined as an "applied positive psychology" (Australian Psychological Coaching Psychology Interest Group 2012), whereby "coaching" (including the methodology and relationship) provides the opportunity for the application of positive psychology research, such as strengths identification and use (Linley et al. 2010). The role of positive psychology in coaching has also been discussed previously in the literature, however further research in regard to its specific applications is needed (see Linley and Harrington 2005; Kaufmann 2006; Biswas-Diener and Dean 2007).

13.5 Evidence Based Coaching in Schools

At this point in time, there is increasing interest on utilizing coaching in schools, both for students and staff. For example, the University of East London's Coaching Psychology Unit, offer students a dedicated module on Coaching and Mentoring in Education and held an International Conference on Coaching and Positive Psychology in Education in 2010.

However, there is currently limited research on applications of coaching psychology and evidence-based coaching in the education sector. Despite this there is interest growing in this field with over 2,590 citations in the database ERIC (in October 2010 using the keywords coaching and education) and over 537 citations in the database PsycINFO. It should however be noted that the majority of this literature is focused on academic coaching for students to enhance learning, or overcome literacy or learning difficulties (e.g., Merriman and Coddington 2008; Plumer and Stoner 2005).

A study by Green et al. (2007) has given preliminary support for the use of evidence-based coaching in educational settings for students. Green et al. (2007) conducted a randomized wait-list control group study of evidence-based life-coaching with an adolescent population. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either a 10-week cognitive-behavioral solution-focused life coaching program or a wait-list control. They found that the 28 female senior high school students in the coaching program experienced a significant increase in levels of cognitive hardness, compared to the wait-list.

Furthermore, a recent strengths-based coaching study. Thirty-eight youth strengths-based coaching program at an independent school were randomly allocated coaching sessions over 4 weeks (Peterson 2006) survey the participants were being persistent in their signature strengths. Those writing about themselves was associated with engagement and hope programs may be considered intervention in a primary way also form an important part.

Whilst these studies based coaching in education and coaching psychology in the field of psychology can be both positive and require further single or multi-comparative study the broader perspective Green et al. (2011) study may not.

13.6 Strategic Life Coaching and Coach
cognitive hardiness, hope, and a significant decrease in levels of depression, compared to the wait-list control group.

Furthermore, a recent pilot study was conducted by Madden et al. (2011) utilizing strengths-based coaching for primary school boys in a within-subject design study. Thirty-eight year five male students (mean age=10.7 years) participated in a strengths-based coaching program as part of their Personal Development/Health program at an independent, private primary school in Sydney, Australia. Participants were randomly allocated to groups of four or five with each group receiving eight coaching sessions over two school terms. The Values in Action-Youth (Park and Peterson 2006) survey was used to highlight participant’s character strengths, and the participants were coached in identifying personally meaningful goals, and in being persistent in their goal-striving, as well as finding novel ways to use their signature strengths. They also completed a “letter from the future” that involved writing about themselves at their best. The strengths-based coaching pilot program was associated with significant increases in the students’ self-reported levels of engagement and hope. The authors concluded that strengths-based coaching programs may be considered as a potential mental health prevention and promotion intervention in a primary school setting to increase students’ well-being and may also form an important part of an overall positive education program.

Whilst these studies provide promising support for the ongoing use of evidence-based coaching in educational settings, further research is required.

13.6 Strategic Integration of Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology

Green et al. (2011) have argued for the integration of coaching psychology and positive psychology in the school setting to facilitate student, staff, and whole school optimal functioning and well-being. Whilst both positive psychology and coaching psychology can be utilized to enhance well-being and optimal functioning, they suggest that both approaches have primarily been applied independently of each other and require further integration. For example, schools who may be utilizing single or multi-component PPIs may not have even considered coaching or be mindful of what it has to offer a school, believing it to be primarily utilized in organizational settings. Similarly, a school implementing coaching for academic performance or for the broader purposes of enhancing well-being, such as the Madden et al. (2011) study, may not have considered also offering class or group based PPIs.

Whilst research supports that both positive psychology and coaching psychology approaches lead to increased well-being, it may not be necessary to utilize both approaches simultaneously. However, Green et al. (2012) suggest that whilst a school may choose to select either approach as a means to create enhanced well-being and optimal functioning for both students and staff, school leadership should consider a strategic integration of both approaches. They argue that any training in positive psychology principles could be enhanced through the use of evidence-based
coaching to support the transfer of training and sustain application in daily life. For example, if a student was learning about “strengths”, they could set a personal goal to leverage a particular character strength. The student then takes ownership of the goal with the learning becoming more personalized. If coaching was offered on a continuing basis to the student (either individually or in a group) there is opportunity to offer ongoing support and track progress of that goal.

Green et al. (2012) suggest that goals may be set in regard to the application of any positive psychology concept including gratitude, kindness, forgiveness. In this manner, they argue, positive psychology is “brought to life” whereby the concepts are applied meaningfully and practically to a student’s academic or personal life, drawing on the goal-setting and goal-striving methodologies of evidence-based coaching.

As such, we would suggest schools consider carefully how applications of both positive psychology and coaching psychology, either separately or as an integrated approach, could help create, enable and sustain well-being for students and staff.

13.7 Future Research and Implications

Future research is required on both school-based PPIs and evidence-based coaching in schools. In addition to supporting the use of both PPIs and evidence-based coaching in schools, further research will yield a more sophisticated understanding of the benefits of the two approaches for students with different needs and characteristics potentially enabling the targeting of interventions for maximum effect. In an attempt to resolve some of these questions, the authors are currently undertaking comparative research in these two fields involving a randomized controlled trial with senior high school students in Sydney, Australia (Harvard University, Institute of Coaching Grant 2011).

We would also suggest that even more importantly, research is required on how these two complementary fields may be more closely integrated to enhance outcomes for students, staff, and schools. Larger scale positive education initiatives, such as the one currently being conducted at Knox Grammar School, in Sydney Australia, are utilizing and combining both approaches in an attempt to increase student, staff, and whole school well-being (Green et al. 2011). Independent scientific evaluation will provide further support for these types of programs.

In addition, further research is required in regard to the mental health of those undergoing positive education interventions. PPIs and evidence-based coaching interventions are often promoted as “mental health prevention/promotion” and are usually aimed at a normal population rather than a clinical population with broad-sweeping assumptions on the mental health of those undergoing such interventions. This is particularly so in regard to coaching whereby many coaches assume that those wanting to engage a coach fall within the normal population. Fortunately, this assumption has been questioned by three scientific studies showing that 25–52% of people attending for coaching interventions present with significantly high levels of psychological distress (Green et al. 2006; Spence and Grant 2007; Kemp and Green 2010). We would suggest that more research in this area is needed to understand the true nature of the problems people might be experiencing who are engaging in coaching in order to better support them.

Overall, the under-researched and under-funded field of positive education is a greater problem than just the under-researched and under-funded field of positive education. As previously mentioned, both fields require much more systematic research and development. It is important that future research consider the integrated nature of these approaches and their potential to be effective in a wide range of educational settings.

13.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that coaching can have much to offer adults by improving their overall well-being and enhancing their ability to achieve personal and professional goals.
We would suggest that these mental health or “screening” issues have not yet been raised or discussed adequately within the positive psychology literature or in terms of screening for PPIs. Given there is scant literature supporting the use of PPIs or coaching with clinical populations, there are real concerns that such interventions may lead to a negative outcome, rather than the intended positive one. Green et al. (2012) also highlight this issue and provide the example of a school student who may undertake a “strengths-based coaching intervention”, fail to apply their strengths sufficiently or achieve their goals, due to an underlying clinical disorder such as depression, potentially worsening the clinical disorder, rather than improving the child’s well-being.

Overall, the understanding of the impact of PPIs on adolescents who are not mentally well is limited. A priority for both research and the application of positive education is a greater understanding of the experience of students with symptoms of mental illness, and how such students can be supported to obtain the help and support they need without excluding them from school-wide well-being practices. It is argued that positive education initiatives will work best when efforts to promote well-being and efforts to treat mental illness are applied in a complementary, integrated, and sustained way (Norrish and Vella-Brodrick 2009).

As previously mentioned, positive education includes both explicit structured education and implicit practices that support key learning in more informal ways. For example, students may explore their character strengths as part of a positive education program—this learning may then be supported and developed implicitly via school-wide practices such as exploring strengths at assemblies, educating parents on the importance of strengths, or creating a school-culture where the strengths language is used frequently (Fox Eades 2008). Similarly, the goal setting strategies that students learn as part of a coaching program may be developed by opportunities for students to set and work towards their goals in various classes and extracurricular activities. It is proposed that student learning is greatest when key messages are reinforced across numerous levels of the school environment and when core ideas are communicated between school staff, families, and the wider community (Weare 2000). However, while the whole school approach is potentially the most powerful in terms of promoting student well-being, it is also inherently more challenging to measure via rigorous research techniques, (such as randomized controlled trials), as it requires the manipulation of naturally occurring factors and the perversiveness of the approach precludes the creation of control groups. Balancing the importance of rigorous research techniques with ecological factors such as the importance of the school-wide practices that support and deepen learning is one of the greatest challenges of positive education moving forward.

13.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that both positive psychology and coaching psychology have much to offer adolescents in schools in not only enhancing well-being, but also improving their overall optimal functioning including their learning and achievement.
We have suggested that the strategic use of both positive psychology and coaching psychology by a school should be a key consideration by leaders, particularly in terms of these interventions underpinning a larger scale positive education program.

Finally, we concur with Clonan et al. (2004) who suggest that "no two school systems would implement positive school psychology in an identical fashion" (p. 105) and the need for schools to create bespoke programs that meet the individualized needs of their school's students and staff. Whether schools look to implement smaller scale PPIs or evidence-based coaching or alternatively are wishing to create a larger scale positive education program, there is a pressing need for further research to support such initiatives to support the widespread adoption of such programs in schools globally to increase the overall flourishing of not only our adolescent population, but for all students and staff.

References


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