

Graham Yates is the Deputy Head Pastoral, St. Swithun's, Winchester. Dr Helen O'Connor is the Clinical Counselling Psychologist, St. Swithun's, Winchester.

For communication, please email: yatesg@stswithuns.com

Graham Yates and Helen O'Connor

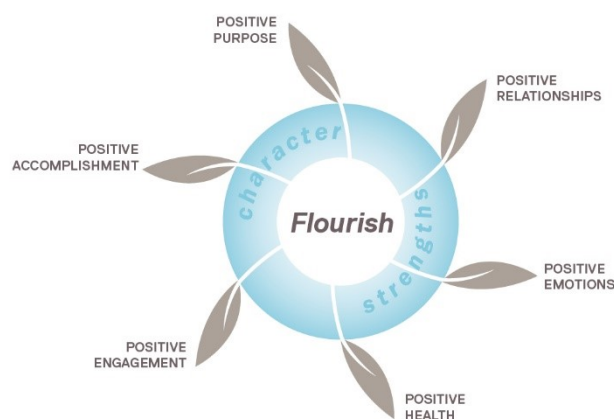
Classroom wellbeing and mental health

It is well documented that as many as one in eight, five to nineteen year olds have at least one mental health disorder (NHS digital, 2018) and whilst there have been many initiatives recently to improve the services that treat them, there is still a large gap between those who require help and those who go on to receive it (Young Minds, 2019). In fact, only one in four children with a diagnosable mental health problem receive the help and intervention that they need (Young Minds 2017). There is also a general trend in schools for pupils to be experiencing increased stress and for overall wellbeing to have suffered (ONS, 2015). Ask anyone what they hope that young people today should be feeling, the majority would say that they want them to be happy, confident and content. The irony for schools is this is not what they “teach”; rather children are taught how to achieve success through learning thinking skills and discipline. There are some good examples of schools tackling wellbeing as a whole school approach (Furlong, Gilman & Huebner, 2014) and actually helping young people to boost their wellbeing and their mental health, just as they do with physical health (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012). However, in the economic climate it is not always possible for schools to approach wellbeing with a school-wide approach but minor changes could be productive and help schools begin to think about managing wellbeing.

What is Positive Education?

At St. Swithun's we became interested in positive education following attendance at a conference hosted by a member of the Geelong Grammar school in Australia (Morrish & Seligman, 2014), which made us consider the prospect of early intervention in mental health difficulties; a proactive approach rather than

reactive. Geelong Grammar school's contribution to Positive education has been phenomenal, and they have led the way in helping schools consider alternative models to building the resilience of their pupils. As a school, we were initially sceptical and wondered how a model of positivity and promoting good mental health could change pupils' attitudes and help them develop good mental health. Geelong Grammar school have found a way of incorporating positive psychology (Oades & Mossman, 2017), into their education system in order to decrease depression in young people and enhance wellbeing and happiness, and their results are impressive. They suggest that schools wanting to replicate the model adapt it accordingly to their school environment, and that they take aspects of it which they believe will work while respecting the framework.



Geelong Grammar School's model embedded positive psychology into the entire school: all staff including teachers, administrators, catering, absolutely everyone participates in the training programmes to learn about positive education and how to apply it to their work, but also importantly how they may use it in the personal lives. The model for positive education is visually

depicted as six leaves coming together with a circle that is supported by character strengths, with flourishing as the core. The leaves represent the six domains of positive education, (positive emotions, positive relationships, positive purpose, positive meaning, positive health, and positive engagement) or those things that are “taught”. Each domain has a set of skills and evidence informed concepts. Underpinning the domains are character strengths which act as the supporting pathways to the domains (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are important for personal wellbeing (Niemiec, 2018), and play an important role in a person’s positive development (Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2018). Introducing character strengths to young people is critical to helping them understand themselves, others and their world (Toner, Haslam, Robinson & Williams, 2012). Character strengths are celebrated by each student and staff member as they contribute to the community. Schools are very good at celebrating talents, especially in areas like music and sport, but are often less good at identifying the specific character strengths that enable individuals to achieve different successes. Geelong embed consideration of character strengths in everything that they do. So often we consider worries and difficulties, rather than focusing on celebrating the good in each person. Learning about and teaching character strengths allows people to be connected and does not focus on a conversation about problems and challenges. Done well it can turn strengths into habits (Waters, 2017).

Positive Education at St. Swithun’s School, Winchester

At St Swithun’s school we were very interested in the Geelong model and in September 2017 began our positive education journey. Having read about the Geelong approach and spoken to colleagues in other Australian schools, we felt that, unlike the Geelong model, our pupils would benefit from a ‘bottom up’ approach, with Year 7 pupils receiving the greatest input. This was partly in response to the statistics about mental health issues becoming so prevalent by the age of 13 (Hollinsley, 2018) (Khan, 2016). Our aim was to help the girls understand what makes them feel good and how to do good and, in so doing, show them how to make the most of their lives

and flourish. We achieved this by focussing on two key concepts within the curriculum:

- Optimism (the force that motivates us to create a positive future for ourselves) and
- Resilience (the capacity to bounce back when life throws a curve ball).

We spent the rest of the year researching further and devising our curriculum, using the framework from Geelong and began teaching our positive education curriculum in September 2018. Year 7 pupils had one hour a week of positive education across two terms covering character strengths and each of the 6 domains. Our vision for the future is that all girls will have the exposure to a positive education programme enabling them to move forward through their life with the right wellbeing skills needed to live positively.

A key element of the Geelong model is to include parents to develop a consistent approach. We were keen to explore this and sent termly interactive newsletters to Year 7 parents outlining what we had been covering with the girls and also suggesting activities that they could do with their daughters as follow up at home. Those that engaged with these reported some quite powerful conversations and experiences.

What have the impacts been?

Our evidence to the impact of the new curriculum are rather anecdotal so far. However, with one successfully educated first year cohort, we have noticed that many of the girls are more reflective, more self aware and have a better understanding of who they are and how to cope with adversity. The following quotes are from the first cohort through:

- It’s helped me to be more thoughtful to others
- I tried the kindness ripple for a day and it made me feel happier
- It’s helped me deal with stress which sometimes can be overwhelming
- It’s opened my mind and made me see things differently
- It’s helped me get stuck in and not be afraid of asking questions
- I have learnt how to get past a negative time
- I have learnt to not doubt my strengths

As teachers of the course we have been witness to many powerful discussions, comments and actions. In response to exploring positive emotions we focused on kindness and this resulted in the Year 7 girls writing good luck messages to the Year 13 girls for their A Level exams and delivering them to them personally in their form time. This was especially powerful for both the Year 13 and Year 7 pupils.

What next at St. Swithun's?

The Year 7 cohort that experienced the positive education curriculum last year will have further input revisiting and developing aspects of the 6 domains in Year 8. This will be slightly less contact time than Year 7. We are also adding in positive education lessons where it is possible to the upper school focusing on delivering the more adaptable elements of the course.

What can schools do to introduce positive education to their curriculum?

Not all schools and education settings can commit to the positive education model proposed; whether that be the Geelong model in its entirety or even what we have achieved at St Swithun's. There are however, some less complex ways of introducing positive education into schools which are based in a positive psychology framework. These ideas are not a full programme but may help promote a positive education curriculum and understanding to pupils and staff. Some examples:

- Feedback from teachers to pupils about the specific strengths a pupil has been noticed using. For example, rather than saying they have done a good job a teacher may wish to comment on the fact that they saw the pupil had persevered despite difficulties in understanding or grasping the concepts.
- Teaching aspects of positive education across year groups to encourage a school wide approach to kindness and forgiveness. For example, suggest classes start a kindness ripple throughout the school, whereby pupils look out for others in aspects of their daily life and how they may help people. They can leave kindness calling cards to assist people in knowing that they have achieved a random act.
- Use tools (such as an online strength tool or character survey) to identify pupils and

teachers character strengths. Once identified pupils can complete a number of tasks which identify how they have used their own character strengths, when they could use more, and those which they could develop further. Character strengths allows pupils and teachers to not only focus on academics but also consider aspects of their personality performance in classes which can lead to higher levels of happiness and productivity.

- A form book or class book in which pupils record what is "awesome" about their school on a week by week basis. Pupils can then reflect back on what other people have observed in moments when they may be struggling to help turn their negative thought patterns.
- Help pupils identify the range of emotions that we feel focusing on positive emotions and the benefits of these. Discuss how evolution plays a role in our experience of negative emotions and how we wish to experience more positive emotions. Explain in form or class time the positive benefits of positive emotions on our well-being and citing happiness research can be very powerful.

References

- Boniwell, L. & Ryan, L. (2012). *Personal Well-being lessons for secondary schools. Positive Psychology in Action*. Open University Press.
- Furlong, M. J., Gilman, R. & Heubner, E. S. (2014). *Handbook of Positive Psychology in schools*. 2nd ed. Taylor Francis: Routledge.
- Hollinsley, J. (2018). *An Educators guide to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools*. John Catt Educational.
- Morrish, J. & Seligman, M. (2014). *Positive education: The Geelong Grammar School Journey*. Oxford University Press.
- Khan, L. (2016). *Missed Opportunities: A review of recent evidence into children and young people's mental health*, Centre for Mental Health, 7 June 2016.
- NHS Digital (2018). *Mental health of children and young people in England, 2017*. Retrieved Sept 22, 2019, from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017#resources>.
- Niemiec, R. (2018). Six functions of character strengths for thriving at times of adversity and opportunity: a theoretical perspective. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.
- Oades, L. G. & Mossman, L. (2017). The Science of Wellbeing and Positive psychology. In M. Slade, L. Oades and A. Jarden (eds.). *Wellbeing, Recovery and Mental Health*, Cambridge University Press, pp7-23.
- ONS (Office of National Statistics) (2015). *Measuring National Well-being: Insights into children's mental health and well-being*. England, 2015.

Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A classification and handbook*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Toner, E., Haslam, N., Robinson, J. & Williams, P. (2012). Character strengths and wellbeing in adolescence: Structure and correlates of the values in action inventory of strengths for children. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52, 637-642.

Wagner, L., Gander, F., Proyer, R. T. & Ruch, W. (2018). Character strengths and PERMA: Investigating the relationships of character strengths with a multidimensional framework of well-being. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.

Waters, L. (2017). *The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength-based parenting helps your child and your teen flourish*. Scribe UK

Young Minds. (2017). *Wise Up: Prioritising wellbeing in schools*. Retrieved Sept 22, 2019, from: <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1428/wise-up-prioritising-wellbeing-in-schools.pdf>

Young Minds (2019) *A New Era for Young people's mental health*. Retrieved Sept 22, 2019, from: <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2620/a-new-era-for-young-peoples-mental-health.pdf>.

Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. Readership is worldwide and in the UK include: primary; secondary and further education teachers; university staff and health-care professionals working in education and health settings. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

Contributors (see a recent list) - Do you have up to 3000 words about a relevant issue that you would like to see published? Please contact the Editor

Education and Health Archive

Each issue of the journal, published since 1983, is available via the archive. There are several simple indices that help to identify articles by keywords; year/issue number; author surname and article title. It can be seen that some contributors have had a number of articles published and there are a range of topics that have been covered over the years. Sometimes a contributor will update their article or develop points raised by another contributor. The pages on the website, that have been provided for the Education and Health journal, usually have the highest number of 'reads' across all pages on this Internet site.

SHEU

Schools and Students Health Education Unit

The specialist provider of reliable local survey data for schools and colleges and recognised nationally since 1977

"The (SHEU survey) helped us to prioritise where we needed to be in terms of PSHE education. We delivered assemblies based on the evidence as well as curriculum development, and dealt with whole school issues – particularly in regard to pastoral care. The answers received to the question on the survey Who are you most likely to approach if you needed help worried staff as teacher was not a popular answer. Subsequently the staff asked themselves why this had happened and what needed to be done to address the issue. There was more emphasis on wider aspects of PSHE education delivery, which needed more attention. To summarise, the (SHEU survey) allows the PSHE department to assess the impact of teaching and learning and modify future lessons accordingly. It allows our school to look at whole school issues such as the extent to which the pastoral care system is meeting the needs of our pupils. It helps us to do need analysis of our pupils. It helps to provide important evidence for SEF / the extent to which we are meeting wellbeing indicators / National Healthy School standards." Secondary School Head

For more details please visit <http://sheu.org.uk>