Don’t Smile Until Christmas: The Promise of Positive Psychology in the Classroom

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The shiny new students who want to be teachers arrive in my classroom. They read and remember all their new learning. Young teachers-in-waiting bring varied dispositions of which they are only slightly aware. They bring fairly entrenched philosophies that they cannot articulate. They bring only pedagogies with which they are personally familiar. After the first practicum experience, strategically organized in a Title I urban school, they return somewhat shaken and the teacher notions that they carried with them to class that first day evaporate. Unfortunately, common wisdom infiltrates their thinking. When the pre-service teachers are asked to describe the non compliant behavior observed in the practicum classrooms they respond: ‘irritating’, ‘annoying’, ‘disruptive’. When asked how to best intervene, the results are even more troubling: “...my supervising teacher is right, you better not smile until Christmas.” “...you have to be like that - mean - if you want them to do what they are supposed to.” “Kind and firm only works - maybe - with little kids.” “Since these kids are raised in low socioeconomic areas and the parenting skills are not the best, these students are used to authoritarian figures and so teachers should be in the same controlling manner.” This is a teachable moment! Students who are at-risk need my energetic, fresh teachers to embrace a major paradigm shift.

Positive Psychology Overview

How to manage this transformation so that these new teachers begin the first day of school with their eyes searching for the fearful, failure-avoiding student? Or, worst yet, the failure-accepting student who radiates the learned helplessness that Seligman (1967) identified 40 years ago. How to help future
teachers understand that managing your classroom requires more than a few transition strategies, attention getters, first day of school schedules, and extrinsic systems of reward? How to introduce the complexities of temperament, personality, psychological dynamics, social and emotional learning, restorative justice, emotional needs, motivational theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, developmental theory? Fortunately, Seligman again brings the clarity: from learned helplessness to learned optimism (Seligman, 1998).

**Learned Optimism**

Every new teacher who crosses the path of children and youth does so with heart and spirit should learn to explicitly teach the positive psychology in their classrooms, K-12. There are three central concerns of positive psychology new teachers should master: positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.

**Positive principles** - Understanding positive emotions entails the study of contentment with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future. Understanding positive individual traits consists of the study of personal strengths and virtues, such as the capacity for love and work, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, curiosity, integrity, self-knowledge, moderation, self-control, and wisdom. Understanding positive institutions entails the study of the strengths that foster better communities, such as justice, responsibility, civility, parenting, nurturance, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, purpose, and tolerance. Positive psychology “....is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best in themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play” (Positive Psychology Center, 2010). The Center’s research based cutting edge information should change the teachers and teaching profoundly.

**Flow** - The birthplace of positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania - founded by Benjamin Franklin - is a worthy irony given that the pursuit of happiness is the birthright of all children. Educators have a rare opportunity to address all aspects of a student’s life every day teaching balance and “flow”.

**Full life** - The emerging body of knowledge in positive psychology is fortified by strong experimental research. Educators who adopt positive psychology principles in their classroom can now answer the “warm and fuzzy” criticisms with rigorous scientific data. Positive psychology advocates for explicitly teaching students how to lead the “full life” irrespective of advantages or disadvantages...stresses or supports...challenges or choices (Seligman, 1998).

**Pleasant life in the classroom** - Creating a pleasant life in the classroom, creating a good life in the classroom, creating a meaningful life in the classroom inspires the kind of programs, curriculum, and activities that are proven successful with students who are failing. The curriculum and activities that are derived from the principles of positive psychology are easily integrated into traditional classroom instruction. Some examples of positive psychology in action, organized around the precepts of positive psychology, are presented below (Murray, 2003). However, there are endless possibilities only limited by the teacher’s imagination. Read - The Handbook of Positive Psychology in the Schools (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009).

**Not Just Touchy-Feely Anymore**

Positive psychology aligns with neuroscience research that confirms that experiential transactions change the brain as described (Davidson, 2001) in an outstanding video: *The Heart Brain Connection*

Social emotional learning theory - especially the constructs of self-regulation and impulse control that are identified as key predictors of academic achievement (Goleman, 1998) as presented in his video *Selling SEL* [http://www.edutopia.org/daniel-goleman-social-emotional-learning-video](http://www.edutopia.org/daniel-goleman-social-emotional-learning-video) - is also compatible with positive psychology. Positive psychology incorporates the literature on classroom climate and school culture as essential to the success of underachieving students (CASEL, 2010). A powerful summary of the work of the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning is found at CASEL [http://www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org). Positive psychology is consistent with the movement toward restorative justice (Holtham, 2009). Learn more about taking restorative justice to school at the Youth Transformation Center or
http://www.youthtransformationcenter.org/about.html. The research in the area of resiliency training is developed in tangent with the research in positive psychology with curricular ideas available http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm. The principles of positive psychology are clearly delineated, well researched, and cross reference easily to other emerging areas of study.

I want my new teachers to understand that students will learn optimally only if the teacher creates a pleasant life in the classroom, a good life in the classroom, and a meaningful life in the classroom:

**Pleasant Life:** Pleasures of positive affect and a sense of personal well-being.

**Good Life:** Identification and amplification of one’s own unique strengths and skills.

**Meaningful Life:** Participation in activities outside of self for the good of society

*Teaching activities* - Some examples of activities derived from positive psychology principles are summarized (Murray, 2003). The examples presented are intended to activate the teacher’s own repertoire of imaginative ways to implement positive psychology principles in classrooms that are easily integrated into academic lessons.

**Pleasant Life Activity:** Plan your ideal day. Propose it. Read about it. Write about it. Draw it. Research it. Detail it. Share it. Savor it.

**Good Life Activity:** Identify a tedious task. Write about it. Tell about it. Think about how to enliven it. Think about a talent you have that you can use to enrich it. Write about it. Tell about it. Share it. Practice it.

**Meaningful Life Activity:** Plan the “perfect” surprise for someone who needs it. Research it. Plan it. Write about it. Detail it. Present it.

There are infinite variations: Make one pleasant statement to someone every
day and graph your activity. Journal one of your talents that you gave away today. Write a gratitude letter. Visit the top ten websites on positive psychology for ideas and inspiration

The Teaching Task Force

The positive psychology teaching task force at the University of Pennsylvania http://www.scribd.com/doc/9935890/Positive-Psychology reviewed the literature that finds positive student outcomes associated with the deployment of positive psychology in the classroom. The task force also framed curriculum around learning virtues: wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence and their associated characteristics (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Positive psychology invites deliberate and explicit development of those virtues. Thus, positive psychology is the antithesis of emotionally void behavioral interventions...of scripted teaching...of compliance...of conformity...of reactivity...of fault...of deficit. The progressive education movement emphasized the joy of learning (Sizer,1973). The joy of learning is now operationalized in the pursuit of happiness, health, and hope through positive psychology in the classroom and in the schoolhouse.

The Joy of Learning: Finding a Happy Place

Positive psychology turns the concept of self esteem inside out replacing it with attention to the importance of self care, self kindness, and self regulation as the means to authentic happiness in all situations. This is the means to counter disadvantaged circumstances and to build resilience. This science proposes that teachers can teach their students to find their own happy place. If my future teachers help their students find their happy place - by making make their schools and classrooms happy places - then I have done my job. Is is really as simple as positivity? Can teachers help students find authentic happiness? And students help teachers find it, too? Can we bring joy back to school? So it seems...so the science tells us.

References


Murray, B. (2003). Primer on teaching positive psychology, APA Monitor, Vol. 34, No. 9, 52

