

**Positive psychology and the purposes of  
schooling: A qualitative exploration of the  
role of positive education in  
nurturing eudaimonic  
conceptions of prosperity and success.**

**By Kylie Michelle Trask-Kerr**

ORCID ID 0000-0002-8198-0164

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**Melbourne Graduate School of Education**

**Centre for Positive Psychology**

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# Abstract

Positive education emerged from positive psychology and its aims include expanding the metrics in education to encompass flourishing: defined for this thesis as the achievement of Aristotelian eudaimonic happiness. This goal aligns with educational philosophies that espouse education for happiness, citizenship and collective wellbeing. However, the philosophical foundations of positive education may diverge, in part, from the ideas of normative ethicists like Aristotle, and its aims may be impeded by societal beliefs about the purpose of education as well as narrow definitions of success, goodness and prosperity. In this thesis qualitative methods are used to explore these concepts through the writings of 431 students. Using thematic analysis as well as the PERMA, PWI and Aristotelian frameworks, across three studies, this thesis examines: a) whether positive education can achieve an ideological shift towards education for collective flourishing, and b) whether positive education may be a vehicle for augmenting a more social purpose of education. Studies found that students of positive education may be more likely than comparison groups to attribute prosperity to relationships and less likely to discuss money as indicative of success and that students in all groups view relationships and positive emotions as important. Social equity, health, moral goodness and collective wellbeing did not feature prominently in student responses, and most students emphasised the credentialing role of education, suggesting potential for further development of positive education programs to nurture flourishing and engender a more social purpose of schooling.

**DECLARATION**

I, Kylie Michelle Trask-Kerr declare that this thesis comprises my original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy - Education at the University of Melbourne, except where indicated in the preface. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given in the bibliography. The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit, exclusive of tables and references.

Kylie Michelle Trask-Kerr

# Preface

## I. Information on co-authored papers in this thesis.

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Tan-Chyuan Chin	15%	Contributing to concept and design; completing and amending ethics application; questionnaire design and data collection.

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To my children Lucy and William Kerr: It is *because* of you that I care deeply about the future of education and want to contribute, however modestly, to the creation of a more caring, hopeful and peaceful world. You and the people like you, with your critical nature and your kind hearts, have the power to change the world for the better, and I know you will.

## Table of Contents

1. Rationale.....	12
1.1 My personal rationale for this thesis.....	12
1.2 The history and evolution of positive psychology as a movement.....	17
1.3 Positive education and educational purpose: Towards a redefinition of success...20	
2. Literature review.....	27
2.1 Towards a new prosperity: Delineating the aims of positive psychology and measuring the impact.....	27
2.2 The purpose of schooling: Historical and contemporary views on the purpose and function of education.....	37
2.3 Positive psychology and the “problem” of normativity.....	48
3. Research questions and hypotheses.....	63
3.1 The gap.....	63
3.2 Research questions.....	64
3.3 Research hypotheses.....	65
3.4 Methodological choices .....	67
4. Success and prosperity.....	69
4.1 (Publication) Positive education and the new prosperity: Exploring young people’s conceptions of prosperity and success.....	69
5. Positive education and the “good” life.....	105

5.1 (Publication) Positive education, Aristotelian eudaimonia and adolescent notions of the “good” life.....105

6. Positive education and the purposes of schooling: Does school contribute to a good life? .....133

6.1 (Publication) Positive education and the purposes of schooling: Does school contribute to a good life? .....133

6.2 Additional data: Teacher responses to positive education. ....170

7. Discussion.....174

7.1 The results: What have we learnt from these studies? .....174

7.2 Positive education: A vehicle for redefining school success? .....180

7.3 Future directions. ....186

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<p>Leunig, M. (2018, February 28)</p> <p>“Education” [Cartoon].</p> <p><a href="https://www.leunig.com.au/works/recent-cartoons/832-education">https://www.leunig.com.au/works/recent-cartoons/832-education</a></p> <p>Image courtesy of Michael Leunig.</p>	<b>p.14</b>	<b>Y</b>
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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 My personal rationale for this thesis.

When I was a secondary school teacher of philosophy around 10 years ago my students and I spent a great deal of time exploring philosophic notions of goodness and ideas about how to live well. The young people I encountered were passionate about ethics and interested in big ideas. There was, however, a distinct foreboding or sense of resignation among them. One student, when discussing the need for ethics in the modern world, argued for a need to live well in the present because, "...the city will be underwater in 10 years' time." Although fortunately an exaggeration, it occurred to me that this child has grown up with the belief that the world may be ending within her lifetime. It seems unfathomable that a person could live, grow and flourish with this belief, and anecdotally it appears that the expectation of, or resignation to, a dystopian future is not uncommon. These young people may be part of a generation who live without hope for the future, or with a diminished sense of their own role and future purpose, and this has huge implications for education and its role in helping students to live well. This sparked my interest in education for flourishing.

The world today is in many ways better than it was for previous generations (Norberg, 2016). My grandmother was born in 1920, and lived through the Great Depression and World War II, at a time when family members commonly succumbed to now-curable illnesses. Despite this she somehow lived well into her nineties with an apparent sense that the world was getting better and more "marvellous" by the minute. In contrast, among our youth, we currently see an apparent acceptance of a bleak future, coupled with a reluctance to turn to the older generation for help. Youth may justifiably feel that previous generations, the elders

within communities, have let them down. This distrust is possibly exacerbated by some adults' reactions to technology and to youth activists like Greta Thunberg. Yet community, I think, *must* work together to be part of the solution. In my discussions with students, community seldom featured in discussions of living well. Instead, there was a focus on individual pursuits, individual pleasures, "living for the moment", wealth as an indicator of success and education commonly discussed as a commodity to be bought and received rather than a life-long pursuit. This view is certainly not peculiar to young people as it appears to be ubiquitous and often reflected in mainstream media. These ideas in fact may be the result of the influence of parents, politicians, policy makers and teachers (cf. Harrison, Dineen & Moller, 2018).

These impressions are worrisome. Our conception of "the good life", our definition of success and our hope for the future play a symbiotic role in giving our lives meaning and determining *how* we can work towards achieving a life of well-being, or eudaimonic happiness. These conceptions inform our morality and guide us in how to live and are therefore fundamental to education. For young people at school, these ideas inform their sense of why they are at school and what they should be achieving while they are there. Despite the disagreement among scholars about the purpose of schooling (cf. Brighthouse, 2009; Caplan, 2018; Dewey, 1938; Goodlad, 2004; Noddings, 2010; Quay, 2013), a thread running through all arguments about educational purpose is the notion that it is designed to improve individual lives, broader communities and the world: to make things *better*. But this cannot be possible if our young people, and even our broader society, are pursuing the wrong things.



Figure 1. Image courtesy of Michael Leunig

As an educator and parent I find the apparent muddled sense of purpose among our youth, in education and in life, deeply troubling and I imagine many others do as well. Damon (2008), for example, found that approximately one-fourth of young people in his American study appeared to be “rudderless” and lacking direction (p.7), and encourages schools, communities and parents to reverse this. We seemingly have a generation born with the belief that the world is falling down around them and they possibly *feel* that their communities cannot help. High levels of depression here in Australia (Mission Australia, 2016) and loneliness (Lim et al., 2019; Marsh, 2017; Qualter et al., 2015) may be reflective of this. Martin Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement, wonders how levels of anxiety and depression could be so high in such wealthy countries (Seligman, 2008), but in many ways it makes sense. Children born into relative privilege in Westernised societies may not be feeling this way because they have too much “stuff” or too little, are too wealthy or too poor or are lacking the comforts and pleasures of life. The causes of mental

health problems are always complex, but there is a possibility that many youths are anxious and unhappy when they carry the terrifying burden of the demise of humanity, have a diminished sense of community or, possibly, because they are pursuing the wrong things. Recent youth activism for climate change may be viewed as a glimmer of hope or may simply reflect the despair and anger many are feeling. The burden felt by our youth may be a contributor to an inward turn towards neoliberal individualism, a symptom of it, or perhaps simply coincide with it. Under these circumstances, flourishing may be difficult to achieve or even define, and without a clear idea of what it *means* to flourish, the purpose of education may be similarly misguided or ambiguous.

Beyond this conjecture, it is incumbent upon educators to find out what young people are thinking about the good life and the purpose of education and, in particular, *how* ubiquitous neoliberal or individualistic conceptions of the good life actually are so we can find out how they may be remedied through education. If we are to help the current generation to “carry the universe forward”, as Dewey (1981) hoped, we may need to nurture a more positive and hopeful path through education and through life: a path towards *goodness* in the Aristotelian sense, towards community spirit and good citizenship. Achievement of this may require an ideological shift: from education as a commodity to education as a foundation for a flourishing life. It may also require a rethinking of notions of success and living well: moving young peoples’ conceptions of the good life towards less inwardly-focused ideals. However, it is essential that we find out, firstly, *what* young people are currently thinking, beyond these extrapolations, to establish a “baseline” understanding and to determine whether current interventions are impacting these ideas. This thesis embarks on an exploration of young peoples’ ideas about flourishing that will, however modestly,

represent a step towards determining how we can help young people to flourish as individuals, school communities and throughout their lives.

## **1.2 The history and evolution of positive psychology as a movement.**

In the past two decades, the emerging focus on well-being known as positive psychology has been seen by some as an answer to the current worldwide mental health crisis and has thus increased in popularity in education and various other fields (cf. Wong & Roy, 2017).

Positive psychology is an attempt to develop a science that will help us to improve quality of life. As a movement, it started in 1998 when Martin Seligman declared that psychology needed to shift away from its focus on pathological purposes and move towards making peoples' lives better. In a special edition of *American Psychologist* that has become a seminal document in the positive psychology movement, Seligman and Csikszentmihályi (2000) spelled out their goals for psychology. They argued that before World War II, through the work of scholars like Terman (1939), Watson (1928) and Jung (1933), psychology attended to three missions: to treat mental illness, make peoples' lives better and to nurture high talent. After the war, due to the creation of both the Veteran's Administration (now Veteran's Affairs) and the National Institute of Mental Health in the US, funding increased for research into curing mental illness and psychologists in America turned their attention exclusively towards this purpose.

Seligman and Csikszentmihályi (2000) declared that at the turn of the century, the United States must choose between a continued pursuit of wealth while ignoring the needs of its people and the people of the world, or work towards increasing the well-being of its people and positive communities. Arguing that at the time psychologists knew little about what made life worth living, they posited that the social and behavioural sciences should be able to find an empirically sound method of determining how to live well: what kinds of families help children to flourish, what workplaces increase satisfaction and what policies

increase civic engagement. In short, they wanted to create a science of well-being. Seligman and colleagues worked to delineate the field and it became defined by its empirical base and its work towards the positive as opposed to removing the negative.

This birth of positive psychology led to the establishment of a new field of academic and practical work. These include positive psychology interventions (PPIs) and research in the area of mindfulness (cf. Baer, 2015; Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005) hope (Lopez, 2013), the growth mindset (Seligman, 2011), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), “broaden and build” (Fredrickson, 2001), character strengths (cf. Park & Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011) and their respective interventions.

Positive psychology builds on the works of humanistic psychologists Maslow (1962), Rogers (1980) and others, which share many of the same concerns with the emotions, empathy and inter-personal relationships (Bohart & Greening, 2001). Maslow (1962), for example, proposed a hierarchy of human needs, such as safety, belongingness, love, physiological needs and self-actualisation. Rogers (1980) is known for his focus on the “self”, and in particular self-actualisation, self-enhancement and self-transcendence.

Interestingly, although the founders of positive psychology distance themselves from humanistic psychologists, stating that their work failed to achieve a substantial empirical base and spurred numerous therapeutic “self-help” movements (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) a lot of work and interventions that had previously emerged from humanistic psychology, self-help and other avenues are often generally regarded as being under the positive psychology umbrella. A financial benefactor at the recent International Positive Psychology Association World Congress, for example, attributed his interest in positive

psychology to his following of popular self-help guru Tony Robbins, a statement which he acknowledged may cause some consternation among many in the field of positive psychology.

Seligman's (2002) "three pillars" of positive psychology are: positive traits, positive emotions and positive institutions. Together, these indicate what the field sets out to improve to achieve its goal. Seligman's notion of PERMA (2018; 2011), an acronym signifying Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment, is a framework outlining the "building blocks" of well-being and forms the basis of Seligman's theory of well-being upon which his science of positive psychology is built. Since its inception, positive psychology has evolved significantly and research within the field has been broad and varied, spurring new ideas, revised PPIs and reinvigorated versions such as Wong's (Wong, 2011) "2.0" version and Lomas's (Lomas, 2016) second wave.

Seligman's main goal and the main goal of positive psychology has become significantly broader than simply a shift in the field of psychology. While the focus of positive psychology is often about this shift in the practice of psychology and about individual subjective well-being, the vision of achieving an "economy of well-being" (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2008), aims towards impact on a global scale. Positive psychology aims to embolden nations and institutions to value measurement of well-being alongside other current measures of success such as economic growth (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2008). Although this seems a natural extension of the desire to shift a focus in psychology and enhance the well-being of individuals, it nonetheless presents challenges and implications that extend beyond simply a shift in practice. For one thing, this goal takes positive psychology into areas that were previously the domain of other fields such as

philosophy, education, sociology and economics. It may also require a cultural shift and a change in the global mindset. Although we tend to value what we measure and this affects what we do (cf. Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010), simply increasing measurement of well-being will not guarantee that it will become a priority, especially given the status of current measures of success such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), company profit, high stakes academic testing and national debt. Some scholars may question whether positive psychology is the appropriate vehicle for such a cultural shift, particularly as it spans philosophical, educational, and economic domains not traditionally inhabited by psychology. However, the contemporary world appears to take heed of the advice of psychology above, for example, philosophy, possibly due to its perceived relevance to the “real” world; the modern proclivity for scientism (cf. Sorell, 2013); a turn toward introspection or, as suggested by Cabanas (2018), a retreat towards self-improvement and neoliberal individualism as a symptom of current crises and uncertainty. Regardless of the reasons, the world is listening to positive psychology and it is therefore the responsibility of the field to determine how a cultural shift towards collective flourishing may occur.

### **1.3 Positive education and educational purpose: Towards a redefinition of success.**

Positive *education*, as distinct from positive psychology, is an approach to education borne out of Seligman’s third pillar: the goal of creating “positive institutions” that value measurement of well-being alongside academic merit (Seligman, 2011). It is described as the application of positive psychology to education (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011). It is argued that positive education forms part of educating the whole child, is designed to combat

the worrying rates of mental health problems in our youth and may improve academic performance (Waters, 2011).

Positive education has made its way into schools in the UK, Australia, the US and other nations via programs, frameworks and PPIs such as the PERMA domains (Seligman, 2011), the Penn Resiliency Programme (Gillham, Reivich, & Seligman, 2007), classroom-based strengths interventions (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, & Vella-Brodrick, 2015), the Positive Education Practices framework (Noble & McGrath, 2008) and others. Collectively, these practices are designed to add to what Seligman sees as “the traditional goal of education” (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009, p.294). Some success has been achieved through these practices in the area of well-being, but the field is still relatively new, and studies reveal a plurality of ideas about what “success” in the field of education means in practice.

Positive education distinguishes itself by its goal of working *towards* the positive, rather than eradicating negative factors (Waters, 2011). In this way, it subtly separates itself from its predecessor, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which is defined as “school-based prevention” (Greenberg et al., 2003), other programs designed to, for example, eradicate bullying, reduce depression or prevent other problem behaviours. It differs from existing parts of the curriculum, such as the focus on citizenship as part of social studies curricula, in that its grounding is in psychology. In addition, although there are many such pre-existing programs in schools designed to nurture well-being, it has been suggested that the goal of positive psychology is not designed to replace existing programs (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Waters, 2011).

Although well-received by many educators (Kristjánsson, 2013), there are scholars who claim that positive psychology and thus positive education is faddish, Pollyanna-like or

evangelical (Diener, 2003; Lazarus, 2003; Simmons, 2013), an image that is perhaps compounded by the aforementioned pop psychology gurus, as well as parenting and lifestyle bloggers, who claim to belong to the positive psychology field. Further, there are serious criticisms surrounding the place of psychology-based interventions or “happiness lessons” in education, with suggestions that they are anti-educational, individualistic, ethnocentric, lacking in moral or normative content and at odds with the purposes of schooling (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Cabanas, 2016; Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b; Furedi, 2004; Suissa, 2008). The conclusion of this thesis sets out to address these important concerns.

It is also possible that our contemporary pursuit of ethereal concepts called “happiness”, “well-being” and “flourishing” contribute to our lack thereof. Philosophers Mill and Aristotle might argue that the best way to achieve happiness is through pursuit of something else (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002; Mill, Robson, & Stillinger, 1996). Further, this pursuit of happiness may not only be a path towards emptiness, it may actually contribute to the aforementioned unhealthy inward turn that is characteristic of neoliberal thinking. In a world where young people feel they can control so little, they turn to the one thing they can control: themselves. As suggested by Cabanas (2018) positive psychology may be a symptom of neoliberalism. This concern will be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis and the links to neoliberalism will be explored in Chapter 2.

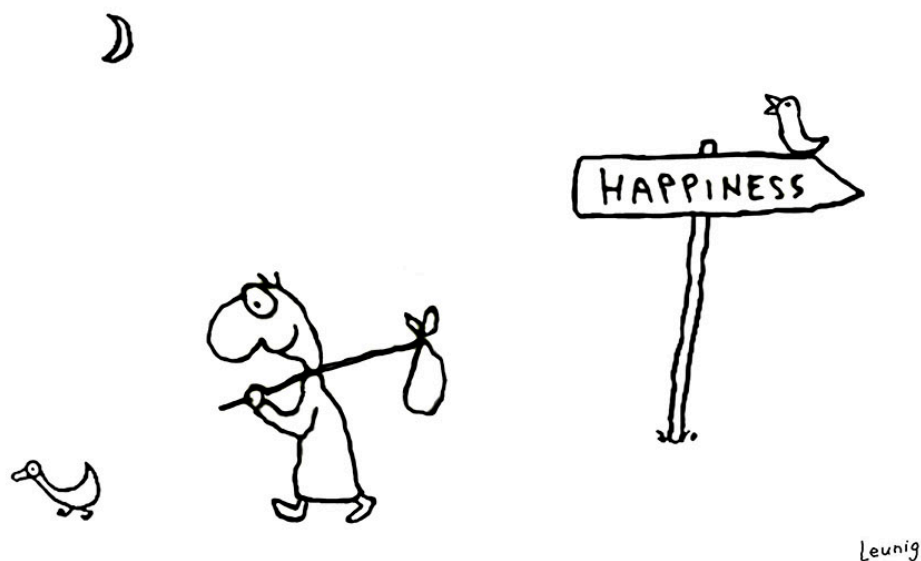


Figure 2. Image courtesy of Michael Leunig

At the core many of these criticisms are the mixed philosophical messages within positive psychology and therefore positive education. The founders of positive psychology aimed for an empirical base (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), but the philosophical grounding is still a work-in-progress (Kristjánsson, 2013; Pawelski, 2016a, 2016b; Rathunde, 2001). The work of scholars like Pawelski (2016b, 2016a) to define the “positive” in positive psychology (and thus positive education) demonstrates that this field is still building a coherent definition of its aims and key concepts. An agreed-upon version of what it means for humans to “flourish”, apart from intuitively feeling like we are, needs further groundwork. The growth of positive psychology, therefore, requires further deep conceptual work on its “roots” in order to support the “tree” that has grown with practical “fruits” in the areas of medicine, clinical psychology, business and education (Pawelski, 2016b p. 363).

In education, this would need to involve engagement with normative ethics, the philosophy of education, and, more specifically, the purpose of schooling. As noted by educational philosophers Woods and Barrow (2006), we cannot make decisions in education, unless we can define education. We must have a clearly defined concept of what it is to *be educated* otherwise we cannot make judgements about whether or not schools are achieving success. If positive education is to be an “education”, it must be rooted in a concept of what it is to be educated and have a clear notion of educational success. There are a lot of discussions in education about what schools “should” do that neglect this fundamental notion of core purpose.

Schools are asked to do a lot of things and are pulled in a lot of different directions (cf. Quay, 2013), and much of it has more to do with economic or political purposes, or its captive audience of adolescents, as it does with any meaningful notion of what it means to be “educated”. The idea that school should be used to increase well-being simply because students spend so much time at school is common in positive education literature (Seligman et al., 2009). While this might be justifiable, educators may lament over what element of education, such as subject knowledge, is pushed *out* of the curriculum to put new well-being initiatives in. Ecclestone and Hayes’ notion of the “hollowed-out curriculum”, engages with this problem (2009a, p. 385). Further to this, the idea of adding the goals of positive psychology to “traditional” goals of schooling (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009) carries the assumption that the “traditional goals” are already set and that the goal of education is academic achievement; an assumption that ignores generations of debate about educational purpose. This appeal to the “traditional” may be a reaction to societal beliefs about the purpose of education or may simply reveal a limited consideration or knowledge of educational philosophy.

In addition, introducing PPIs to enhance well-being in schools does not necessarily represent the revolution or paradigm shift espoused by key figures in positive psychology. Given that social and emotional learning (SEL) existed before the current incarnation of positive education (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011a) and its impact on school performance is sometimes used to justify the introduction of positive education (cf. Waters, 2011), PPIs might simply be seen by some school communities as an extension of or an addition to pre-existing well-being measures, and therefore somehow separate from the core business of schooling. School-wide systems level approaches that involve teaching entire staffs and encouraging a positive shift in the curriculum (Waters, 2011) are designed to combat this, but we do not currently know if they have shifted the mindset of students or changed their ideas about success. *If* positive education is aiming to achieve a paradigm shift towards a “new prosperity”, as Seligman espouses (2008), positive education needs a clearer vision of what it is to flourish or live well and how education plays a central role in nurturing this flourishing life, so as to encourage this mentality in students and their families.

My previous work addressed challenges of individualism and moral neutrality in positive education at the theoretical level by exploring how the epistemology and educational philosophy of Dewey might contribute to positive education (Trask-Kerr, 2015; Trask-Kerr, Quay, & Slemph, 2019). The present thesis intends to build upon the philosophical and normative framework for positive education with an empirical exploration of four intersected concepts: success, prosperity, goodness and the purpose of education, and the role positive education might play in these. The reasons for this focus are explicated on page 66 of this thesis. These will be analysed through several lenses, including the PERMA framework

(Seligman, 2011), the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) (Cummins, 1997), the ethics of Aristotle and theories about the social purposes of schooling, understood broadly here to refer to education for collective well-being and community flourishing. Emerging from these studies are discussions of individualism, normativity, and the philosophy of education, which are key to our understanding of the implications of positive education and determining whether it has a place in schools and a role to play in changing ideological perspectives towards the social purposes of education. The thesis will end with suggestions for several possible futures of positive education, including the role of humanities education and a possible extrication of positive *education* from positive *psychology* when it comes to learning, teaching, and the curriculum.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Towards a “new prosperity”: Delineating the aims of positive education and measuring the impact.

Positive education aims to expand the metrics in education (Waters, 2011) and achieve a “new prosperity”:

*The aim of wealth should be to produce more well-being.... Public policy can be aimed at increasing general well-being and the successes or failures of policy can be measured against this standard. Prosperity-as-usual has been equated with wealth. The time has come for a new prosperity, a prosperity that combines well-being with wealth. Learning to value this new prosperity must start early – in the formative years of schooling – and it is this new prosperity, kindled by positive education that Australia can now choose (Seligman, 2008, p. 20).*

Despite the far-reaching goal of attaining a “new prosperity” through education and leaving aside this rather problematic association of prosperity-as-usual with wealth, an examination of the *types* of studies in positive education thus far reveals that assessment of the “impact” of positive education has largely been about emotional well-being and academic achievement. This section reviews some of the metrics of positive education as they related to the curriculum in schools, noting that the *ideological* impact, which is the subject of this thesis, is largely unexplored. Likewise, the current studies of *achievement* tend to focus on academic grades in mathematics or literacy and therefore adopt a specifically narrow definition of achievement that is perhaps at odds with the goals of positive education.

This, in itself, may indicate a need to readjust conceptions of academic success both within positive education and, if this is a reflection of the broader community, in education at large. It would be difficult to quantify the potential long-term impact of assessing (and therefore valuing) the wrong things. Imagine a creative genius who never could master the beautiful handwriting so prized in primary school or the mathematics whiz who could not come up with automatic responses in times table challenges. Feelings of inadequacy might have a long-term impact on generations of students, shaping their future choices and potentially affecting the fabric of our communities worldwide. Despite this, students, educators and policymakers may show a reluctance to work towards something that is seen as somehow at odds with the perceived purpose of schooling. We measure various skills within individual subjects, but when it comes to assessment of schools and programmes we tend to focus more on traditional skills such as numeracy, grammar and punctuation as though numeracy and literacy are the sole indicators of the likelihood of success.

Educators advocating positive education often appeal to the common-sense view that well-being increases the likelihood of academic success (Suldo, Thalji, & Ferron, 2011) and although it is difficult to imagine a student with low levels of well-being performing well at school, it is not impossible. South Korea, for example, reports lower than average life satisfaction compared with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average, yet score significantly higher than the OECD average in literacy, mathematics and science (OECD, 2015). Further, the justification of the introduction of positive education for academic purposes leads to a rather circular argument about the purpose and goals of positive education. The papers reviewed herein explore this connection between positive education and academic purposes.

Even before the advent of what we now call positive education, the connection between emotional well-being and academic performance had been examined in both educational psychology and the social sciences. Pekrun (Pekrun, 1992) outlined assumptions about how mood affects academic performance, posturing that since negative emotions like anxiety had been shown to impact academic performance, one might assume other emotions have effects too. In a longitudinal study of 3,425 Year 5-9 students in Germany, he found that positive emotions such as enjoyment and pride, positively predicted subsequent academic achievement in mathematics.

Weiner (1985) studied the causal relationship between emotions like pride, anger, guilt, gratitude, shame or hopelessness and found that they play a role in motivation and achievement. Similarly, he also found that negative emotions such as shame, boredom, anger, anxiety and hopelessness, negatively predicted achievement. Interestingly, a reciprocal benefit was also found, in that achievement predicted subsequent emotions. This highlights the circularity of the relationship between achievement and positive emotion. One might envisage that a student who is naturally academically proficient would have greater confidence and therefore experience more positive emotions at school. This reciprocal benefit was again acknowledged in a more recent study, citing these causal relationships and the role of achievement in the development of emotions (Pekrun, Lichtenfeld, Marsh, Murayama, & Goetz, 2017). This could suggest that positive education might have a role to play in boosting the confidence of those who are less inclined towards traditional academic achievement. Steinmayr, Crede, McElvany and Wirthwein (2015), in a more recent study involving 290 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, found that anxiety negatively predicted grade point averages (GPA). They too noticed a reciprocal effect, where GPA also predicted levels of anxiety.

Despite these studies, Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry (2002) reviewed literature dating from 1974-2000, and found that most studies on emotion in an educational setting since the 1950s focussed primarily on anxiety. Other emotions had been largely neglected with the exception of studies relevant to specific research traditions. This signalled the clear gap in research that has been filled, somewhat, by studies in positive education, positive psychology in education, and social and emotional learning.

It is important to note that well-being extends beyond feelings and emotions. As mentioned earlier, flourishing involves not just the feelings associated with well-being, but a more holistic self-satisfaction or eudaimonic happiness that comes from fulfilling one's function and living a good life. Howell (2009), for example, studied flourishing in 397 undergraduate students, finding that students who feel that they are flourishing procrastinate less and achieve higher grades. Similarly, although we cannot *always* assume that positive emotions always lead to positive actions, it has been suggested that focussing on positive emotions may lead to pro-social behaviours, such as those described by Fredrickson (2001) as part of her *Broaden and Build* theory.

Elfrink et al. (2017) conducted a case study of the impact and aspects of the implementation of a positive education programme in two schools in the Netherlands. This study consisted of a process and impact evaluation of the two schools piloting a positive education programme (PEP) which included teacher training and workshops on “values”, “life rules” and “well-being and engagement” over several months. Using standardized questionnaires and self-reporting methods with 339 students aged 4-12 and 33 teachers across two schools, they found that the programme had a positive impact on well-being, behaviour,

student-teacher relationships, overall school climate and an increased engagement in learning. Acknowledging a lack of generalizability of the study due to the absence of a control group, Elfrink et al. noted that further research using more robust research methods exploring the effectiveness of PEP when compared with “business as usual” is needed. This would also address the possibility that other factors could have impacted the findings. Elfrink et al. and Seligman et al. (2009) also recommend a broader school approach to well-being. Interestingly, Elfrink et al.’s study also noted challenges expressed by teachers with regard to the implementation of positive education, such as lack of time for positive education due to their already busy schedules, and difficulties with continuity when, for example, handing over to a replacement teacher. These observations provide possible avenues for further inquiry.

Elfrink et al.’s (2017) findings also point to a need to explore the relationship between student engagement and achievement. Student engagement plays an important role in student achievement but is complex and not easily measured. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) identify the need to measure three distinct dimensions of student engagement: behavioural, social and emotional. Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, and Mooney (2011) in a review of literature on student engagement identified 21 instruments used to measure these dimensions. Instruments included teacher report measures, observational measures and student self-report. They found that 10 student self-report measures, two teacher report and one observational report measure reported a positive correlation between engagement and academic achievement, but noted that a study of engagement is, problematically, often considered to be a proxy for student achievement. Scholars studying the effects of positive education on learning must be mindful of the complexity of this relationship between engagement and achievement.

A more holistic type of engagement is explored as part of Seligman's PERMA theory.

Seligman described engagement as:

*...about flow: being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity. I refer to a life lived with these aims as the "engaged life." Engagement is different, even opposite, from positive emotion; for if you ask people who are in flow what they are thinking and feeling, they usually say, "nothing." In flow we merge with the object. I believe that the concentrated attention that flow requires uses up all the cognitive and emotional resources that make up thought and feeling. (Seligman, 2011, p. 11)*

Other studies of positive education programs focus more specifically on achievement as distinct from engagement. Adler (2016) co-developed a Gross National Happiness (GNH) Curriculum in Bhutan based on concepts of positive psychology such as mindfulness, empathy, coping with emotions and interpersonal relationships, as well as additional life skills such as creative thinking, critical thinking and problem solving. The programme consisted of a 15-month stand-alone programme for secondary students in Years 7-12. Using a nested cluster randomized design at a whole-school level in 18 schools, the study included 8,385 participants and asked two questions: 1. Does the GNH Curriculum raise well-being? 2. Does increasing well-being improve academic performance? The study delivered a placebo GNH Curriculum, which taught psychology, nutrition and human anatomy, with a randomly-assigned control group. The study found that students participating in the GNH Curriculum increased academic performance by more than 0.53 standard deviations, whereas the control group's scores only increased by 0.06 standard deviations after the 15-month study. Adler (2016) also noted that the strongest mediators between well-being and increases in academic performance were higher connectedness with peers, perseverance and engagement. Emphasis

was also placed on the importance of student-teacher relationships in supporting academic performance. Adler also found consistent results in subsequent projects in Mexico and Peru, both of which increased academic performance in the intervention group.

Adler's (2016) findings in Bhutan were taken immediately after the 15-month treatment and again after 12 months, representing one of the few studies that examined longer-term effects of a positive education programme and demonstrates positive impact. It does, however, examine a programme which includes some elements of academic learning, such as critical and creative thinking which may be one factor accounting for any possible differences in findings. Notably, this study simultaneously examined a direct relationship between the programme and academic achievement, as well as between the programme and well-being.

Other studies have yielded similar results. Park and Peterson (2008), for example, examined character strengths in a longitudinal study and found that perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope and perspective predicted grade-point averages, after controlling for IQ scores. Similarly, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) studied 347 Year 9 students involved in the strengths curriculum and found an increase in both the enjoyment of school and student grades. Extending positive education beyond the classroom, Waters, Loton and Jach (2019) found that adolescents whose parents used strength-based parenting techniques derived from positive psychology achieved higher grades due to increased perseverance.

Austin (2005) conducted a study of 527 high school students in California, divided into experimental and control groups, finding that those who completed a six-week strengths

intervention course reported significant benefits in the areas of academic efficacy, expectancy, positive academic behaviours, and extrinsic motivation. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) identified an increase in mathematics scores amongst a group of 99 students who completed a mindfulness programme called MindUp, when compared with another programme. Ciarrochi, Heaven and Davies (2007), in a study of 784 high school students examined three “positive thinking” variables (self-esteem, trait hope, and positive attributional style) in predicting future high school grades, teacher-rated adjustment, and students’ reports of their affective states. They found that hope was the best predictor of positive affect and grades.

Hope theory is linked with the concept of a “growth mindset” and the belief that intelligence is not fixed, which is a component of many positive education programmes. Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck (2007) examined the mathematics results of 373 7<sup>th</sup>-grade students and found that those who believed intelligence was malleable, what they call an incremental theory, increased their scores in mathematics. In a further study of 47 students they found that students who had completed an education programme in incremental theory displayed a positive change in classroom motivation and an upward trajectory in grades.

Another complication arises when attempting to define positive psychology interventions, as distinct from other school well-being programs, to determine their impact. The umbrella term “positive psychology” is defined by its empirical base and its focus on working towards the positive (rather than eliminating the negative). One might need to consider *all* well-being programs part of positive education if they have the potential to be measured, á la Popper’s falsification theory (Popper, 1963), which contends that a theory must have the potential to be falsified to be scientific. This means that any Social and

Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives based on the science of well-being should also be examined. The SEL framework, an antecedent to positive education, includes many priorities and interventions currently encompassed by positive education. The central concern of SEL is to bolster student success “in school and life” by fostering social and emotional development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). SEL programming teaches five key competencies: self-awareness; social awareness; responsible decision making; self-management and relationships skills, under the premise that “social, emotional and academic growth are interdependent” (Zins & Elias, 2006, p. 3).

Social and emotional learning programmes (SEL) have produced similar findings. Durlak, Weissberg, Schellinger, Dymnicki and Taylor (2011) reviewed the effects of school-based SEL programs in 270,034 schools ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12 on dependent variables such as social and emotional skills; attitudes towards self and others; positive social behaviours; conduct problems; emotional distress and academic performance. Interventions delivered by teachers were considered separately from interventions delivered by experts, with the conclusion that SEL interventions are equally effective when delivered by regular teachers. The review included papers published prior to 2007 that emphasised one or more SEL skills and targeted students between the ages of 5 and 18 with no identified learning difficulties. The review examined several outcomes of the SEL programs. Interestingly, when assessing the impact on academic performance, Durlak et al. (2010) chose to include only standardised tests to avoid problems with teacher-developed measures of academic success. Sixteen percent of reviewed studies collected data on academic performance, and these studies found an 11-percentile gain in the academic performance of students post SEL programs. Suldo, Savage and Mercer’s (2014) study of 55 middle school students who completed various PPIs, however, found no change in grades.

There have been relatively few studies linking existing school activities to wellbeing or flourishing. Tay, Pawelski and Keith (2018) propose a conceptual model on which to base investigations of the ways the arts and humanities might contribute to flourishing. Noting the active debate on the value of the arts and humanities and the comparative lack of scientific evidence, they identify the absence of a conceptual model as a possible reason. They point to the likelihood of a “robust” connection between the arts/humanities and human flourishing and the potential for empirical studies on this topic to yield important knowledge. Their model suggests that immersion, embeddedness, socialisation, and reflectiveness are mechanisms through which the arts and humanities may affect human flourishing. They note that four mechanisms are understood as mediators, reflecting proximal processes resulting in engagement with the arts and humanities. They also suggest outcomes in four categories including, neurological/physiological/psychological reactions; psychological competencies; general wellbeing effects; and, importantly for this thesis, positive normative outcomes.

Vaziri, Tay, Keith and Pawelski (2019) conducted a systematic review of the relationship between History, Literature and Philosophy with positive functioning. They noted relatively few studies in some areas like History where they found 23 studies, with 20 of those primarily concerned with pedagogy and student engagement. Self-efficacy, student empowerment and social presence were considered in three of the History studies. The majority of the History results were positive, with five of these producing mixed results. The authors found 55 studies focussing on Literature. Most showed positive results in a range of areas including virtue and psychological wellbeing, although 32 of these focussed on literature in general and were not in an educational setting. Philosophy yielded only two

studies, one focussing on comparing online discussion forums and the other on Philosophy for Children (P4C). Both yielded positive results in areas such as student participation and engagement.

Despite positive education's goal of achieving a "new prosperity" and shifting the metrics in education, there have not, to my knowledge, been any empirical studies examining the impact of positive education on the attitudes and beliefs of students about prosperity, definitions of success and the purpose of schooling within the context of positive education. Although it is important to measure the impact on approaches like positive education on student well-being and achievement, if a "new prosperity" is to be realised we need a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs and values that comprise what Seligman termed "prosperity-as-usual". A clearer insight into why students believe they are at school and the "good life" they are striving for would elucidate beliefs about what students see as important in their schooling and help us to gauge whether a shift in the metrics is achievable or even necessary.

## **2.2 The purpose of schooling: historical and contemporary views on the purpose and function of education.**

A definitive conception of purpose of schooling is important for positive education. If we do not know education's purpose, mission and goals, we cannot know when we get there (Peterson, 2009) and is important to know what it means to "be educated" so we can define success. Educational philosopher Noddings (2003) in her book *Happiness and Education*

calls for a revival of what she calls “aims-talk” in education (p. 4). She observes that society seems to have “simply decided that the purpose of education is economic”. She argues that education must surely be “more than this” and espouses “aims-talk” in our evaluation of our means in education (p.4). Importantly, she also encourages a questioning of whether our aims are consistent with one another.

An absence of purpose or “aims-talk” presents two distinct challenges for positive education. Firstly, if approaches within positive education are at odds with prevailing beliefs about the economic purpose of education, they are likely to fail, or be seen as simply another add-on in an already crowded educational landscape. Secondly, if the prevailing belief is that education is for economic purposes, the “new prosperity” will require an ideological shift, a feat that *may* require significantly more than positive education’s current modus operandi of increasing subjective well-being and academic results. To evaluate its potential to do this we must first understand current conceptions and theoretical perspectives about purpose in education.

Yet, as observed by Noddings (2003), Woods and Barrow (2006) and others, purpose is rarely considered in planning for education. Teaching and learning are often assumed to be the fundamental mission of schooling (Greenberg et al., 2003), and, as Klitmøller (2016) contends, planning in education is often conducted without any direct concern for the purpose of education or what education *is*, resulting in merely a discussion of what students and teachers would like. This, he says, reinforces abstract notions of learning as the purpose of education. This also leaves the definition of the purpose of schooling to what is easily measured (Biesta, 2009), leaving out many important but unmeasurable outcomes. The increasingly strong push towards high stakes testing and worldwide focus on academic

rankings (Supovitz, 2009; Zhao & Gearin, 2016) contribute to this phenomenon. At the local level, schools are ranked according to final year results, literacy and numeracy, so this becomes their focus. At a global level, governments have an interest in increasing Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings by improving academic results, which sometimes comes at a cost (Dinham & Scott, 2012). Biesta (2016) warns of the “seductive” power of measurements like PISA (p.350). Biesta (2009) expresses concern about whether we are measuring what we value or simply valuing what we can easily measure and warns against a culture of “performativity” where the means to measurement of quality in education become ends in themselves (p.35).

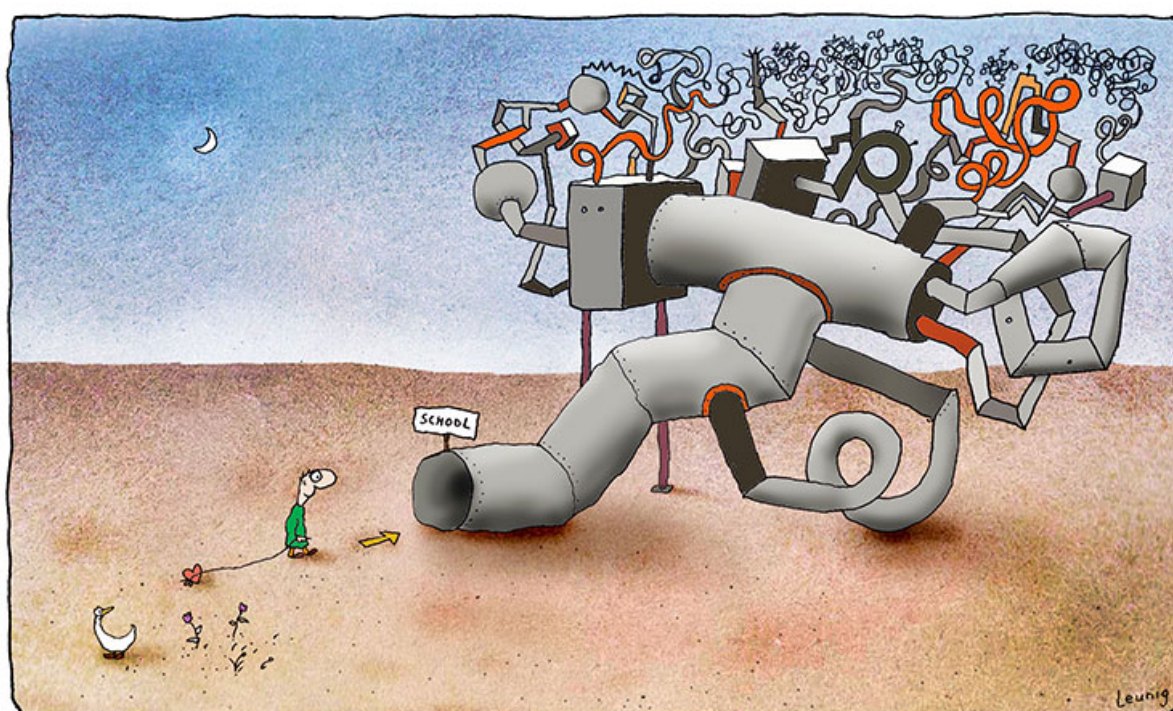


Figure 3. Image courtesy of Michael Leunig.

Another symptom of an unclear purpose in schools may be the ever-changing nature of educational fads in schools, reflected in Hattie and Hamilton’s (2018) notion of the “education cargo cult”. Hattie and Hamilton argue that many educational items and training are selected because they “look shiny and well packaged” (p.16). They observe that teachers

and policymakers are busy and rarely have the time to evaluate the data on the impact of education and have a tendency to fall back on our heuristics, cognitive biases and hunches when making decisions about what works in the classroom. Hattie and Hamilton explore the potential for meta-analyses in filling this void and encourage diligent evaluation of impact. A clear idea of purpose may make this evaluation easier since prompting teachers to ask whether a new approach aligns with the goal of education may be a solid first step in evaluating impact.

Reid, Cranston, Keating and Mulford (2010) describe schooling in the contemporary period as one where social efficiency and social mobility are placed in the foreground. They attribute this to neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies shaping modalities that construct education as a private commodity. They describe three modalities: The modality of *organization and funding* placing an emphasis on satisfying needs of parents and students as “consumers”; *curriculum* that emphasizes the development of “human capital” and focuses on curriculum for vocational purposes; and *structure and process*, which has imported techniques from the private sector like “choice” and “accountability”, making schools more like businesses that compete for “market share”. They note that the purposes of schooling are often “assumed rather than examined” (p.1) and, as part of their Australian Research Council research project, set out to examine how the democratic purposes of schools are understood and how the social mobility and social efficiency purposes undermine them. This examination of literature and policy documents found that public purposes of schooling such as social justice, equity and the development of active citizens have become less prominent with respect to private purposes (Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid and Keating, 2010). They note that although there is a place for both public and private purposes in schools, one ought not be privileged at the expense of the other.

There are relatively few empirical studies examining school community perspectives on the purpose of schooling. Widdowson, Dixon, Peterson, Rubie-Davies, and Earl Irving (2015) explored the beliefs of students, parents and teachers from three schools in New Zealand about the purposes of schooling. Using focus groups (5-10 participants in each) with a total of 43 students aged 13-15 years, 22 parents and 27 teachers, they discussed four possible categories or purposes: 1. Learning and gaining knowledge; 2. To develop life and social skills; 3. To optimize chances and quality of life; 4. To enable future employment and economic function. All groups identified with beliefs about learning as the purpose of schooling. Views of students and parents were more closely aligned than those of teachers, and differences were found in students from schools of higher socioeconomic backgrounds, who expressed a broader range of beliefs about the purposes of schooling. They found that all groups endorsed academic learning as a purpose of schooling. In addition, students from middle high socioeconomic backgrounds identified self-knowledge, communication skills, community participation citizenship, character development and getting along with others as important elements of school's purpose. Quality of life in the future was seen by parents and students as an important element of the purpose of schooling but was mentioned less frequently by teachers. Future employment was mentioned by students, but only by teachers in middle and lower socio-economic schools. Parents did not mention future employment as a purpose of schooling. The discrepancies between the views of students and teachers is pertinent, given that both ideally work together to achieve the goals of schooling.

Teachers' beliefs in Widdowson et al.'s (2015) study are in contrast with the findings of Osguthorpe and Sanger (2013), who focused solely on the views of teacher candidates about the purpose of schooling and their reasons for choosing teaching as a career. Their

study examined 267 essays submitted for application and continuance in the teacher education programme, as well as 92 responses to a questionnaire completed as part of an undergraduate teacher course at a university in the US. They found that these teachers-in-training viewed schooling as being preparation for the real world, strengthening of academic capacities and developing moral or prosocial skills.

One might conclude, then, that although policy seems to have shifted away from the social or public purposes of education, many members of school communities recognize these purposes and the role schools play in nurturing social harmony, Harrison, Dineen and Moller (2018), for example, surveyed 376 parents and 137 teachers about their shared understandings of character education, finding that both teachers and parents prioritised character education in schools over attainment, and moral values above performance values. Dewey (Dewey, 1923, 1938, 1981) would add that by creating a well-functioning mini community within a school, good citizens that can create a harmonious community beyond the school are nurtured. This good citizenship, in Aristotelian terms, is perhaps the “chief good” and ultimate aim of a school, and arguably the best way schools can achieve an “economy of well-being” as prescribed by Diener and Seligman (2004).

Even if we *all* agree that the purpose of schooling involves flourishing, there may also be disagreement about *how* this should be achieved. Aristotle would argue that the chief human good is attained by exercising *logos* (intellect or reason) to attain *arête* (virtue), and *phronesis* (ethical wisdom) (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002), whilst Dewey would focus on experiential learning for the sake of present happiness, rather than working directly towards some distant goal (Dewey, 1938). More recent educational philosophers and theorists have discussed the importance of flourishing as an overarching goal of education (Brighouse,

2009; Cohen, 2006; Grant, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2016; White, 2011; Wolbert, de Ruyter, & Schinkel, 2015). Noddings (2002; 2010), for example, identifies happiness as the ultimate goal of education and life, and emphasises, among other things, the importance of caring, positive relations with other people and involvement in the community. She explores the role school might play in helping students find happiness through work, through community support and by being a member of a liberal democratic society. She also explores the importance of happiness *at* school (2003), which accords with Dewey's (1893) contention that education should be considered a full part of life, rather than mere preparation for it, and thus so paradoxically becoming a better preparation for stages of life beyond the school years. Interestingly, the "happiness" in Noddings' work, attained indirectly through activity and community, appears to represent eudaimonic happiness rather than subjective wellbeing.

Kristjánsson (2016, 2017) also discusses happiness as the aim of education, pointing to recent work by Brighouse (2006), de Ruyter (2007) and White (2011). Kristjánsson writes extensively about the role of Aristotelian flourishing in education (cf. 2014, 2017, 2018) and in his "enchanted" account (Kristjánsson, 2016) he expresses an affinity with the Aristotelian conception of flourishing, and character education as part of this, but argues for an extension of this towards a framework that takes into account ideals that transcend beyond "selves" (p.718). He also recognises the role of academic pursuits, arguing that "character education which focused solely on moral qualities—but not, say, also intellectual ones—would not suffice as education for flourishing" (p.708).

Chen (2012) examined the association between education and self-reported happiness by examining survey data from four East Asian countries, finding that people who have more education have more extensive social networks and are able to connect more effectively with

the outside world. Non-monetary factors such as the degree of cosmopolitanism and number of personal networks, she says, largely account for the education-happiness association in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, but not in China where monetary factors play a more significant role, possibly due to a lower income per capita. According to this study, education is likely to contribute to subjective well-being by increasing involvement in the community and interpersonal relationships.

These insights indicate that the notions of education for happiness or flourishing are shared by many and one might expect that this would lead to positive education enjoying longevity and being embraced by educators. Despite this, White (2016) notes difficulties in maintaining the longevity of positive education in schools and in education policy. He claims that well-being is seen as a marginal topic that distracts from what is seen as “real” educational progress. This is also evident in writings from outside of positive psychology that criticize the impact of positive education, with the assumption that impact is solely about academic learning. This either/or thinking (White, 2016), includes the idea that we need to either focus on academic learning or well-being.

On the other hand, academic learning and the nurturing of intellect, as distinct from the nurturing of emotions, may be a *key* method for achieving flourishing at school. Furedi (2009) notes that good teachers recognise that the cultivation of intellect is linked to a child’s disposition and that all good schools attend to the emotional, moral and spiritual needs of their students. He bemoans the proliferation of what he calls the “therapeutic function” emerging in schools, which he says often communicates an “anti-academic sentiment” (p.170). He warns against diminishing students by defining them by their vulnerability, and

supports a subject-based curriculum, where emotional education takes place through intellectual pursuits such as arts education.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009a, 2009b) similarly warn against a therapeutic culture or emotionalism, which they see as an inward turn that risks self-preoccupation. They characterise affective or psychological interventions in education as emerging from a “therapy culture” with benefits that are based in circular logic and which emphasise the emotions or feelings at the expense of the intellect (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009a). They argue that this therapy culture promotes an assumption that there is a general need for psychological intervention and subsequently measures its value on its ability to meet this need, hence the circular logic. In relation to the school curriculum, they describe a contemporary disillusionment with traditional subject-based education and a seemingly unchallenged assumption that students cannot cope with a curriculum that does not engage them by relating to the self. This disillusionment, they say, creates a “hollowed-out” curriculum by displacing subject-based knowledge in favour of “attributes, skills, values and dispositions”, the most influential being concern about emotional well-being (p. 385).

Jackson and Bingham (2018) counter positive psychology’s emphasis on *positive* emotion alongside Noddings’ endorsement of education for happiness, arguing that happiness itself must be problematised in education. They argue that room must also be made for *unhappiness*, especially when education is functioning for social justice. Observing positive psychology’s tendency to imply that individuals are in control of their happiness, they invoke examples where students who do not have control over their own happiness may feel that they are to blame for their challenges. Further, they observe that happiness as the ultimate educational goal may preclude learning about bad things, such as war and oppression, if they may lead to unhappiness. These examples highlight the importance of framing eudaimonic

flourishing, and by extrapolation *community* flourishing, as the goals of education, as distinct from individual feelings of happiness, as well as an emphasis on the role of social justice in community flourishing. This also elucidates a possible need to re-think the way positive education positions happiness as something for which students have responsibility, by acknowledging that in many instances students simply do not have control over their own destiny. Positive education's work on resilience (cf. Gillham, Reivich, & Seligman, 2007; Noble & McGrath, 2005) may contribute to this if framed appropriately by acknowledging the validity and utility of negative emotions. The programmes themselves are often designed in this way but may not always be appropriately delivered.

Within positive education literature there also appears to be general consensus that although the measurement of well-being should be a tool for assessing school success, this assessment should still accompany the measurement of academic achievement. This is consistent with the "A" in Seligman's PERMA theory of well-being which stands for "accomplishment", defined as "a life dedicated to accomplishment for the sake of accomplishment, in its extended form" (Seligman, 2011, p. 19). Accomplishment, however, takes many forms and as a society we tend to value what we measure. Contemporary schools are far from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century factory environments described in some critical literature. Many offer a plethora of opportunities for students to flourish through finding their passion for art, literature, mathematics, sport and dramatic skills. Students are supported in building their social skills and encouraged to communicate effectively. They explore social and political issues, and often volunteer in service of their communities. Schooling is, and arguably has always been, about exposing students to experiences that will help them to flourish – now and in the future. Yet, as discussed earlier, our ranking of schools reflects something very different. The Australian government's "My School" website, for example, provides National

Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test data on reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and numeracy, along with general demographic information about each Australian school. This website, often used by Australian parents to select schools for their children, illuminates a strong societal privileging of the traditional “three R” academics over creativity, social skills, fine arts, music, communication skills, and other strengths that help students to flourish in the world. This is symptomatic of the focus on private purposes of education mentioned by Cranston et al. (2010).

One might wonder whether ideas about a “therapy culture” in schools (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, 2009a; Furedi, 2009) and a neo-liberal/neo-conservative shaping of school as a private commodity (Cranston et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2010) are at odds, but the marketing of positive education in schools suggest otherwise. White (2016) mentions that many see positive education as a “silver bullet”, and in an environment where schools produce human capital, these interventions might be mistakenly perceived as the answer to all educational (and emotional) challenges. If positive education is to succeed and be taken seriously in education, it needs to be more than simply a method for self-improvement or an attempt at magically solving educational problems. This could be achieved through engagement with the philosophy of schooling and alignment with the goal of shifting education back towards social purposes. As part of this, it would be important to ensure that this new measurement of well-being espoused within positive psychology does not become merely another way of commodifying education.

The most important role of positive education might be to engender a shift towards what we, as a community, *really* want (or *should* really want) from a successful education system. The answer to this is most likely a positive school experience that nurtures well-

rounded, capable and virtuous citizens, and flourishing communities: defined here as “social” purposes of education (as distinct from the social mobility and social efficiency purposes identified by Reid et al. (2011)). Achieving this may require a change in attitudes about success, encompassing a move towards more social purposes of education; a turn outward rather than inward; and a clearer conception of “the good life” towards which education aims. Importantly, this may require further knowledge about current beliefs and attitudes to education, as well as an assessment of the inroads current positive education approaches may have made towards changing them.

### **2.3 Positive psychology, positive education and the “problem” of normativity.**

Since most would agree that education aims for flourishing communities (cf. Cherkowski & Walker, 2014; Dewey, 1988; Kristjánsson, 2016; Noddings, 2003), school success requires a consolidated conception of flourishing at both the individual and community levels.

Community and individual flourishing are symbiotically connected in that individuals live good lives within flourishing communities, and this flourishing must have a moral component. It is important, then, to have a degree of consensus on the meaning of “goodness” and “the good life” so we can know how to get there. Further, eudaimonic flourishing, as described by Aristotle (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002; Solomon, 2019) and others, entails a moral or normative framework and a clear conception of the utility of ethical wisdom and virtue. To integrate normative content into positive *education* would involve an evaluation of the nature of “goodness” in education, and a clear value judgement about what actions are morally better than others as part of a good life in general. In practice, this would impact planning for education at the systemic level, and a shift in the content of current interventions that focus on moral behaviour. Rather than simply teaching students that moral

or “good” behaviour tends to lead to positive emotions or individual flourishing, a normative positive education would engage students in the moral justification behind the behaviour.

This may require some *consensus* within positive psychology about key terms such as “goodness”, “flourishing” and “virtue”.

Elements of positive psychology are often claimed to derive from Aristotelian normative ethics or be inspired by quasi-Aristotelian virtue theory (cf. Kristjánsson, 2016; Martin, 2007; Posner, Sunstein, & Nussbaum, 2013; Seligman et al., 2009; Suissa, 2008), but despite this there has, ironically, been significant debate among scholars of positive psychology and positive education about whether prescribing a moral or normative framework compromises the scientific status through which positive psychology defines itself (Banicki, 2014; Held, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2013; Seligman, 2002). The resulting ambiguity in the philosophical grounding of positive education has been a subject of criticism (Rathunde, 2001) and it has more recently been posited within positive psychology that its philosophical base needs work (Pawelski, 2016b).

The possibility of a complementary relationship between philosophy and psychology was explored in my work with colleagues on a Deweyan positive education (Trask-Kerr, 2015; Trask-Kerr, Quay, et al., 2019), arguing that the work of Dewey may contribute to positive education through its understanding of the value of philosophy in determining how to use empirical data. For Dewey, who is known for his *pragmatism*, concepts are defined by their practical use and that both scientific and philosophical work must have relevance to life and living. Unlike many conceptions of philosophy that see philosophical knowledge as occupying an abstract or Platonic “higher realm” of knowledge, Dewey contended that it is only our active experience of the world, our empirical observation, that matters. Similarly,

Dewey observes that a narrow field of inquiry is likely to be more easily controlled and therefore more scientific, but that when the inquiry encompasses life experience and moral judgement, a broader philosophical inquiry is needed. In short, while scientific observations in psychology might yield useful data, it is with the help of philosophical knowledge that we determine what to do with it.

*This relation has significant ramifications for positive education. Broader philosophic inquiry is supported by narrower scientific inquiry, and vice versa. So, in order to become what was initially imagined, positive education cannot remain purely a product of positive psychology. This relation also offers the possibility of a positive education that embraces moral philosophy within a framework of scientific inquiry, addressing the deficiency of normative ethical discussion in positive psychology discourse. (Trask-Kerr, Quay, et al., 2019, p. 10)*

Although psychology originally emerged from philosophy, in the current era it is largely a positivist and behaviourist science. Its data, therefore, are usually based on empirical observation and self-report. A consequence of this is that frameworks developed from data may sometimes be pluralistic in nature: for example, when observing the causes of positive emotions and well-being, participants might report various different explanations for their well-being so each will feature in reported findings as possible causes for well-being. Some might hold more weight than others and some findings will be informed by other theories, but all will be based on empirical observation and thus may be considered scientific.

In contrast, philosophical findings are often based on reason, formal logic and argument. Regardless of the reported causes of happiness, for example, philosophy will decipher a meaning of happiness as a concept and work its causes back from there, basing its theories on reason rather than pure empiricism. Illustrative examples of this may be found in the famous arguments between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* (1994) when, for example, Socrates describes a hedonic life as that of a "leaky jar" forever being filled and posits that since desire and happiness are incompatible, Callicles' assertion that the hedonism is good life must be false (488e-499e). While empirical observations are sometimes useful in philosophy, conclusions or "findings" in philosophy are based on clarifying beliefs and values using logic and reason. Correlations between Plato's allegory and recent research on hedonic adaptation and the changing nature of happiness (cf. Sheldon & Lucas, 2014) illustrate one of the many parallels between philosophy and psychology. However, the methodological divide between them, can contribute to the heart of many philosophical criticisms of positive psychology and positive education's ethical framework: *positive* psychology is a largely positivist pursuit but deals with interpretivist and philosophical concerns. It has been suggested that positive psychology aligns well with ethics and is therefore well-placed to disseminate ethical knowledge (Vella-Brodrick, 2011).

Suissa (2008) argued that to teach happiness without values is "anti-educational" and suggests that positive psychology side-steps the important but unmeasurable or "scientifically unwieldy" aspects of human life (p.587). In response to the work of Layard (2005) Suissa argues that although we are in some sense "programmed" to seek pleasure or well-being, to assume that moral behaviour making a person feel better is sufficient justification for encouraging children to "do good deeds" is to completely sidestep the normative question about morality (Suissa, 2008). In other words, when encouraging moral behaviour in

children, we need to more closely examine morality behind the behaviour, rather than focusing on how it makes the individual feel.

Martin (2007) identifies the problems deciphering whether positive psychology is “doing science” or “some combination of science and normative ethics”. Although he beseeches thinkers not to downplay the pursuits of happiness, citing happiness as a great human good, through a critique of Seligman’s (2002) *Authentic Happiness*, he concludes that positive psychology needs a clearer stance on whether society’s view of the virtues is “reasonable” and which forms of happiness are morally desirable (p.102).

Kristjánsson (2012) points to difficulties with what he calls positive education’s “pluralism”. He says that although positive psychology’s happiness theory contains an implicit moral message and that Seligman’s work implies that some paths to happiness are intrinsically better than others, positive psychologists avoid prescriptive moral philosophy for fear of being unscientific. He observes that, according to this doctrine, “the despot, the hedonist and the con man can all be counted as happy if they have followed at least one path to happiness” (p.90). His solution is a conceptual one: by adopting a moral realist stance, he says, one might accept that naturalistic evaluative moral facts can be established empirically and objectively without motivational internalism, or the belief that all normative judgements contain the imperative to act. According to this maxim, normativity does not entail prescription.

In his more recent work, Kristjánsson (2016) identifies issues with current versions of character education, commonly placed under the positive education umbrella, that seem to privilege what Brooks (2015) calls “resume virtues”, pointing to examples from positive

education such as resilience and grit. Invoking Aristotle, Kristjánsson similarly argues that Aristotle would see what Brooks (2015) calls non-instrumental “eulogy virtues” like kindness and honest as more important to character education. He also argues that education for flourishing would incorporate far more than just moral or life-skills education, and that it would also include intellectual pursuits and permeate all school activities and practices.

Diener (2003) similarly appears to acknowledge a need for moral normativity when he discusses the question: *What is positive?* He contends that although defining the positive is difficult, and that positive psychologists cannot be the “final arbiters” of what is good, they must at least be “players” in helping society define what is positive, as the alternative is “complete value relativism”, where Hitler is as deserving of devotion as St Francis of Assisi (p.117). Diener invokes the philosopher Brock’s suggestion that the three bases by which we judge what is good are: what people choose; peoples’ experiences of pleasantness and peoples’ moral norms or value systems. He points to limitations with each of these bases but contends that the “positive” does not have to be a “simple, monadic concept” to be a useful heuristic one and that the different approaches simply make the study of positive psychology more intriguing (p.116). The basis of positive functioning, he says, needs to be carefully analysed.

Pawelski (2016a; 2016b) similarly identifies issues defining the positive in positive psychology, pointing to a need for a consolidated concept of the “positive”. Through an examination of lexical meanings of the positive in positive psychology, he identifies six discrete definitions of the positive in early positive psychology literature, and ultimately presents a normative definition of the positive as: that for which there is “simple preference”; that which has degrees of “relative preference” and that which is sustainable across time,

persons, effects and structures (2016b, p. 364). He also disputes the common notion that positive psychology aims to focus on enhancing the positive rather than eliminating the negative, noting examples where eliminating the negative leads to an increase of the positive.

Friedman and Robbins (2012) describe a problem with positive psychology's implication that resilience, for example, is a virtue regardless of the circumstances, as distinct from humanistic psychology's assessment of virtues in relationship to other virtues and environmental factors. They argue positive psychology simply presents a limited version of humanistic psychology because its methods are confined to philosophical positivism, which, they say, is inconsistent with more recent developments in the philosophy of science that take a more holistic view of the relationship between values and science. This results in a narrow philosophical framework within positive psychology that privileges quantitative methods and approaches its subject matter in a "value-free way" (p.88).

Nussbaum (2008) explores conceptual issues within psychology's focus on happiness, citing the positive psychology movement's attempts to link empirical findings and related normative judgements to ancient and modern ethics. Through a conceptual exploration of pleasure, life satisfaction, happiness and positive emotion, she concludes that an appeal to subjective well-being is not "utterly useless", but is "riddled with conception confusion and normative naivete" (p.108). She declares a need to "pause and sort things out before going any further" (p.108). Importantly, she uses examples from the work of Wordsworth to illustrate a shift in the definition of the word "happiness" from the Aristotelian notion of action in accordance with virtues towards Bentham's utilitarianism, which accords happiness with pleasure and satisfaction. Despite positive psychology frequently taking inspiration from Aristotle, its discourse about the "positive" and "worldwide flourishing" frequently reflects

utilitarian sensibilities. Nussbaum explores many philosophers after Bentham, many of whom who are not utilitarian, whose “happiness” reflects this utilitarian sense of happiness.

Han (2019), examines the application of the VIA (Values in Action) character strengths to moral education. The VIA character framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is based on the premise that every human possesses 24 character strengths in different degrees, giving every person a unique strength profile. The framework holds that knowledge of individual strengths like curiosity, creativity and appreciation of beauty and excellence, increases one’s ability to flourish. The hierarchical list of characteristics is drawn from the elements of character valued by philosophers and religious thinkers, as well as psychology, and are based around the “core virtues”: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (p.13)

Han (2019) states that VIA will be able to contribute to moral education by providing conceptual frameworks to understand the structure and organisation of character strengths that may form the basis of moral behaviour, and the tools to assess them. He argues, however, that an examination of the moral justifiability of the VIA model is needed. Han points out that no previous studies had examined whether the application of VIA character strengths lead to a moral disposition, and that the VIA character strengths were lacking in a guide to the implementation of strengths, in particular the notion of the Aristotelian “golden mean” and first or second order virtues. Individual character strengths like courage are considered first order virtues, while second order virtues are moderators like *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, that assist us in the appropriate use of first order strengths. His examination of previous factor analyses concluded that VIA contained possible candidates for both first and second order virtues, but that more work was needed to address the aforementioned problems.

Morgan, Gulliford and Carr (2015) explore the moral educational significance of gratitude interventions used in schools as part of positive education. Arguing that previous gratitude interventions are relatively narrow, they posit that students' understanding of the complexities of gratitude and allowing students to understand the "grammar" of gratitude might be better served by learning about gratitude through, for example, stories drawn from literature and by providing space for them to learn about what gratitude *is*, rather than simply compelling students to be grateful (p.109). Jackson (2016), on the other hand, argues that although there may be reasons to embrace gratitude in many situations, the moral status of gratitude must be questioned. She emphasises students' need to understand moral reasons for lack of gratitude in some cases pertaining to social justice.

Hyland (2016) targets the implementation of the mindfulness, a popular positive psychology intervention, arguing that its benefits such as development of reflective skills, self-knowledge and empathy are too important to be diminished by the gimmicks and diminished spirituality associated with what he calls "McMindfulness" in schools. He argues that development beyond this stage is important for moral development and affect, and that attention must be paid to the values of the "universal *dharma*".

Other important charges against positive psychology as a whole, and against positive education, are that they are inherently individualistic, ethnocentric and represent an "inward turn" (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Cabanas, 2018; Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b, 2009a; Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Suissa, 2015). This is perhaps partly reflective of the individual, Western and inward focus of some elements of psychology.

There have been many discussions in positive education and positive psychology about community and collective flourishing (cf. Biswas-Diener, 2011; Cohen, 2006) and much work being done to shift the focus toward collective well-being but positive psychology sometimes frames relationships and community engagement in terms of their utility for boosting individual happiness (Seligman, 2011). In my previous work I explored how the work of Dewey might address the challenge of individualism through a more “social” approach to education and through an understanding of the self as part of a universal whole (Trask-Kerr, 2015).

Common sense will tell us that happy communities logically means happy people, but, in positive *education*, we need to be mindful of conveying to students the inherent message that their individual happiness is paramount and more important than that of the community. Prosocial behaviours develop with age (Siu, Shek, & Law, 2012) and preoccupation with self is sometimes seen as a marker of youth, particularly in this age of technology and social media. We need to ensure that positive education is not pushing them further in that direction by overemphasising their emotions and personal happiness at the expense of attention to others and, perhaps more seriously, awareness of social justice.

Becker and Marecek (2008) argue for a less individualistic exploration of morality and a stronger sense of the “greater good” within positive psychology, beyond that which will make an individual “most fulfilled” (p.1770). They identify the inference that values are “private choices” according to positive psychology, rather than universal and express concern that the conception of the self-contained individual might unintentionally perpetuate or strengthen “inequalities of gender, ethnicity and class” (p.1769). One might argue that

character strengths described in positive psychology are universal, but there may be an inference that individuals can choose whether or not to exercise strengths and virtues, particularly when they are not part of one's individual key strengths (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The related challenge of ethnocentrism is sometimes explained by those espousing positive psychology as being a result of the majority of the research in the area occurring in Western countries, but the issue is bigger than this. In addition to the distinctly Western concept of the "self", much of the seminal work in positive psychology reveals the subtle assumption that where the United States goes, the remainder of the world follows. Seligman and Csikszentmihályi's (2000) seminal paper begins by urging psychologists in America not to ignore the needs of its people and the "world at large", since, they say, ignoring these needs would lead to chaos and despair. An inference from this might be that the logical or natural consequence of ignoring the needs of the people of the United States is *worldwide* chaos and despair. Similarly, the concepts surrounding wellbeing and positive education are seen through a distinctly Western lens.

Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) contend that "there is no such thing as a value-free and no such thing as a value-neutral, culture-free psychology" and discuss various assumptions within positive psychology that they believe put the movement in danger of being narrow and ethnocentric. They attribute its individualism to the Western conception of the "self", which they describe as an interpretation based on faith in the Cartesian notion of the "self" as merely a thinking being. They posit that a belief in autonomy, freedom and self-expression as markers of maturity and mental health are uniquely Western in contrast with interpersonal indicators of goodness found in other cultures that identify more with

collectivism. They argue that peace and wellbeing may be found by adopting the non-Western practice of identifying with the community, the “whole”, or, in the case of some schools of Buddhism, with nothing. Importantly, in their general discussion of cultural interpretations of “goods” Christopher and Hickinbottom argue that identifying the development of “thick descriptions of moral goods (as opposed to operational definitions)” as the most important task in developing a full understanding of what human flourishing entails (p.580).

Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) also point to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s belief in a naturalist epistemology, or the believe that objective moral truths are out there to be found through scientific means, as an example of a Western perspective. They conclude, however, by acknowledging that positive psychology is critical to the “well-being of 21st-century psychology” but argue for the necessity of thinking critically about the assumptions within positive psychology to avoid it being an ethnocentric “disguised ideology” that perpetuates “the socio-political status quo” (p.581).

Seligman also justifies the “new prosperity” in distinctly Western terms. For example, he argues that wealth is pointless if we are all unhappy and therefore promotes this new prosperity as measure of success alongside wealth (Seligman, 2008). This kind of rhetoric arguably brings with it an unintended but distinctly Western and capitalist assumption: that wealth *should* bring happiness and, even if it doesn’t, that the wealthy *deserve* happiness. Such assumptions, though not uncommon in the modern capitalist neoliberal world, are decidedly out of sync with the aim of creating positive communities and highlight a need for a stronger sense of the “social”.

It is perhaps little wonder, then, that debate has arisen about the relationship between positive psychology and neoliberal governmentality (Amsler, 2011; Binkley, 2011, 2018; Cabanas, 2018; De La Fabián & Stecher, 2017). The birth of neoliberalism was described by Foucault (cf. Peters, 2007) and its paradoxes are aptly described by Brown (2015, p. 49):

*In the economic realm, neoliberalism aims simultaneously at deregulation and control. It carries purpose and has its own futurology (and futures markets), while eschewing planning. It seeks to privatize every public enterprise, yet valorizes public-private partnerships that imbue the market with ethical potential and social responsibility and the public realm with market metrics. With its ambition for unregulated and untaxed capital flows, it undermines national sovereignty while intensifying preoccupation with national GNP, GDP, and other growth indicators in national and postnational constellations.*

Important for our understanding of the role of neoliberalism as it relates to positive education, is the notion that neoliberalism stealthily imbues society with an unquestioned state of competitiveness, positions education as a commodity and economic wealth as a marker of success. Contemporary neoliberalism has been blamed for causing a rise in competitive self-interest, loneliness and isolation (cf. Monbiot, 2016), highlighting a need for wellbeing interventions. Conversely, there has been some suggestion that the introduction of positive psychology is in itself a both a symptom and a reflection of a neoliberal agenda, rather than a solution for it: with an implication that problems in life are caused *by* unhappiness rather than the cause *of* them; a narrow sense of the social; scientism and an emphasis on measurement; an absence of political and cultural content; and an individualistic conception of *personal* flourishing as the ultimate goal in life, at the expense of the most

worthy purposes (cf. Cabanas, 2018). Whether or not this is so, in a neoliberal environment, educational innovations such as positive education are marketed in terms of their potential for creating economic success and competitive advantage. The mere notion of measuring wellbeing may contribute to this by providing another marketable metric. Wellbeing itself is similarly marketed in terms of its benefits to the individual, reflecting the assumptions it should be challenging if it is to succeed in nurturing a more holistic definition of success.

As highlighted here, there has been a steady stream of research identifying philosophical challenges in positive psychology and positive education. Some of these issues have, to an extent, been theoretically addressed as part of positive psychology's expanding empirical base (2016b), and continue to be developed. Some examples of positive psychology initiatives that set out to address these challenges include systems informed approaches to positive psychology that take a more pragmatic approach to context and systems (Kern et al., 2019), Lomas's "Second Wave" (Lomas, 2016) which explores the value of negative emotions, as well as Wong's "Positive Psychology 2.0" (Wong, 2011), which touches on many of the criticisms of positive psychology. Hence, there is still work to be done, both practically and theoretically, to move positive *education* towards this normative framework that embeds education for community flourishing into the culture and mindset of schools but this work is steadily emerging and advancing.

Given the plethora of philosophical concerns, one might ask whether positive psychology in general, or positive education in particular, are appropriate vehicles for redefining school success and nurturing flourishing in our schools. However, regardless of the criticisms of equivocal moral foundations, the unintended assumptions and the Western conceptions of the self within positive psychology and positive education, there is a clear

need to find out why some people who *should* be happy by societal standards, clearly are not and this may require an examination of the societal standards and beliefs, rather than the emotions or achievements of people who hold them, as has largely been the case in positive psychology so far. In education, the answer may be found by exploring our young peoples' conceptions of the good life that lead to this "*should*" and challenging what may be erroneous conceptions of success that leave out important values such as community-mindedness, social responsibility and good citizenship. This, I believe, may be what Seligman meant when he described a need for a "new prosperity": we need to work towards clearer conception of who "should" be happy, because wealth alone is clearly not working for us as a marker of success or the flourishing life. Regardless of the reasons for the rise of positive psychology, its rising popularity (cf. Compton & Hoffman, 2020; Wong & Roy, 2017) means people are interested in *listening* to positive psychology and with this power comes the responsibility to challenge erroneous conceptions of success. *But how?* There have not, as yet, been any empirical studies of the nature of these ideas and the potential role of positive education in achieving an ideological shift. This exploration will be a small but integral step towards knowing how to do it.

### **3. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

#### **3.1 The gap.**

Literature in both education and positive psychology reveal significant interest in education for flourishing, defined as eudaimonic flourishing as described by Aristotle (Han, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2016, 2017; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006), including recognition of a need for collective or community flourishing (Biswas-Diener, 2011). Similarly, there have been many calls for a more solid philosophical grounding for positive psychology (and by extrapolation, positive education), and for a more consolidated moral or normative framework (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Pawelski, 2016b; Rathunde, 2001). This includes concerns about the implications of a positive education that side-steps important moral and philosophical questions (Suissa, 2008, 2015). Some of these concerns extend to accusations of individualism within positive psychology, in part due to its emphasis on personal subjective well-being and emotions and alleged ethnocentrism (Banicki, 2014; Becker & Marecek, 2008; Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008). Similarly, general concern about the purpose of schooling commonly calls for more attention to be paid to the aims of education and the social purposes of schooling.

Despite all of this interest there does not appear to be any published empirical studies exploring conceptions of success, prosperity, goodness or the purpose of schooling with students participating in positive education. We do not know, for example, if the alleged lack of normative framework or individualism has manifested within students of positive education, or whether, for example, studying the PERMA framework as part of PPIs has shifted students' understanding of or ideological beliefs about "goodness", virtue, what it

means to succeed at school and what it means to succeed in life. Similarly, concern about the perfunctory application on Aristotle's ethics in PPIs may be unwarranted if students of positive education already demonstrate an understanding of eudaimonic happiness as described by Aristotle, whether as a result of their participation in positive education or their general beliefs. The goal of this thesis is to address this gap in the literature and elucidate conceptions of success, prosperity, goodness and the purpose of schooling (Figure 4) so that we may build on these in planning an education system that embraces community flourishing into the future.

### **3.2 Research questions.**

To address the gaps identified in the literature, the overarching questions addressed in this thesis are:

- a) What beliefs about success, flourishing and the purpose of education are held by adolescents?
- b) Could PosEd be a vehicle for augmenting a conception of success or goodness based in eudaimonic flourishing?
- c) Can PosEd achieve an ideological shift towards education for collective flourishing, if it does not already exist?

These questions are addressed across three qualitative papers, one published and two currently under review, addressing the following questions:

- *How do adolescents define “prosperity” and “success” (Chapter 4) and “goodness”?*  
*(Chapter 5)*

- *What is “the good life” according to adolescents? (Chapter 5)*
- *What elements of Aristotle’s account of eudaimonia are expressed in adolescents’ conceptions of the good life? (Chapter 5)*
- *How do these definitions of prosperity and success differ in students who attended a positive education school when compared to students who do not attend a positive education school? (Chapter 4 & 5)*
- *What are students’ beliefs about the purpose of schooling and how school contributes to a good life? (Chapter 6)*
- *What views about the purposes of schooling are implicit in student writing? (Chapter 6)*
- *Do these views differ in students attending a school with a whole-school positive education programme compared with students attending a comparison school that has not implemented a positive education approach? (Chapter 6)*
- *How do student views on the purpose of schooling differ from the views of teachers? (Chapter 6)*

### **3.3 Research Hypotheses.**

It is predicted that students attending schools that have adopted a whole-school approach positive education, henceforth to be referred to as “positive education (PosEd) schools”, will show:

- a) Evidence of increased knowledge of elements of quality of life and PERMA, when compared with students from non-PosEd schools.
- b) Conceptions of “the good life” that align with some elements of eudaimonic happiness.

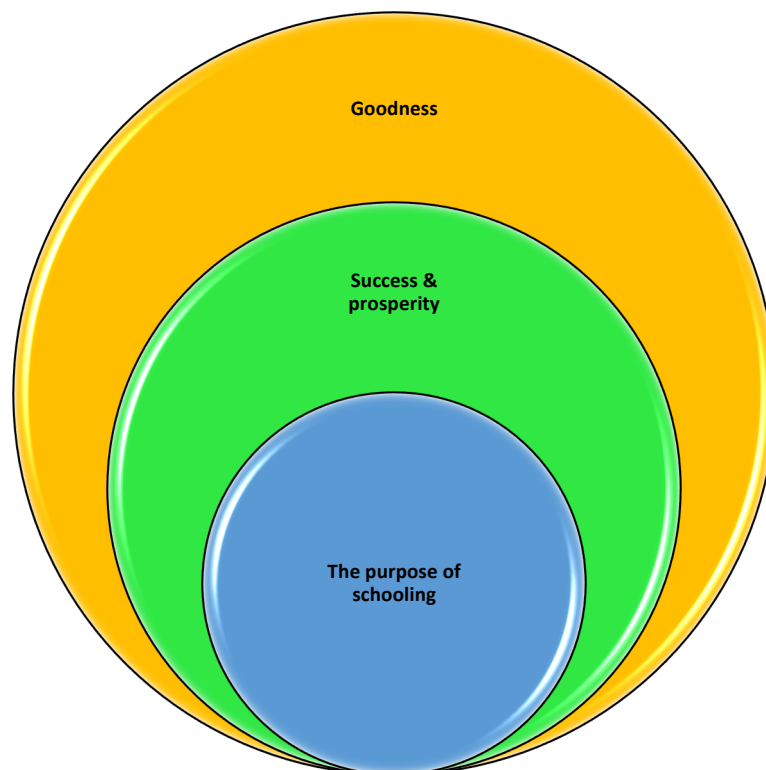
- c) An emphasis on the *credentialing* role of schooling, or a belief that school is primarily to prepare students for future careers.

Given the emergent status of positive education it is possible that these studies may reveal areas of work still to be done in areas (b) and (c) to nurture community-mindedness and to privilege the social purposes of schooling. This might be due to the nature of 21<sup>st</sup> Century schooling, neoliberal ideas, or the individual focus in early versions of positive education.

The following three papers address these questions through an exploration of student conceptions of success, prosperity, goodness and the purposes of schooling, since these conceptions work symbiotically towards a conception of flourishing. In an Aristotelian sense, conceptions of success and prosperity inform our understanding of “goodness”, which, in turn, informs our conception of the role of education in nurturing a good life. Although many philosophical frameworks may be useful in our understanding of conceptions of goodness or normativity within positive education, Aristotle was chosen as an appropriate lens due to the Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian content within existing positive psychology frameworks (Banicki, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2016; Posner et al., 2013). Viewing goodness in the Aristotelian sense, as *eudaimonia*, or the “chief good” to which schooling, success and prosperity aim. This concept of goodness as the chief good also reflects the Platonic concept of goodness as the chief form or “the sun” than illuminates truth and knowledge and thus the path to enlightenment (Plato, 2007).

Papers in this thesis are ordered so as to provide insight into success and prosperity first, since this is what positive education seeks to redefine in its goal of creating a “new prosperity”, followed by an exploration of the Aristotelian elements of students’

understandings of goodness, and finally, having established an insight into success, prosperity and goodness, an exploration of inherent beliefs about the purpose of schooling.



*Figure 4. Key concepts*

### **3.4 Methodological choices**

The lenses and methods for analyses and contexts chosen for each of these studies are detailed and justified within each of the papers. The thematic analyses were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) and included both theory-driven and data-driven techniques to ensure an adequate, nuanced, analysis of all relevant themes within the data. This type of analysis is not as common in positive psychology as quantitative methods. Thematic analysis is most often used for interviews rather than written narratives, but it can enable a rich and nuanced understanding of the writings that might not be easily interpreted from quantitative methods. It is important to acknowledge that findings are limited in that they are influenced

by philosophical biases, interpretation and past experience. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative methods generate a richness of data that may not be found in quantitative studies, and a researcher's "*subjectivity (their views, perspectives, frameworks for making sense of the world; their politics; their passions)*" ... *is seen as a strength rather than a weakness*" (p. 4). Although themes in these studies are quantified to an extent, and some measures are taken to increase objectivity, such as the use of Cummins' framework in Chapter 4, the main contribution of this thesis is in the discussion of philosophical and ideological findings, which are not easily quantified or neatly replicated.

For this reason, a choice was also made not to seek inter-rater reliability, since it was felt that a second interpretation of the writings would not add to the present studies for reasons set out by Morse (1997) and others (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Morse (1997) argued that inter-rater reliability *may* be appropriate in interviews where participants may be asked the same questions, but in qualitative studies such as lengthy interviews, one cannot expect a second researcher to necessarily have the same interpretation or insights. She argues that, just as one values a book review without seeking a second opinion, it is "death" to a study (p. 447) to limit an interpretation or insights to categories that may be neatly replicated by another researcher.

Since the writing tasks were administered in the classroom by teachers and collated by the researcher, blind analysis was not possible. However, the choice to administer the writing tasks in a classroom setting reflected the students' 'natural' setting, a measure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). The steps taken in interpretation and analysis of each study are described in the articles herein.

## **4. Success and Prosperity**

### **4.1 Publication**

**Article published as:** Trask-Kerr, K., Chin, T. C., & Vella-Brodrick, D. (2019). Positive education and the new prosperity: exploring young peoples' conceptions of prosperity and success. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(2)

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# **Positive education and the new prosperity: Exploring young people's conceptions of prosperity and success**

## **Abstract**

Positive psychology and positive education aim to broaden the definition of prosperity and success to include well-being. This qualitative study sought to explore whether students in a school with a school-wide approach to positive education expressed different ideas about prosperity and success than students who have not received explicit positive education training. Using thematic analysis techniques and with reference to Seligman's PERMA and Cummins' Personal Well-being Index (PWI) frameworks, the writing tasks of 205 Year 10 students were analysed. Results showed that positive education students attributed success and prosperity to relationships more frequently than students who had not participated in the

positive education programme, and discussed money as indicative of success less frequently. Social equity, health and collective well-being did not feature prominently in positive education students' responses, suggesting potential for further development of positive education programmes to promote these elements of prosperity and engender a more social definition of success.

**Keywords:** Positive education, quality of life, success, prosperity, well-being, adolescents, school-based programmes

## **Introduction**

Positive psychology, from which positive education emerged, is a branch of psychology originally created by Seligman in 1998 to shift the focus in psychology towards increasing flourishing rather than solely on ameliorating illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This goal expanded to embrace the aim of creating a worldwide economy of well-being where national prosperity is measured in terms of levels of human flourishing rather than economics alone (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2008).

In schools, this extends to the goal of changing the metrics towards valuing schools based on their ability to nurture student well-being and flourishing rather than solely supporting academic success (Waters, 2011). The field builds on the work of humanistic psychologists such as Maslow and Rogers (Friedman, 2008), but separates itself from these and other predecessors. Positive psychology is defined by its empirical base, examining what makes life worth living with the aim of creating a science of well-being. It explores the strengths, virtues, conditions and processes that contribute to well-being and positive function (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Importantly, it purports that it does not assume that the rest of

psychology is negative (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Positive education, the school-based incarnation of positive psychology, aims to challenge notions of success and prosperity by augmenting an education system where schools are measured on their ability to help students flourish and a world where the prosperity of a nation is measured based on the well-being of citizens (Rusk & Waters, 2013; Seligman, 2008, 2011, 2018; Waters, 2011).

Despite promising results in schools (Gillham et al., 2011; Norrish, 2015; O'Connor & Cameron, 2017), positive education, positive psychology and well-being science in general have not escaped criticism, partly due to positive psychology's huge umbrella under which many scientific and some pseudo-scientific interventions claim to reside. Points of contention include alleged individualism, lack of philosophical or theoretical grounding, a "faddish" nature, elitism and the suggestion that many of its interventions existed previously under different names (cf. Biswas-Diener, 2011; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Lazarus, 2003; Suissa, 2008; White, 2016; Wong & Roy, 2017).

Positive education looks different in different schools. Most commonly, schools will introduce a dedicated programme where students are taught skills based on positive psychology interventions (PPIs) that boost their resilience, hope and gratitude. Many have named their individual programmes "positive education" but some have avoided this "branding" and utilised the same PPIs on a smaller, "unbranded", scale. This is sometimes conducted as a one-off by their teachers or visiting specialists but many successful programmes have been ongoing and have become a regular part of school culture, which arguably is closer to what the founders of positive education envisaged in their goal of creating positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although there is value in engaging the services of visiting specialists in various PPIs, it has been shown that

interventions can be successfully run by students' regular classroom teachers (Elfrink, Goldberg, Schreurs, Bohlmeijer, & Clarke, 2017).

Schools that have embraced positive education have incorporated the goal of increasing well-being into their school strategic plan and implemented a whole-school shift that more closely resembles the aims set out by Seligman and colleague Csikszentmihályi at positive psychology's inception (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This includes training all staff in the use of positive education interventions, an emphasis on embedding positive education in the classroom and a focus on measuring well-being (Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017). The positive education (PosEd) school participating in the present study has implemented a school-wide positive psychology programme (Norrish, 2013, 2015).

In 2008, the year the PosEd school introduced positive education to its curriculum, Seligman expounded the aim of these programmes in wealthy nations such as Australia:

*The aim of wealth should be to produce more well-being. Public policy can be aimed at increasing general well-being and the successes or failures of policy can be measured against this standard. Prosperity-as-usual has been equated with wealth. The time has come for a new prosperity, a prosperity that combines well-being with wealth. Learning to value this new prosperity must start early – in the formative years of schooling – and it is this new prosperity, kindled by positive education that Australia can now choose. (Seligman, 2008, p. 20)*

This idea of combining well-being with wealth is also reflected in Seligman's vision for schools (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Leaving aside complicated moral implications of expounding aims exclusively for wealthy countries (which shall be addressed in the discussion section of this paper), this study was designed to explore whether or not positive education has, in fact, kindled a new definition of prosperity. Using samples of student writing, we sought to explore the following questions:

- What are young peoples' conceptions of national prosperity and success?
- How do conceptions of national prosperity and success differ in young people who attend a school with a whole-school approach to positive education, when compared with others of a similar demographic?
- How do young peoples' conceptions of national prosperity and success reflect the Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA) domains (Seligman, 2011), and the Personal Well-being Index (PWI) (Cummins, 1997; Tomy & Cummins, 2011)?
- To what extent do student definitions of success and prosperity reflect the goal of creating a "new prosperity", as expounded in positive education literature?
- What elements of community-mindedness can be found in adolescents' writings about prosperity and success?

The PERMA domains are described by Seligman as the "building blocks" of well-being (Seligman, 2018, p. 333). The domains of Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment are identified as elements of a flourishing life and explicitly taught as part of positive education programmes in schools. The PWI similarly spells out essential elements of living well. These are health, accomplishment, relationships, safety,

community connectedness and future security (Cummins, 1997; Tomy & Cummins, 2011). This framework is developed within a quality of life framework and is not considered to be under the positive psychology umbrella and is therefore not generally taught (explicitly) to students of positive education. Nonetheless, we considered both frameworks relevant to redefining success and national prosperity.

We predicted that students of positive education would be more likely to look beyond traditional academic or financial goals in their discussion of success and prosperity than students who had not participated in a whole-school positive education programme. This is due to their studies of elements of the PERMA as part of the school's "Learning to Flourish" programme, as well as the embedding of positive education in their school (see Norrish, 2013; Norrish & Huppert, 2015). Despite the PWI framework not being included in their school's programme, we predicted that their writing would also align with this framework due to an increased focus on elements of quality of life in their school. We could not find any similar studies exploring students' knowledge of quality of life on which to base our hypotheses, but other studies have shown that learning about well-being may increase well-being literacy (Campbell, 2016; Oades & Johnston, 2017).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Two hundred and seventeen students participated in the written task analysed in the present study. Twelve responses were excluded from further analysis due to being blank, too short (less than one sentence) or off-task. Of the remaining usable written responses, 146 were from the PosEd group (A), 35 were from comparison group (B) and 24 from comparison group (C). Length of responses ranged from one sentence to 497 words. The task was not part

of the curriculum and was not assessed. Students were not offered an incentive to participate, which may have been why some students did not complete the task or were off-task.

All participants were in Year 10. The exact ages of participants were not available to the researchers, but students at this stage are usually between 15 and 16 years old. As the current study is a secondary analysis of existing data, the collection of other potentially relevant information about the students who participated was not possible.

Students in the PosEd group (A) attended a large, co-educational independent (private) school in a regional city near Melbourne, Australia, with an Index of Community Socio- Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 1150 (ACARA, 2014). Students in comparison group (B) attended an independent (private) school for boys in urban Melbourne with an ICSEA value of 1156 (ACARA, 2014). Students in comparison group (C) attended a co- educational independent (private) school in regional Victoria with an ICSEA value of 1110. The ICSEA value is a calculation of the average educational advantage of students within Australian schools, and is calculated based on a school's geographical location, parents' education, parents' occupation and proportion of Indigenous students. The median ICSEA in Australian schools is 1000 with a standard deviation of 100. The range is typically 500 to 1300 (ACARA, 2014). The ICSEA values for the three participating schools indicate that they are attended by students with higher-than-average educational advantage. Although the schools that agreed to participate were well-matched in terms of educational advantage, the disparity between these schools in terms of location and gender balance may introduce some systematic bias. For example, students attending the regional school might experience different levels of stress, or a single-sex school may see quality of life through a gendered

perspective. We could not find any specific evidence of this, but a replication of this study might aim to recruit schools with more similar cohorts.

### *Description of interventions*

The PosEd school has a strong positive education focus, with an established programme of explicitly taught positive psychology interventions (PPIs) that commenced in 2011, three years prior to our data collection in 2014. At least 90 minutes per week was dedicated to the explicit teaching of PPIs throughout the school year. One such intervention was a positive education programme entitled “Learning to Flourish” which draws primarily from the science of positive psychology (O’Connor & Cameron, 2017). The programme included activities based on the Values in Action character strengths framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), developing a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), hope (Lopez, 2013), flexible thinking, meaning, purpose, gratitude and optimism. The dedicated programme took students through a range of activities designed to promote well-being, increase emotional literacy and specifically to help students to flourish at school. In addition, six years prior to the data collection for the present study, the PosEd school had undertaken a whole-school shift towards positive education. This is reflected in the school’s strategic plan, in teacher training and in the creation of an Institute for Positive Education, which provides training for teachers in and outside of the school.

Comparison groups attended schools that indicated they did not explicitly teach any particular positive education framework or use PPIs. It is noteworthy that well-being education in these schools did cover similar topics such as flourishing, character strengths, resilience and relationships. Both schools implemented positive education in 2015, the year subsequent to the data collection, but even then, their exposure was lower, with 70% and 30% fewer minutes per week, respectively, devoted to positive education in these schools.

***Data collection***

Data for the present study were collected in 2014 as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage study into the impact of positive education at the school. The Linkage programme is a government funded initiative that promotes partnerships between researchers and organizations. Students completed the writing tasks at school using an online survey tool (Survey Gizmo). Responses were collated using Survey Gizmo and imported into NVivo for analysis.

Students were instructed to design a research project about success and national prosperity. The guiding questions asked:

- What are the research questions to be examined?
- How do you define success (prosperity)?
- What would you measure and how?
- What group of people would you be interested in studying (e.g., children, adolescents, young adults, working adults, elderly, a general sample) and why? How would you run the study, and why?
- What is the practical importance of the research study? For example, how would the findings of this research be used in the real world?
- Potential issues that you will need to consider as a researcher.

These questions were designed to invoke responses that reveal students' knowledge of scientific process and inquiry, and also demonstrate their views about the definition of success and prosperity. The current study focusses on the latter, as well as what is revealed

about their community-mindedness and knowledge of elements of quality of life and flourishing.

### *Procedure*

The process for data analysis was adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006), who describe both theory-driven and data-driven generation of codes as part of a thematic analysis. The present study employs both techniques to ensure an adequate analysis of all relevant themes within the data. The steps taken in interpretation and analysis are described in the following paragraphs.

The first step involved reading through the narratives to gauge a general understanding of the types of responses the task generated. At this stage, we were mindful of the PWI and PERMA frameworks that would later be used for classifying the themes, but other themes were also noted. There were a small number of outliers or claims attributing success and prosperity to contributors that did not relate to the PWI or PERMA framework. Examples were noted and then a list of the top 50 most frequently used words was generated using NVivo and word clouds created after eliminating two-letter words. This was not used for analysis per se because single words in isolation may be taken out of context. However, it provided an impression of the types of themes that may be interpreted from the texts.

The next stage involved the generation of nodes (themes) for coding (see Appendix). These were initially created using both the PERMA and PWI frameworks and then informed by the first reading of the data. This allowed for a more appropriate categorisation of sub-themes within the PWI or PERMA themes (or “parent nodes”) and the addition of added parent nodes in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recognition of the importance of

coding as many potential themes and patterns as possible. This being said, we were careful to include only the themes that students considered to be part of their definition of success.

Students often discussed other factors that they did not consider central to success or prosperity. Many initial themes were separated into new categories; for example, many students discussed “accomplishment” as something entirely separate from “money”, and “money” was also often implied to be independent of “living standard”. Therefore, the theme of “money” was added as a separate “parent node” along with “governance”, since students discussed the current government as an independent contributor to success and prosperity.

Themes were then reviewed and extra sub-nodes were added to some parent nodes, or moved to others, to further capture the nuances of meaning in some students’ discussions. “Safety”, for example was originally classified as a sub-node within “living standard” but was moved to “governance and political stability” because students tended to imply that safety was the result of living in a peaceful country. Additional parent themes were added to more accurately capture important themes that may not fit entirely within the PERMA or PWI frameworks. For example, many students discussed money or the economy as a factor independent of “future security”. Similarly, governance and environment were discussed by some students but did not fit neatly within the PERMA or PWI frameworks.

Text was coded into nodes. Importantly, only text from which we inferred meaning about success or prosperity was coded. This makes the analysis more accurate than a simple text search in NVivo or the word frequency list, as many keywords are mentioned without implying any meaning with regard to the individual student’s conception of success, or some are mentioned negatively. For example, a student writing “success is not about money but about happiness” would be coded into the “positive emotions” node but if using a text search

alone, this response may be erroneously added to “money”. Some single statements referring to more than one theme were coded into several categories. For this reason, we chose not to utilise the “coverage” calculation in NVivo as this would yield inaccurate results.

Calculations were based on the number of references rather than the percentage of coverage. These were mapped and tabulated, with the comparison groups combined into one chart for ease of interpretation (see Appendix for separate comparison group results). Nodes were grouped into relevant PWI or PERMA “parent” themes to create a visual representation of the data for comparison. Themes with negligible results and outliers were not included in the visual representation of data. The total number of mentions in each parent theme was calculated as a percentage of the total for all parent themes to create a pie chart for comparison. This chart is designed for visual comparison of weighting of main themes, but is not a main tool for analysis.

Findings were analysed to deduce the “story” each theme told about the data, along with the word frequency. Observations about the types of language used were noted, including the use of individual versus collective language. Finally, responses were re-read and categorised according to whether the student used individual or collective language to respond to task questions. Responses that used both were sorted into a third category. When coding responses for individual versus collective language, the number of student responses serves as the denominator.

## **Results**

The representations of the elements of the PERMA domain in participants’ writing tasks is compared across the PosEd and comparison groups in the following sections.

***General observations***

Students recognised the complexity of success and prosperity, with most giving multi-faceted definitions. Some examples:

*“I would define success as the accomplishment of a task or goal, but I would also define it by knowing that you are happy, that there are people in the world who truly care about you.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“I define success as how happy you are and it just depends on what makes you happy and how you would like to lead your life. This maybe be [sic] different for different people but on the majority I think that you measure happiness by your number of friendships and how good you feel your relationships are.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“A nation’s success and prosperity is measured not only through economic gain but also through more significant aspects that are vital to a healthy society, such as happiness.” (Comparison group participant)*

*“Determining the success of a nation may depend on things like their economy and their crime rate and unemployment rate, these are all things that can be quantified to see if the nation and its government have used their resources well to succeed and have a stable and healthy population.” (Comparison group participant)*

Students’ interpretation of the question tended to produce a broad range of answers, with some students focusing on success and others on prosperity. Although success and prosperity are presented as synonyms in the task question, in reality success might be more likely to

invoke responses more related to individual success or to achievement, whereas prosperity might be interpreted as relating to national or collective flourishing. This was not the case with all students, as evidenced in the aforementioned example of a student who interpreted prosperity to mean individual success. Some students' choice to focus on one and not the other is interesting in itself as it may be interpreted as evidence of what they see as important in assessing quality of life.

### ***Positive emotions (PERMA domain 1)***

A large proportion of students in all groups associated success with happiness, with 23.06% of data coded falling within the "positive emotions" category in the PosEd group, and 20% in the comparison groups (Figure 1). This category included life satisfaction, general happiness, joy, luck, pleasure and a sense of purpose. Discussion of what comprises "happiness" is minimal, with many students simply using the word happiness in general terms.

Happiness-related terms featured third in the PosEd group word frequency query (Figure 2), contrasted with tenth in the comparison group. This may indicate that students in the PosEd group are more likely to associate success with positive emotions. Nonetheless, many comparison group participants also equated happiness with success or prosperity, with many students in these groups referring to collective rather than individual happiness:

*"...a nation's prosperity is in modern terms defined by its wealth in relation to its economy, but in more realistic terms, happiness is more important than anything else. Money doesn't buy happiness." (Comparison group participant)*

*Achievement and accomplishment (PERMA domain 4, PWI 2)*

Students in all groups associated success with achievement and accomplishment, with a higher proportion of references in the comparison groups equating success with achievement (Figure 1). There was some acknowledgement of the achievement of lifelong happiness, as described in the Aristotelian account of eudaimonia (Aristotle & Sachs, 2002), but most descriptions of success referred to particular goals rather than lifelong achievement. Although there were a higher proportion of coded references to achievement in the comparison group, these references more frequently referred to national success when compared with the PosEd group, which included more references to individual success, discussed further in the individual/collective language section.

*“I would define success as an accomplishment of a goal/aim. It is your own goal that you set out to complete.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“Success is based on how satisfied they are with achieving their goals and being happy.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“I would define success and prosperity as the wealth and achievements of the nation.” (Comparison group participant)*

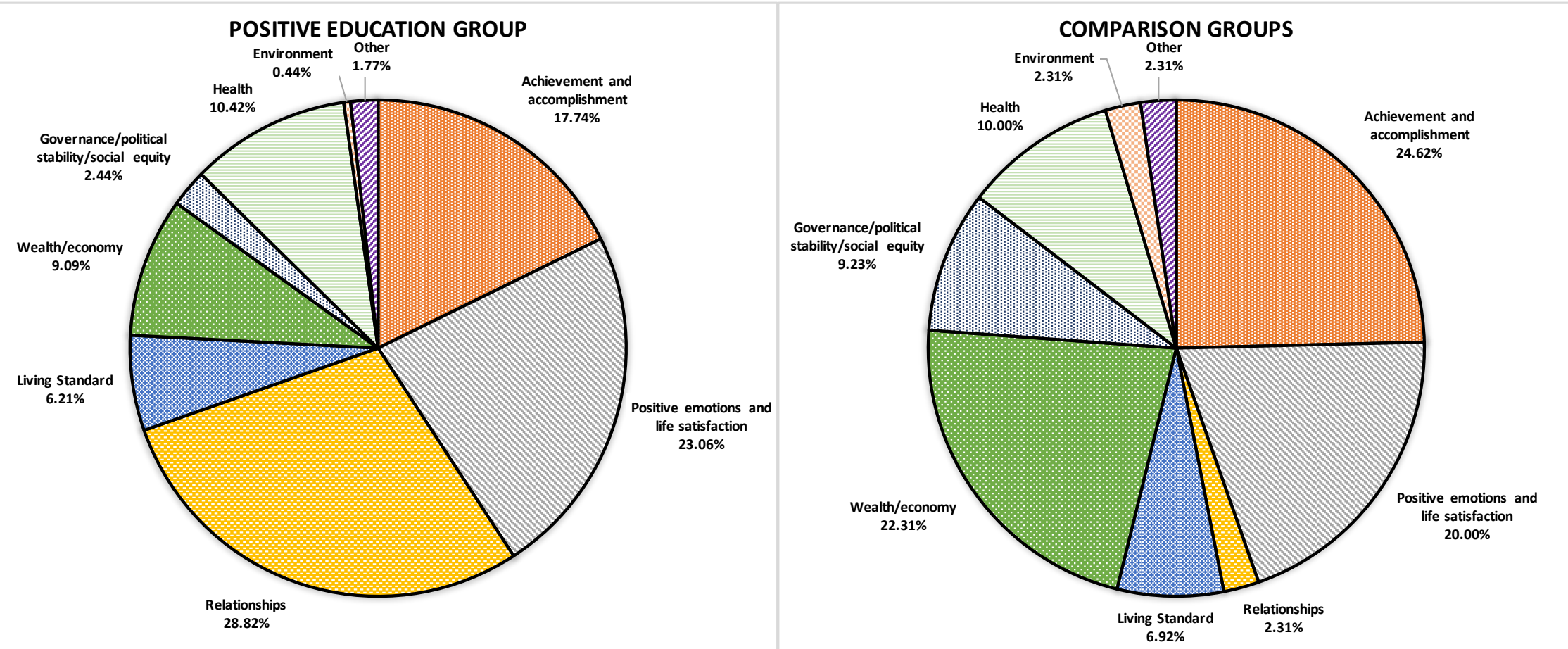


Figure 1. Themes as percentage of total coded themes



***Wealth, economy and living standard***

Although wealth was mentioned by students in both groups, it was discussed more frequently in the comparison groups, with 22.31% of coded references falling into the wealth or economics category in that group, contrasted with only 9.09% in the PosEd group. Also interesting was the way wealth was discussed in both groups, with the comparison groups more likely to discuss wealth and economic success of the nation. Few students referred specifically to the value of money for future security, as in the PWI (Tomyn & Cummins, 2011), with most references describing the value of money in terms of improving living standards. For this reason, the themes “living standard” and “money” could have been combined under the same parent node, but the decision was made to keep them separate as the inferences are slightly different. Many students in the comparison group discussed economic success and the impact this might have on a nation’s prosperity:

*“When we discuss the idea of what makes a nation great, we can look for example at the country’s rate of unemployment, how successful its economy is, and the size of its army.” (Comparison group participant).*

***Governance, political stability and social equity (relates to PWI 4)***

More students in the comparison groups considered issues of governance, political stability and social equity in their discussion of prosperity and success. These themes were discussed in 9.23% of references coded in the comparison groups. In contrast, the PosEd group discussed these themes in 2.44% of coded references, although wealth is discussed separately by many students.

*“I would say that success (or prosperity) in my opinion would be a general measure of the economic, political and social stability and wealth across the nation.”*

*(Comparison group participant)*

*“I would define success as a country as having a minimal wealth gap between the rich and the poor.” (Comparison group participant)*

### ***Health, environment and sustainability (relates to PWI 1)***

All groups discussed the importance of health as a measure of success and prosperity, with 10.42% of references coded in the PosEd group falling into this category, and 10% in comparison groups (Figure 1). Students described both the health of the nation, as well as individual good health. The environment and sustainability only featured once in the PosEd group (less than 1%), compared with four references in the comparison groups.

*“I would define a nation’s prosperity by both its infrastructure (e.g. Wealth, Growth, Safety, etc.) as well as the state of its citizens (are they happy, healthy, wealthy or poor, etc.) because both have an equally important impact on a countries [sic] well-being.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“If a nation can get everyone clean food and water, access to a medical care and a job as well as keeping the environment healthy and reducing CO2 emissions at safe levels, ten [sic] a nation has truly been successful.” (Comparison group participant)*

*Individual versus collective language*

Students' responses to the writing task were also coded for their use of collective, as opposed to individual language, with some responses coded as reflecting both forms of language (Figure 3).

More students in the PosEd group interpreted success and prosperity in individual rather than collective terms, with 88.36% in the PosEd group discussing success exclusively as it pertained to the individual, 6.16% discussing success in collective terms and 5.48% referring to both collective and individual success in their written discussion. Some students described methods of gauging national prosperity by measuring individual success while many others explicitly defined success as individual happiness or achievements:

*“Ideally, success is someone who fulfils their personal achievements and have the financial means they desire whilst having a good network of friends and family.”*

*(PosEd group participant)*

*“Some questions that I would consider asking would be: How old are you? Where do you live? How would you define prosperity? Have you found prosperity?” (PosEd group participant)*

In contrast, 35.59% of comparison group students discussed success or prosperity exclusively as it pertained to individuals, with 44.07% using more collective terms and 20.34% discussing both. The proportion of collective language use was higher in Comparison Group 2 than in Comparison Group 1 (Figure 3). These discussions were more likely to invoke the

economy, political stability and social equity. These responses may include levels of individual happiness or success but discussed in more collective terms:

*“I would measure the collective success of the country through efficiency of economy, politics, and population well-being.” (Comparison group participant)*

*“Success, as an umbrella term, is used ... to describe a multitude of factors ranging from and including average wage or salary (including taxes), economic stability, public service quality, market growth and demand, and worth of ownership of goods.” (Comparison group participant)*

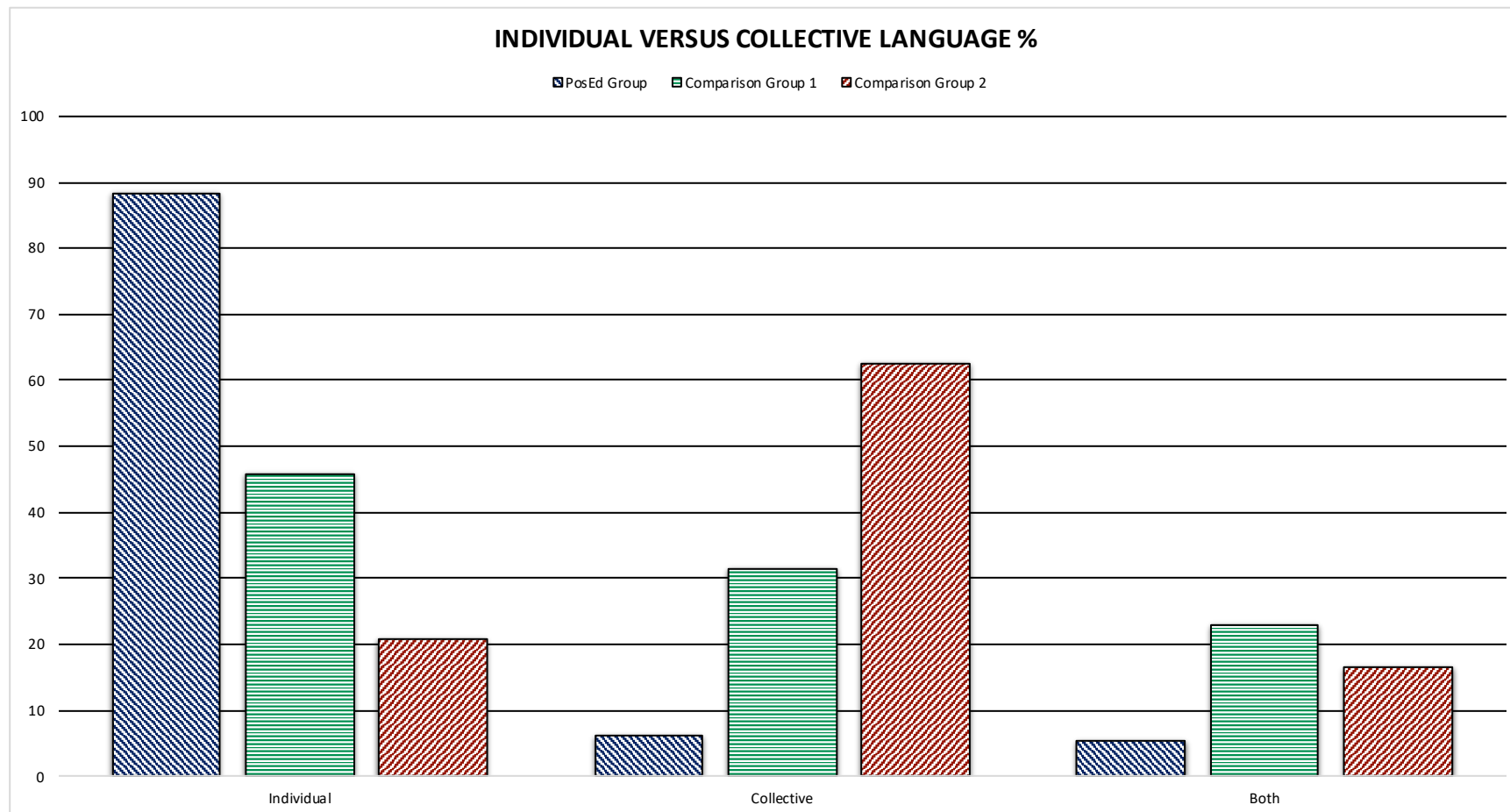


Figure 3. Individual vs. collective language

## **Discussion**

### ***Young peoples' conceptions of national prosperity and success***

The students' accounts of national prosperity and success in this study extended beyond the traditional association of prosperity with wealth or success with financial or academic goals. Although these students discussed accomplishment, economics, career success and wealth in their definitions, many students considered the importance of relationships, happiness and environment when thinking about success or prosperity. This might indicate that the language used in the teaching of positive education has influenced the way these adolescents think about success and prosperity. However, many students in the comparison groups also referenced these themes in their discussions, so not all discussions of an expanded view of success or prosperity can be attributed to the influence of a positive education programme.

### ***Do conceptions of national prosperity differ in young people who attend a school with a whole-school approach to positive education?***

The findings suggest that students who have completed a positive education programme may possess an understanding of the human element of national prosperity and success, as opposed to limited metrics such as GDP and economic growth. Family and friends were discussed more frequently in the writings of the positive education group than in the comparison groups, reflecting positive education's emphasis on building strong connections and on gratitude. Students in the positive education group invariably referred to at least one of each of the PERMA domains, as well as the PWI framework, when considering national prosperity and success, possibly indicating that positive psychology is succeeding in generating thought about a redefined idea of success. Although this has somewhat confirmed our prediction that students in a positive education school would be more likely to look

beyond academic or financial definitions of success and prosperity than students who had not participated in positive education, there is more work to be done in this area.

### ***Reflections of the PERMA and PWI domains in adolescents' conceptions of prosperity and success***

Elements of PERMA such as positive emotions, relationships and accomplishment appear to be valued by these young people when they consider how to measure prosperity and success. However, fewer students gave in-depth explanations that directly discussed engagement or meaning, indicating a possible area for expansion of the positive education programme. PWIs including health, community-connectedness, safety and future security were discussed less frequently as part of a definition of success but were discussed in the context of a broader discussion of prosperity.

### **Limitations**

There was a disparity between the sample sizes in the PosEd group compared with the much-smaller comparison groups. Although patterns and themes could be detected in all groups, with the two comparison groups sharing more similarities with each other than with the PosEd group (most notably the lack of discussion of personal relationships), a further study should aim to compare groups of similar sizes (i.e. a larger comparison group).

There is a possibility that the comparison group had been exposed to PPIs through their usual well-being programme; however, the amount of exposure would have been considerably less than the Positive Education school participating in this study. In addition, the broad aim of this study was to explore the impact of a whole-school positive education approach on students' ideas of prosperity and success. The Positive Education school had

adopted this whole-school positive education approach for several years prior to this study and this would have been well established by the time this research was conducted. The aim of challenging ideas of success and prosperity are arguably strongest in schools that have adopted the “whole school” model of positive education. Individual PPIs such as resilience training, peer support, gratitude or mindfulness exercises contribute to well-being but may not necessarily engender the whole school aim of shifting the metrics in education.

At the same time, it should be noted that students in the PosEd group had participated in various studies as part of their school’s positive education pilot programme (Vella-Brodrick, Rickard, & Chin, 2014; Vella-Brodrick et al., 2017), were probably aware of the fundamental goals of positive education study and therefore demand characteristics for such a study might appear in their responses. In this paper, however, we have examined evidence of an ideological shift that is not explicitly part of the students’ positive education training. Most other studies undertaken by researchers working with these students involved assessing the students’ levels of well-being (Vella-Brodrick et al., 2014, 2017). Therefore, students could not have been aware that this is what we would examine. In addition, the use of a framework (PWI) unfamiliar to the students may insulate this study against this type of response bias.

There is also the possibility of social desirability bias in the type of study that deals with moral or normative subjects. Students might feel that a response about happiness or one that reveals their social responsibility makes them appear to researchers to be better people. Students completing the task in the positive education (PosEd) group were also aware of the purpose of the ARC Linkage project and that the data were being collected as part of a larger positive education study. These students had provided previous data and were aware that they

were “living” the positive education experience on which the study was focused. The potential impact of this is inescapable and could produce a study bias. We sought to combat this to some extent by examining questions that extend beyond the scope of positive psychology interventions explicitly taught to this group, using both the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011) and Cummins’ Quality of Life framework (Cummins, 1997; Tomy & Cummins, 2011) in the analysis. Cummins’ framework existed prior to the inception of positive psychology and is not typically considered to be under the umbrella of positive psychology. Although it reflects similar values as the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), it comes from an arguably different tradition than positive psychology and, therefore, has the potential to show that the values and ideas instilled by positive psychology interventions, or specifically by a positive education programme, hold up to scrutiny beyond the field.

We were aware that the potential for insularity within a field is a reality within this type of education research that seeks to analyse ideas and attitudes taught as part of a specific programme. A researcher looking specifically for knowledge of the PERMA domains (Seligman, 2011) might teach students about the domains and then test them on their knowledge, and this would primarily be an exercise in comprehension. In this study, the student writing task did not indicate what we would examine and many of the main themes were not explicitly mentioned in the writing task question. In our analysis we sought to move beyond the ideas within the writing task question put to the participants and infer themes that potentially have a broader practical impact on students’ lives and communities.

Relevant, too, is the active role of the researcher in interpreting these data, including Ely, Downing, Vinz, and Anzul’s (1997) observation that themes do not reside in the data, but rather in the mind of the researcher. With this in mind, we adopted an essentialist/realist

epistemological standpoint in interpreting data, assuming that the language used by the students reflects the students' real beliefs, meaning and experience. We approached the data with the ethical assumption that "success" and "prosperity" are inherently good things and that this alone provides the imperative for participants to act in a way (or desire to act in a way) that will bring such success to their own lives or to their own communities.

Interpretation of data is informed by the PERMA domains (Seligman, 2011) and PWI (Cummins, 1997; Tomy & Cummins, 2011), which provided an objective lens.

In addition to these lenses, we interpreted the data within the context of the goals of positive education: to establish an "economy of well-being" which privileges some paths to prosperity above others. The inherent normativity of any quality of life study also cannot be ignored, and we are mindful that although positive psychology literature acknowledges that there are many paths to a good life, the most fulfilling path generally involves a contribution to the community. The "values-neutral" position or moral pluralism of some positive psychology proponents is, in fact, an area of contention (Kristjansson, 2012; Wong & Roy, 2017) but this study sought to move beyond this in the hope of encouraging a more collective and community-minded approach to flourishing, as described by Wong (2011), Biswas-Diener (2011) and others.

### *A new prosperity? Moral and social concerns*

Looking deeper into the moral messages the writing tasks convey, a sense of individualism pervades even those that referred to "helping others" or contributing to society. Positive psychology has been criticised for its ostensible individualism (Biswas-Diener, 2011; Wong & Roy, 2017), and at times seems to promote community service almost as a side effect of the pursuit of personal happiness or as a means to attain individual happiness, but not as an

end in itself. These student responses do tend to put the individual at the forefront of their conception of prosperity. It is interesting that even though more students in the comparison groups included more references to economic contributors to success and prosperity, more of these students discussed social equity and the gap between rich and poor than in the positive education group. The references to wealth and the economy were also more likely to be in collective terms. Despite the superficiality of defining success in terms of wealth, this might be considered a more social view of prosperity.

Further study is needed to determine whether the apparent individualism and superficiality is the result of a limited timeframe or scope of the question presented, or whether there is something lacking in their education about what social equity might contribute to a truly prosperous nation. A writing task question that specifically asks for depth and greater clarity might reveal more detail about what students think comprises a successful nation. Nonetheless, even under time pressure, the first response of most students in the PosEd group was to consider individual happiness. Even if their deeper understanding extends beyond this, they have clearly privileged this above a more collective view of prosperity and this warrants further research.

On the other hand, the tendency for positive education students to value personal connections like family and friendships as a sign of success is a promising indication that positive education programmes can have an impact, not only on mental health but conceptually. This might be harnessed to achieve the most important purposes of schooling: community harmony and the collective good.

In light of the present social and political climate, one might suggest that Seligman's (2008) proclamation that Australia is a "wealthy" country that therefore needs to focus on well-being as a mark of prosperity has become a little less relevant. There is something paradoxical in declaring that we are wealthy so we should therefore be happy, whilst simultaneously claiming that wealth is not the most important mark of success. In the past 10 years our world has arguably become more nationalistic, disharmonious and tumultuous and a less ethnocentric, more existential, positive education may have a role to play in helping young people to navigate that. Students of positive education now need an awareness of their responsibilities as part of a social whole and a harmonious community. This can be reflected in the school community, where students can develop skills that encourage active participation in a community which supports social cohesion. Further, positive education has the opportunity to impart an existential awareness of our relative smallness in the world as humans but yet our power to change it for the better, through contributions to our community, sustainability and the environment.

Positive education is growing and evolving. This study reveals a possible need for a more social positive education, drawing from educational philosophers such as Noddings (2010) and Dewey (1923), and from work that encourages a more ethical positive psychology (Wong, 2011). Within this new framework, there needs to be a new, more social, idea of success and prosperity that informs not only the teaching within positive education, but ideas about the purpose of schooling. Our need to create a "new" prosperity, as expounded by Seligman (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2008) is as relevant as it ever was, but the actual path towards this new prosperity is far more complicated, less ethnocentric, and is more firmly grounded in social harmony and collective well-being than in current positive education frameworks. A proposal for this new definition of prosperity for the common good,

and an examination of the role positive education might play in it, is beyond the scope of this study but is an exciting avenue for further study that will serve to consolidate the goals of positive education into the 2020s and beyond.

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**Appendix**

		<i>PosEd</i>	<i>Comparison Group 1</i>	<i>Comparison Group 2</i>	<i>Comparison Groups Combined</i>
<i>Achievement and accomplishment</i>	Achievement (general)	30	14	4	18
	Education	12	6	0	6
	Employment, work and career	37	3	4	7
	Innovation and science	1	0	1	1
<i>Positive emotions and life satisfaction</i>	Positive emotions (general)	76	10	9	19
	Life satisfaction	10	0	1	1
	Pleasure or joy	1	0	0	0
	Well-being (general)	9	2	1	3
	Good fortune or luck	0	0	2	2
	Meaning/purpose	8	1	0	1
	<i>Relationships</i>	Relationships (general)	9	0	0
Family		57	0	2	2
Friends		38	0	1	1
Pets		6	0	0	0
Romantic		10	0	0	0
Community connectedness		6	0	0	0
Contribution to others		4	0	0	0

<i>Living standard</i>	Living standard	13	1	2	3
	Home standard	3	0	0	0
	Leisure time	7	0	0	0
	Location/liveability of town	2	0	0	0
	Safety	3	3	3	6
<i>Wealth/economy</i>	Wealth/economy	40	15	14	29
	Future security	1	0	0	0
<i>Governance/ political stability/ Social equity</i>	Governance/political stability	5	5	1	6
	Social equity	6	1	5	6
<i>Health</i>	Health (general)	24	5	5	10
	Exercise	13	0	0	0
	Food	3	2	1	3
	Wellness (general)	7	0	0	0
<i>Environment</i>	Sustainability/environment	2	2	1	3
<i>Others/outliers</i>	Military	0	0	1	1
	Gratitude	1	0	0	0
	Freedom of thought	1	0	0	0
	Spirituality	4	0	0	0
	Status	0	0	2	2
	Virtue or morality	2	0	0	0
<i>Total references</i>		451	70	60	130

## **5. Positive Education and the Good Life**

### **5.1 Publication**

# **Positive education, Aristotelian eudaimonia and adolescent notions of the “good” life.**

### **Authors:**

Kylie Trask-Kerr; Dr Tan-Chyuan Chin & Prof. Dianne A. Vella-Brodrick

### **Abstract**

The educational approach known as positive education emerged from positive psychology and attributes its conception of flourishing to Aristotelian eudaimonia. This is a point of contention between scholars who see positive psychology’s flourishing as an epithet of Aristotelian virtues and others who have identified critical divergences between the philosophical foundations of positive psychology and Aristotle’s normative ethics. Few of these scholars, however, have used empirical methods to examine whether young peoples’ understandings of the good life reflect Aristotelian eudaimonia, and whether this is different in students of positive education than in the other student cohorts. This qualitative paper explores these ideas as expressed through the writings of 226 Year 10 (15- and 16-year old) students, 93 of whom attend a school that has implemented a whole-school approach to positive education. These ideas are analysed through an Aristotelian lens using thematic analysis, finding more similarities than differences between the two groups. Both groups discussed relationships most frequently in their definitions of the good life. Positive emotions and accomplishments also featured prominently but, in contrast with the Aristotelian

conception of the good life, moral goodness and virtue were not prominent themes.

Conclusions are drawn about the implications of this and possible directions for positive education, moral education and the purpose of schooling.

## **Introduction**

### ***Positive education and the “problem” of normativity.***

Positive education is an approach originating from the positive psychology movement.

Positive psychology researchers' *raison d'être* has been to create an empirically sound science of well-being that examines what makes life worth living. The movement's founder, Martin Seligman, and other scholars of positive psychology in the years since it originated in 1998, have cited Aristotelian eudaimonia as a source of inspiration for key elements of their concept of flourishing (cf. Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006; Seligman, 2011). The goal of positive education is to augment an education system that measures schools on their ability to nurture students in achieving this eudaimonic life. In practice, this has involved the introduction of positive psychology practices in schools and, in some schools, implementing a school-wide shift towards prioritizing student flourishing. It has been suggested that positive psychology interventions (PPIs) may be successful in boosting positive affect, well-being and engagement (Elfrink, Goldberg, Schreurs, Bohlmeijer, & Clarke, 2017; Seligman & Adler, 2009; Slemp et al., 2017). Philosophers, however, have questioned the limited philosophical or moral groundwork in positive psychology (Rathunde, 2001; Suissa, 2008, 2013) and over the past 20 years many scholars of positive psychology have attempted to address these philosophical quandaries (cf. Kristjánsson, 2013; Rathunde, 2001; Trask-Kerr, Quay, & Slemp, 2019; Wong & Roy, 2017). Empirical exploration of the moral impact of positive psychology in education, however, is scarce.

In practice we know little about how young people *conceive* of a life well lived or how they individually define the flourishing life. Students may find that PPIs improve their lives in various ways such as reducing stress at school or helping them to feel their school is invested in their well-being. Many may learn how to achieve flow when working and how to express gratitude. Instinctively and anecdotally, however, we know that a life well lived, or eudaimonia, is somehow deeper and more complex than this. We do not know if these students have a sense of this *bigger picture* and it may be possible that each student has his or her own different version of flourishing in mind. Such “happiness pluralism” has been an area of contention in positive psychology (Kristjánsson, 2012; Peterson, 2006). Various scholars have avoided definitive guides to goodness or happiness. Some scholars argue that positive psychology needs to avoid outright prescriptive content in order to remain scientific and because such concepts cannot be shown to be universal (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Simmons, 2013) and Seligman is explicit in avoiding what he calls Aristotle’s “monism”, or the implication that there is one track to goodness, in his well-being theory (Seligman, 2011, p. 16). Simmons (2013) describes this as a lack of normativity and a values-neutral position, while others simply see this merely as an acknowledgement that goodness is a “subjective enterprise” (Linley et al., 2006, p. 13) and point out that positive psychology, by definition, cannot be devoid of values. Regardless of the reasons, a lack of clear prescriptive or normative content in positive psychology would put the ideological foundations of positive *education* at odds with Aristotle’s normative ethics from which the concept of eudaimonia originates and, arguably, at odds with many philosophers’ conceptions of the purpose of education.

In the case of the PPI Values in Action (VIA) character strengths framework, various strengths *are* linked with Aristotelian-type virtues, but rarely actually ranked in order of their importance to eudaimonia. Similarly, PPIs exploring Seligman’s PERMA framework, which

cites positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment as the “building blocks” of well-being (Seligman, 2018) rarely involve an exploration of how one can be sure to have attained “well-being”, other than self-reported positive feelings or other outward, behaviourist, explanations. It is difficult to research more ethereal notions such as the “life well lived”, practical wisdom, virtue or lifelong fulfillment, which are all at the heart of Aristotle’s eudaimonia. Further, the prescriptive/normative, “is/ought” debate has been contested only at the theoretical level. Little has been written about whether, in practice, positive education actually conveys a coherent and normative account of the flourishing life. Although it is entirely possible that, despite the scholarly debate about normative content, the practice of explicitly teaching PPIs might convey some sense of morality. Equally, it is possible that, even without explicit wellbeing education, students already possess a sense of how to achieve eudaimonic happiness. This study seeks to find this out.

### ***Why is eudaimonia important for education?***

Eudaimonic happiness as conceived by Aristotle and the versions of happiness conceived by other philosophers are important to education in that they elucidate a coherent goal for human lives and therefore guide us in our planning for education policy. Philosophers have contributed an understanding of the less tangible elements of well-being and positive psychology to bridge a gap between the positivist and the philosophical, but as yet this has not changed the way positive education in practice is studied or implemented in schools. This paper attempts to fill this gap. Rather than being merely an attempt at exploring whether positive education has accurately lived up to the promise of teaching students about eudaimonic happiness, this paper represents a step towards establishing a philosophical baseline. Understanding adolescents’ conceptual grasp of eudaimonic happiness gives us a starting point in constructing an education system that not only conveys knowledge about

how to be mentally healthy but encourages the use of practical wisdom and virtue to make their lives better and to make the world a better place, which is, arguably, the purpose of education.

***Aristotle's eudaimonia and the division of "goods".***

In contrast with positive psychology's happiness pluralism, Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia has the classification of goods at its core (Aristotle & Peters, 1895). At the helm of this ranking of goods is eudaimonic happiness: understood to be the "chief good", or the aim of all human actions, achieved through exercising our unique function as humans, which is to *reason* or use our intellect in accordance with virtue. This type of happiness is self-sufficient, in that if we have it we want for nothing else; is sought for its own sake and consists of our use of *logos* (reason or the intellect) to attain *phronesis* (ethical wisdom) and *arête* (virtue). In addition to this important notion of the "chief good", Aristotle proposed that one method of defining the good life might be to examine what we find ourselves *desiring* in our pursuit of happiness and categorizing these goods. He divided goods into three categories: external goods such as wealth and status; goods of the body such as health and attractiveness; and goods of the soul such as virtue, wisdom, excellence and pleasure. Aristotle contended that although a certain degree of the first two categories such as health might be necessary preconditions for eudaimonia, the third category was most important to eudaimonia, since virtue is the essential component of eudaimonic happiness and a virtuous person can attain happiness in the deepest sense, even without external or bodily goods. A virtuous person, according to Aristotle can never be *deeply* unhappy even in the face of forces beyond their control such as illness or misfortune. Similarly, people might seek pleasure from various things, but pleasure derived from excellence (in virtue) is inherently pleasant.

Also important to our exploration is Aristotle's conception of how long it might take to achieve eudaimonic happiness. Eudaimonic happiness is closer to what we currently call lifelong fulfillment, rather than the feelings of joy, contentment or the fleeting sense of satisfaction we commonly call "happiness". Aristotle argues that children cannot be happy because they are not yet old enough (Aristotle & Peters, 1895). It is also more complex and takes longer to achieve than what is implied in many current descriptions of eudaimonia, which sometimes describes eudaimonia as simply the opposite of hedonism. Since a virtuous person can never be deeply unhappy in the eudaimonic sense, someone might *feel* unhappy at various times but still achieve eudaimonia, similarly the enjoyment of hedonic pleasures is not at odds with eudaimonic happiness, although a truly happy person would never pursue hedonia at the expense of more important "goods". Happiness is also described by Aristotle as an *activity* in accordance with excellence (of virtue). Although in contemporary times we often describe a person as simply *being* virtuous, Aristotelian virtue is something to be exercised. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 1 Aristotle points out, for example, that an Olympian is not crowned for being beautiful or strong, but for competing and winning.

***The theoretical groundwork thus far.***

Owing to positive psychology's emphasis on Aristotelian eudaimonia, several scholars have grappled with the relationship between positive psychology and Aristotle, positive psychology and normative ethics, or the meaning of "positive" or "goodness" at the theoretical level. Although most deal with positive psychology and not positive education, their work has implications for positive education and conceptions of the good life. Importantly, scholars exploring these topics such as Kristjansson (2012) and Han (2019) are almost unanimous in their calls for normative ethics or clearer ethical direction in positive psychology and positive education.

Kristjánsson (2010, 2012; 2013; 2018) writes extensively about Aristotle, positive psychology, positive education and the issues related to lack of normativity or happiness pluralism. Commending positive psychologists for rejecting the notion of happiness simply *as* pleasure, Kristjánsson (2012) argues that positive education needs to move beyond the inherent happiness pluralism and adopt eudaimonia as a measurable basis for educational practice. He notes the usefulness of a naturalistic understanding of happiness within this, and the Aristotelian notion that although happiness does not *consist* solely of pleasure, that pleasure is a natural consequence of flourishing. Kristjánsson also notes that by avoiding prescription, positive psychology might be ambiguous and “specifically underspecified” both morally and educationally (p.91).

Schwartz and Sharp (2006) contrast Aristotle’s view that virtues are interdependent, with positive psychology’s implication that character strengths and virtues are logically independent and able to be cultivated according to one’s own character. They also point to the Aristotelian notion that all virtues are important to the eudaimonic life and the idea that having more of a particular virtue is not always a good thing, both ideas that diverge from those within the VIA character strength framework. Schwartz and Sharp recommend the nurturing of practical wisdom and the reshaping of social institutions to encourage, rather than inhibit, its use. Importantly, they also suggest that positive emotion may be the wrong thing to be measuring at this time, and that people are already too concerned with “feeling good rather than doing good” (p.392).

Suissa (2008) discusses the role of education in helping individuals to decipher a normative path to happiness. She describes the deciphering of philosophical questions about normative traits and values as the philosophical questions Aristotle and others were concerned to answer in their account of the worthwhile life. She questions the value of

objective accounts of happiness ascribed by positive psychology and suggests that the notions of packaging and teaching “happiness” in schools is essentially anti-educational. Education, she says, resides in interpreting the realm between the inner and outer worlds, between meaning and value. She essentially argues that well-being is not solely an empirical journey, or one that may be packaged as a set of skills to be taught.

Han (2019) uses an Aristotelian framework to question the moral justifiability of the VIA inventory of strengths, and points to a lack of examination of whether the character strengths lead to moral ends, and the need for Aristotelian *phronesis*, or practical wisdom within the inventory. He suggests the need for future research into whether the VIA character strengths promote optimal moral functioning and flourishing in order to create a more robust model that might contribute to positive psychology, moral psychology and moral education.

Relevant to our understanding of *goodness*, Pawelski (2016) examined lexical meanings of the positive in positive psychology. Arguing that positive psychology needs deepening of its conceptual roots, he identifies six discrete definitions of the positive in early positive psychology literature, and ultimately presents a normative definition of the positive as: that for which there is “simple preference”; that which has degrees of “relative preference” and that which is sustainable across time, persons, effects and structures (p.364). He also disputes the common notion that positive psychology aims to focus on enhancing the positive rather than eliminating the negative, noting examples where eliminating the negative leads to an increase of the positive. Diener (2003) similarly acknowledges the ambiguous nature of the word “positive”. These discussions frame our examination of “goodness”.

### **The research questions**

- What is “the good life” according to adolescents?

- What elements of Aristotle's account of eudaimonia are expressed in adolescents' conceptions of the good life?
- How do these definitions differ in students who attended a positive education school when compared to students who do not attend a positive education school?

## **Participants and data collection**

Two hundred and fifty six Year 10 students (aged 15-16) from two schools participated in a writing task activity in 2018 as part of this study. The activity asked them to, firstly, write a definition of the good life in prose and, secondly, explain how school contributes to the good life. This paper focusses on the first question. Two hundred and twenty five students consented to be part of the study, including 93 from the positive education (PosEd) school and 132 from the comparison school.

Schools were recruited via email and selected based on their socio-economic similarities and interest in participating in the study. Both participating schools are independent (private) schools in Victoria, Australia with higher than average Index of Community and Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) values and student populations over 2000. The positive education (PosEd) school is located in an inner suburb of Melbourne, while the comparison school is located in a regional (rural) town near Melbourne. Both schools enroll students living in their neighbouring areas as well as other suburbs of Melbourne, although the regional (rural) location of the comparison school and resulting difference in demographics is a limitation in this study.

The writing task questions were distributed by teachers via a link on the respective schools' intranet servers and students were given up to 40 minutes of class time to complete the writing tasks in an online form, which was collated into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

Researchers were not present for the writing task and the activity was administered entirely by the students' usual teachers, although it was not part of the school's curriculum or assessment. Apart from the plain language statements explaining that these writing tasks were part of a positive education study and that there were no "wrong" answers, students were not given additional information from teachers about how to interpret the questions.

***Positive education in participating schools.***

The PosEd school made an explicit commitment to positive psychology's positive education agenda in 2014. The aims of positive education are included in the school's strategic plan and the school website refers to the tenets of positive psychology outlined in Seligman et al. (2009). All teaching and administrative staff at the school received intensive positive education training when the school first announced this commitment, and an annual induction to positive education has been provided to staff arriving in years since. The school's formative assessment plan used in all learning areas from Kindergarten to Year 12 (Ages 3-18) includes references to nine positive learner attributes, which reflect the principles of positive psychology and a Director of Positive Education is part of the school's senior management. All students in the school participate in activities and PPIs based on mindfulness, resilience, strengths, gratitude, self-reflection and building authentic relationships. The majority of these students (N88) participated in a year-long Year 9 program in 2017 that specifically applied a positive education perspective to learning both in and out of the classroom and included activities based on community service and personal development.

The comparison group takes a different approach to well-being and one that is not specifically derived from the tenets of positive psychology. Although the school would undoubtedly label themselves as "positive", the science of positive psychology is not

explicitly part of the school's strategic plan or marketing. Like many schools, they have incorporated some elements of positive psychology into their well-being programme and at least two staff at this school have attended a professional development course in positive education. Students in Year 10 at this school participate in activities about mental health, negativity bias, meditation, stress management and strengths as part of a six-day leadership training course that is otherwise primarily geared towards leadership and career-related skills. In Year 9 they participate in a camp that involved strengths and goal setting as well as career skills. The school's participation in the Duke of Edinburgh award entails community service and physical activity.

### ***Procedure for analysis.***

Using NVivo and drawing processes from Braun and Clarke (2006), a list of Aristotelian "goods" was compiled to inform the first reading of the text, divided into the three parent nodes prescribed by Aristotle: "Bodily Goods", "External Goods" and "Goods of the Soul". This categorization of themes allows for an Aristotelian overview and an identification of what might be missing from adolescents' conception of "the good" from an Aristotelian point of view. These are, of course, not neat categories in a contemporary setting. We now know that several "goods of the soul" and external goods may benefit the body just as, conversely, bodily goods might arguably be of benefit to the soul. It should also be noted that although the conception of the soul will not be explored in any depth in this paper, that Aristotle's definition of the human soul was that of the *rational soul*: that which makes us alive, conscious, humans who are able to use the intellect to achieve the "chief good". Something that is good for the soul in a modern-day setting would possibly be defined as something that is inherently good for wellbeing and pursued for its own sake.

Student writing tasks were imported to NVivo and sorted into themes (nodes) with most writings containing elements fitting into more than one category. New nodes were created for themes that did not fit into the initial set. The number of coded items was used as a denominator to calculate coverage for each theme (Figure 1).

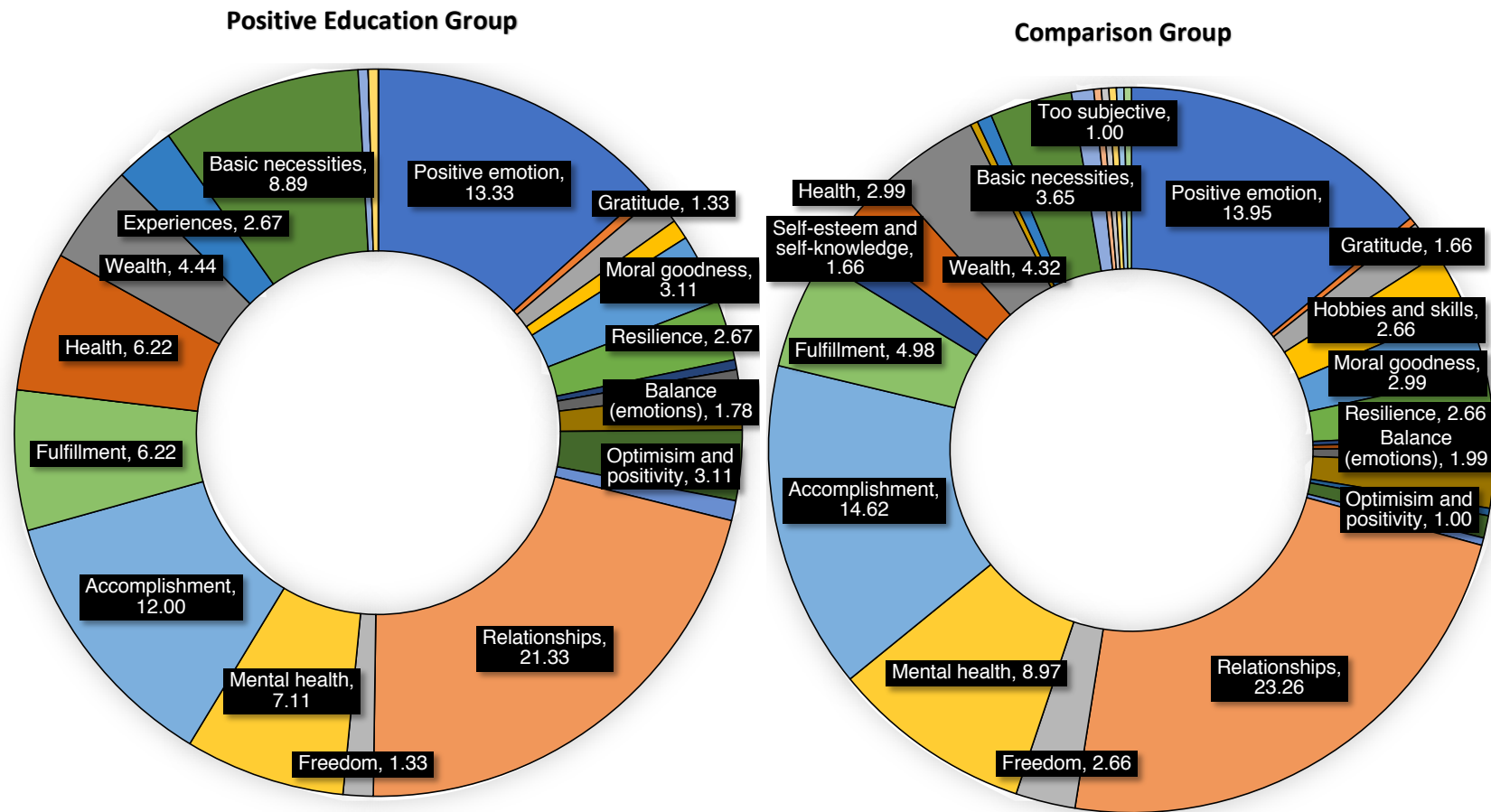


Figure 1. Coded themes by %

Note. Labels for categories with values lower than 1.0 have been removed. Refer to appendix for full list.

## Results

### ***“Bodily goods.”***

Bodily goods did not feature prominently in students’ writing but was higher in the PosEd group than the comparison group, with health discussed in 6.22% and 2.99 % of coded themes, respectively. Other bodily goods mentioned by Aristotle, such as beauty, were not reported by these students to be part of a good life.

*“...a 'good' life is also when you are physically, mentally and socially healthy. Being healthy puts a smile on your mind and your face, because it makes you feel good and positive.” (Comparison group participant)*

Mental health featured slightly more frequently than bodily health, with 7.11 % of references in the PosEd group and 8.97 % in the comparison group referring directly to mental health. Mental health is difficult to categorise in the Aristotelian division of goods, since it might now be seen as both a physical and mental state. Since Aristotle implies that the mental is synonymous with the soul, one might also attribute modern conceptions of mental health as belonging to goods of the soul.

### ***“External goods.”***

The majority of goods mentioned by students belong in Aristotle’s “external goods” category. Relationships featured prominently in student writings, with 21.33% of coded themes in the PosEd group and 23.26% of coded themes in the comparison group discussing relationships. The tendency for PosEd students to value relationships concurs with findings of our previous study on prosperity and success (Trask-Kerr, Chin & Vella-Brodrick, 2019) but the similarity between groups is in contrast with our findings that PosEd students were more likely to associate relationships with prosperity and success than students in comparison

groups. Aristotle's classification of relationships is complex: Although in his Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle sometimes classed friends and relations as external components in eudaimonic happiness, in his Eudemian ethics, Aristotle divides friendship into three categories: utility, pleasure and "the good" (Solomon, 2019). This third type is associated with virtue and could therefore, be seen as an important ingredient in eudaimonic flourishing and is arguably associated with the goods of the soul. It *may* therefore be argued that friendship *is* an Aristotelian virtue.

*"A good life is different for everyone, but for me its (sic) being healthy, having an education and having a loving family." (PosEd group participant)*

*"...we all love different things and have different opinions about most things in life, but above all what everyone wants in a good life is the feeling of being happy and loved." (Comparison group participant)*

*"Friends are also an important factor for having a 'good' life because you need to be able to have people that you can talk to and go out with to have some fun and to enjoy your life at your age." (Comparison group participant).*

*"Happiness comes from loving relationships and Netflix." (PosEd group participant)*

Accomplishment was the second most-discussed theme in the comparison group, with 14.62%, compared to 12% in the positive education group where it was the third most discussed theme. Although not statistically significant, this represents the main difference between the two groups. Accomplishments discussed by students included educational

achievements, a sense of “getting somewhere”, self-development, career success, building skills and “trying hard” to achieve goals. These discussions of accomplishment are distinct from discussions of fulfillment which, although related to accomplishment, are more about a *feeling* or *sense* of contentment rather than the action of working to accomplish goals.

*“Set goals. Work towards them. Get closer to that 'good' life we all desire. But remember to have fun along the way, because the journey is definitely going to be longer than the end destination.” (Comparison group participant)*

*“In my opinion, a good life is a life where you are successful in what you choose to do. For example, if you choose to be a lawyer and you are good at being a lawyer you have achieved success, therefore achieving a good life. I also believe money is a good representation of a good life.” (PosEd group participant)*

Other external goods were discussed as essential to the good life, including: basic necessities (PosEd 8.89% and Comparison 3.65%); wealth, financial security and abundance (PosEd 4.44% and Comparison 4.32%); occupations, skills and hobbies (PosEd 0.89% and Comparison 2.66%).

*“A good life is having food, water, shelter and an education.” (Comparison group participant)*

*“A good life consists of a variety of different things, including; having a good supply of money to be able to support yourself and loved ones financially.” (Comparison group participant)*

*“Hobbies and interests keep us happy by giving us something to be interested by and can also give us a purpose.” (PosEd group participant)*

***“Goods of the soul.”***

Virtue, in the Aristotelian sense, did not feature prominently in student writings.

Kindness or generosity to others was coded in 3.11% of PosEd students’ themes and 2.99% in the comparison group.

*“Personally, my happiness comes from helping people and that is something I very much enjoy.” (Comparison group participant)*

One student in each group even mentioned the need to *not* be too generous for fear of giving away too much or exhausting oneself.

*“You don’t want to be too compassionate or too giving, because then you would burn yourself out.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“People say that volunteering or helping out the elderly is a good life. WRONG! Do you want a life where in other people's lives you had a good life or do you want a life that is yours and you make the most out of it and not care about what people think of your decisions (sic).” (Comparison group participant)*

Justice and fairness were mentioned only once, by a student in the comparison group.

Positive emotions, however, featured in 13.33% of coded responses in the PosEd group and 13.95% in the comparison group, placing this, after relationships and accomplishment, the third most discussed theme. This included references to enjoyment, general happiness, joy and pleasure.

*“A good life is not defined by wealth nor money, but rather by happiness.” (PosEd group)*

*“I believe a 'good' life to be a life that shows you joy and happiness that make all of the terrible aspects seem to be worth enduring.” (Comparison group participant)*

Fulfillment, contentment and life satisfaction may be viewed as an understanding of eudaimonic happiness and this was demonstrated in 6.22% of coded PosEd references and 4.98% in the comparison group. Resilience featured in 2.67% in the PosEd group and 2.66% in the comparison group. Balancing emotions and optimism or positivity were also noted by some (PosEd 1.78% & Comparison 1.99%; Optimism: Pos Ed 3.11% & Comparison 1%).

*“A 'good' life is different to an 'ideal' life. The difference is that a 'good' life is one that could apply to anyone, however an 'ideal' life is different for everyone. For example, a 'good' life could include having enough resources to sustain oneself as well as a bit extra for luxury purposes, however an 'ideal' life may be to be filthy rich.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“A good life. To me some valuable aspects to having a good life is being able to go through the hard times, and come out again looking at things in a positive way. It is being able to experience everything the world has to offer. Most importantly, it is enjoying what you do everyday, and knowing that you only live once and to make the most of it.” (PosEd group participant)*

Despite their limited discussion of moral goodness, these students have indicated a good level of knowledge of key elements of quality of life and a recognition of the importance of relationships, which is important not only in positive psychology frameworks (cf. Seligman, 2018), but also in quality of life models such as the Personal Well-being Index (Cummins,

1997). There are also heartening elements of hope and resilience in some of these responses from young people, despite some acknowledgment of the perils of contemporary living:

*“A 'good' life will always have ups and downs, it's your personal ability to handle these ups and downs that allows you to recover and continue on with a life worth living”. (Comparison group participant)*

*“...Living happily doing what I love and passionate about (sic). It's a life where I don't have to worry about all the terrible things that humans have done to themselves and the environment. A "good" life doesn't mean that it is completely free from negativity but some exposure to negativity can help people to become stronger, and that is also important to have in a good life.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“A good life is my life”. (Comparison group participant)*

Through an Aristotelian lens, we might say that these students' conceptions of the good life represent much of what one *desires* as part of a good life, but lacks acknowledgement of the importance of ethical wisdom: the use of reason to decipher *how to act* to achieve a good life. They also lack acknowledgement of “goodness” as an ethical concept and there is also very little mention of social action within the community in order to achieve collective goodness.

### **Concluding remarks**

There were no statistical differences in the understanding of the good life demonstrated by the PosEd group and the comparison group, but this study nonetheless serves to contribute a somewhat modest understanding of student conceptions of eudaimonia on which we can build through education. There is a possibility that results in a study like this might be largely lexical rather than ethical: the word “goodness” means different things to different people. In some ways this is precisely the point of this study: understanding what students think about

when prompted to define the “good” is important for our planning in education and for refining the goals of positive education. Other limitations include the geographical and therefore possible demographic differences in the participating schools and the possibility that, having read the plain language statement, students who are knowledgeable about positive education might be more likely to discuss goodness in terms that relate to mental health and less likely to consider moral goodness. Similarities in the responses between the two groups seem to suggest that these limitations have not had an impact, although one cannot be certain that the comparison group did not have knowledge of positive education. The limited differences between the positive education group and the comparison group contrasts with our previous findings (Trask-Kerr et al., 2019) and although this could be attributed to the different schools, different task questions and a different study focus, there is the possibility that in 2018 when our present data collection occurred, positive psychology was becoming mainstream such that students in all schools have been exposed to the tenets of positive education compared with students in 2014 when data for our previous study were collected (Trask-Kerr, Chin & Vella-Brodrick, 2019). It is also important to note that thematic analyses rely heavily on the researchers’ interpretation of the text, which may sometimes impact the replicability of studies.

Just as students’ understanding of the purpose of schooling is important for our educational goals, so too is their understanding of “goodness” when we design and conceive of education as a path towards a flourishing life. This study might suggest that young people in both self-declared “positive education” schools and schools in general in general see a “good” life as consisting of quality relationships, positive emotions and accomplishment. If we are making judgements, and in the Aristotelian sense we are, this is not an entirely bad starting point. But *it is* just a starting point. *If* positive education and education in general is to achieve the aim

of nurturing flourishing in schools, we need an agenda that prioritises normativity and moral goodness. In addition, if the positive psychology movement is to live up to its rhetoric about Aristotelian virtue and eudaimonia, it needs to develop a framework that incorporates ethical wisdom. A positive *education* agenda that truly prioritises Aristotelian virtue would require a deliberate focus on phronesis and academic rigour to decipher ethical norms.

There are many philosophers and scholars that espouse the value of normativity, moral education, ethical wisdom or community action as a paths towards goodness (cf. Dewey, 1980; Noddings, 2002; Schwartz, 2007; Walker, Roberts, & Kristjánsson, 2015), and despite being often cited within positive psychology, Aristotle may not necessarily be the clearest choice for education. Nonetheless, an ethical framework is needed that represents more than merely a perfunctory nod towards moral philosophy. Development of an ethical framework within positive education would be in accordance with the suggestions of Schwartz and Sharp (2006), Kristjánsson (2012), Han (2019) and would ameliorate concerns that positive psychology is values-neutral and focusses too much on the individual rather than the collective (cf. Becker & Marecek, 2008; Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Wong & Roy, 2017). Whilst owing its revitalisation to positive psychology as a scientific movement, such an agenda would move positive *education* further into the realm of education and philosophy, where the roots of education for flourishing as a concept reside.

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## Appendix

### *Full List of Coded Categories*

	<b>Positive Education Group</b>	<b>Comparison Group</b>
	<b>% Coverage per theme</b>	<b>% Coverage per theme</b>
<b>Positive emotion</b>	13.33	13.95
<b>Belonging</b>	0.44	0.33
<b>Gratitude</b>	1.33	1.66
<b>Hobbies and skills</b>	0.89	2.66
<b>Moral goodness</b>	3.11	2.99
<b>Resilience</b>	2.67	2.66
<b>Community support</b>	0.44	0.33

<b>Justice</b>	0.00	0.33
<b>Balance (work/life)</b>	0.89	0.66
<b>Balance (emotions)</b>	1.78	1.99
<b>Independence</b>	0.00	0.33
<b>Optimism and positivity</b>	3.11	1.00
<b>Meaning</b>	0.89	0.33
<b>Relationships</b>	21.33	23.26
<b>Freedom</b>	1.33	2.66
<b>Mental health</b>	7.11	8.97
<b>Accomplishment</b>	12.00	14.62
<b>Fulfilment</b>	6.22	4.98
<b>Self-esteem and self- knowledge</b>	0.00	1.66
<b>Health</b>	6.22	2.99
<b>Wealth</b>	4.44	4.32
<b>Possessions</b>	0.00	0.33
<b>Experiences</b>	2.67	0.66
<b>Basic necessities</b>	8.89	3.65
<b>Too subjective to say</b>	0.44	1.00
<b>Feeling important</b>	0.00	0.33
<b>Luck</b>	0.00	0.33
<b>Not being generous</b>	0.44	0.33
<b>Spirituality</b>	0.00	0.33

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<b>Existential awareness</b>	0.00	0.33
Total	100.00	100.00

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## **6. Does school contribute to a good life?**

### **6.1 Publication**

# **Positive education and the purposes of schooling: Does school contribute to a good life?**

**Authors:** Kylie Trask-Kerr; Dr. Tan-Chyuan Chin & Prof. Dianne A Vella-Brodrick

### **Abstract**

Positive education derives from positive psychology and aims to shift the metrics in education towards including well-being as an indicator of school success and this aim has recently expanded to emphasize collective well-being and group flourishing. Achievement of these goals may require an examination of views currently held about the purpose of education and the contribution of education to flourishing lives and communities. This qualitative paper explores these notions, as expressed in the writings of Year 10 students (N=225), 93 of whom attend school with an integrated approach to positive education. Student and teacher survey responses are also examined (N=102). The analysis of student writing found that both groups emphasized the credentialing role of education as well as the role of schooling in present-day happiness, as distinct from future flourishing. Discussions of social purposes of education including morality or collective well-being featured least prominently in student writings of both groups. This contrasts with teacher survey responses indicating that teachers value the role of schooling in creating communities that make the world a better place. This indicates a disconnect between teacher and student views of the

purpose of schooling and a possible need to address this challenge if positive education is to succeed in shifting the metrics in schools.

**Key Words:** Positive education; positive psychology; educational philosophy; purpose of schooling; quality of life; well-being

## Introduction

### What is positive education?

Positive psychology originated in 1998 when psychologist Martin Seligman announced his intention to build a field that would focus its investigations on what makes life worth living (Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2006). Seligman and Csikszentmihályi (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) expounded this aim in a special edition of *American Psychologist*, wherein they argued for the need to shift the pathological focus of psychology and pay attention to what they call the “fulfilled individual” and the “thriving community” (p.5). The field aims to use empirical measures to explore the strengths, virtues, conditions and processes that contribute to well-being and positive functioning (Rusk & Waters, 2013) and has expanded towards the goal of creating a worldwide “economy of well-being” (Diener & Seligman, 2009, p.1).

Positive education emerged as part of positive psychology’s goal of creating positive institutions, one of the pillars of positive psychology, and has been embraced by schools around the world in the form of policies, programs and positive psychology interventions (PPIs). The scope and scale of these programs vary from school-to-school and positive education is regarded as an umbrella term encompassing initiatives that aim to enhance well-being through evidence-based interventions. Examples of PPIs include exploration of the PERMA domains (Seligman, 2011, 2018), the Penn Resiliency Program (Gillham et al.,

2007), Broaden and Build, (Fredrickson, 2001), classroom-based strengths interventions (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, & Vella-Brodrick, 2015) and the Positive Education Practices framework (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Schools employ specialists to run individual programs, run one-off programs, or have regular sessions run by their own teachers. Some schools have embarked on a whole-school transition, working the objectives of positive psychology into their school policies, missions and strategic plans. Collectively, these measures aim to “shift the metrics” in education towards the measurement of well-being rather than simply on academic results.

### **The need to address the question of “purpose” in education**

Despite positive education’s aim of expanding the metrics in education (Waters, 2011; White, 2016), there seems to be a discrepancy between the rhetoric about measuring well-being in school communities and the views held by students about what is important at school.

Anecdotally, students seem to see positive education policies and PPIs as an add-on to the “serious” business of achieving high academic results that will lead to future achievement or financial success. This is intensified during the senior years of schooling, when students are scrambling for a competitive edge that will help them achieve a prized position at university. This either/or thinking (White, 2016), the idea that we need to either focus on academic learning or well-being as though they cannot work together, is at odds with the goals of positive education. In addition, positive psychology is sometimes promoted in schools as a measure designed to increase academic results. This is sometimes reflected in its marketing, which appears to justify the introduction of positive education by highlighting its positive effect on academic results.

It is therefore necessary to factor views about the purpose of schooling into the planning of positive education programs to avoid conveying the message to students that

even though we are looking after well-being, what we really care about is their individual academic or economic success. Positive education has the potential to guide and redefine ideas about the purposes of schooling because, at its core, this is what it is designed to do. “Shifting the metrics” is a phrase often thrown about in discussions of the goals of positive education and this therefore makes the business of positive education fundamentally about educational purpose: given that we tend to define our level of success in achieving the purpose of education using metrics. But purpose is seldom discussed, and it is therefore possible that this message is not filtering through.

Klitmøller (2016) and Biesta (2009; 2016) similarly argue that issues of purpose need to be brought back to planning in education. Klitmøller contends that planning in education is often conducted without any direct concern for the purpose of education or what education is, resulting in merely a discussion of what students and teachers would like, reinforcing abstract notions of learning as the purpose of education. This also leaves the definition of the purpose of schooling to measurements conducted by Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Biesta (2016) warns of the “seductive” power of measurements like PISA (p.350). He questions whether we are measuring what we value or simply valuing what we can easily measure (Biesta, 2009). Positive education has been upheld as a possible antidote to these concerns but it’s frequent discussion of the impact of PPIs on academic scores undermines this. It is important to explore whether positive education has had an impact and encouraged students to identify the importance of education’s broader purpose, and to consider questions of purpose in future planning. If education is to be about more than merely pushing students towards future economic success, positive education might be a vehicle to convey this message, but only if its message is coherent.

### **The purpose of schooling**

Schools have come a long way from the nineteenth-century notion of simply conveying information about reading, writing, arithmetic and an understanding of one's place in society (Schrag, 2017). Although teaching and learning are often assumed to be the fundamental mission of schooling (Greenberg et al., 2003), contemporary schools are about a lot more than simply academic pursuits or preparation for future careers. Schools offer programs to support student well-being as well as diverse avenues for students to flourish through finding their passion for art, literature, mathematics, sport and dramatic skills. Schools support students in building their social skills and encourage effective communication. Students are educated about social and political issues, and often volunteer in service of their communities.

Schooling is about exposing students to experiences that will help them to flourish – now and in the future. Educational literature cites a range of aims in schooling, such as the acquisition of facts; comprehension of social issues; vocational skills; well-being; and good citizenship (Goodlad, 2004; Kliebard, 2004; Quay, 2013; Schiro, 2013). Sociologists and educational philosophers have noted the importance of flourishing as an overarching goal of education (Brighthouse, 2009; Cohen, 2006; Grant, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2016; Wolbert et al., 2015). Noddings (2010) emphasised the role of education in caring and the development of moral character. Dewey (1923, 1938, 1981) saw school as a mini community where students developed the tools to become good citizens in the broader community. Importantly, Dewey (1938) saw this as education for the sake of the present rather than towards a distant career or academic goal.

Others see nurturing of intellect as the key element to achieving flourishing at school. Furedi (2009) notes that good teachers recognise that the cultivation of intellect is linked to a child's disposition and that all good schools attend to the emotional, moral and spiritual needs of their students. He bemoans the proliferation of what he calls the "therapeutic function" emerging in schools, which he says often communicates an "anti-academic sentiment" (p.170). He warns against defining students by their vulnerability and supports a subject-based curriculum, where emotional education takes place through intellectual pursuits such as arts education. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009a, 2009b) similarly warn against a therapeutic culture in schools, which they see as an inward turn that risks self-preoccupation.

Despite this rigorous debate about school purpose, there is a currently a dominant belief that schools simply have what Stevenson (2007) described as a "credentialing" role (p.145), equipping individuals with qualifications for future economic success. Conveying norms of individualism, competition and achievement (2007), this prevailing belief is seen throughout our culture and in education policy. Schools tend to be ranked via academic performance alone and therefore individual achievement becomes their main focus. There has been an increasingly strong push towards measurement, high stakes testing and a worldwide focus on academic rankings (Supovitz, 2009; Zhao & Gearin, 2016). At a global level, governments have an interest in increasing PISA rankings by improving academic results, which sometimes comes at a cost (Dinham & Scott, 2012). At the local level, schools are ranked according to final year results, literacy and numeracy. The Australian government's "My School" website, for example, provides National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test data on reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and numeracy, along with general demographic information about each Australian school. This website, often used by Australian parents to select schools for their children, illuminates a

strong societal privileging of the traditional “three R” academics over creativity, social skills, fine arts, music, communication skills, and other strengths that help students to flourish in the world.

Reid, Cranston, Keating and Mulford (2010) describe schooling in the contemporary period as one where social efficiency and social mobility are placed in the foreground. They attribute this to neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies shaping modalities that construct education as a private commodity. They describe three modalities: The modality of *organization and funding* placing an emphasis on satisfying needs of parents and students as “consumers”; *curriculum* that emphasizes the development of “human capital” and focuses on curriculum for vocational purposes; and *structure and process*, which has imported techniques from the private sector like choice and accountability, making schools more like businesses that compete for “market share”(p.1). They note that the purposes of schooling are often assumed rather than examined and set out to examine how the democratic purposes of schools are understood and how the social mobility and social efficiency purposes undermine them. They found that public purposes of schooling such as social justice, equity and the development of active citizens have become less prominent with respect to private purposes. Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid and Keating (2010) note that although there is a place for both public and private purposes in schools, one ought not be privileged at the expense of the other.

A relatively small number of studies examining perspectives on the purpose of schooling *within* school communities as opposed to academic or public debate have been published. Widdowson, Dixon, Peterson, Rubie-Davies, and Earl Irving (2015) explored the beliefs of students, parents and teachers from three schools in New Zealand about the purposes of schooling. Using focus groups (5-10 participants in each) with a total of 43

students aged 13-15 years, 22 parents and 27 teachers, they discussed four possible categories or purposes: 1. Learning and gaining knowledge; 2. Developing life and social skills; 3. Optimizing chances and quality of life; 4. Enabling future employment and economic function. Views of students and parents were more closely aligned than those of teachers, and differences were found among students from schools of higher socioeconomic backgrounds, who expressed a broader range of beliefs about the purposes of schooling. They found that all groups endorsed academic learning as a purpose of schooling. In addition, students from middle high socioeconomic backgrounds identified self-knowledge, communication skills, community participation citizenship, character development and getting along with others as important elements of school's purpose. Quality of life in the future was seen by parents and students as an important element of the purpose of schooling but was mentioned less frequently by teachers. Future employment was mentioned by students, but only by teachers in middle and lower socio-economic schools. Parents did not mention future employment as a purpose of schooling. The discrepancies between the views of students and teachers is pertinent, given that both ideally work together to achieve the goals of schooling.

Teachers' beliefs in Widdowson et al.'s (2015) study are in contrast with the findings of Osguthorpe and Sanger (2013), who focused solely on the views of teacher candidates about the purpose of schooling and their reasons for choosing teaching as a career. Their study examined 267 essays submitted for application and continuance in the teacher education programme, as well as 92 responses to a questionnaire completed as part of an undergraduate teacher course at a university in the US. They found that these teachers-in-training viewed schooling as being preparation for the real world, strengthening of academic capacities and developing moral or prosocial skills. Although their motives may be

influenced by the desire to be accepted into the programme, their answers reveal what they see as desirable ideals for teacher candidates.

Fischman, Di Bara and Gardner (2006) found that teachers' understanding of their role was considerably broader than society's narrow conceptualization of the purpose of education which was confined to academic concerns. Despite this, through policies, culture and practices we often convey the message to students that school is primarily about achievement and economic success. This discrepancy between ideals held by many teachers, sociologists, psychologists and educational philosophers, and the prevailing dominant culture is why wellbeing initiatives like positive education are often seen as "marginal", or, as noted by White (2016) distracting from "real" educational progress.

Positive education has the potential to remedy this discrepancy, so long as it avoids being part of the individualist, neoliberal commodification of education that privileges private purpose. Unfortunately, the marketing of positive education programs sometimes reflect these private purposes and as White (2016) mentions, many see positive education as a "silver bullet". In an environment where schools produce human capital, these programs might be mistakenly perceived as the answer to all educational (and emotional) challenges. Programs like positive education are encumbered with the responsibility of changing ideas about the role of schooling in the collective lives of students: in creating a "good" life. This study intends to examine the extent to which the current incarnation of positive education might impact these ideas, with a view to further augmenting a more social and community-minded purpose of schooling.

### **The research questions**

This study aims to:

- a) explore student ideas about the purpose of schooling and how school contributes to a good life;
- b) analyse implicit views about the purposes of schooling in student writing; and
- c) identify whether these views differ in students who attend a school with a whole-school positive education programme.
- d) contrast these findings with the results of a survey asking teachers and students about the main purpose of schooling.

It is anticipated that this analysis will provide insight into whether views held by students about the purposes of schooling align with the rhetoric in positive education and positive psychology about changing the metrics in education and point to whether an ideological shift is necessary and achievable through positive education.

## **Hypotheses**

It is predicted that all student writings will demonstrate:

- a) a view that the purpose of schooling is to achieve academic outcomes that prepare individuals for future careers, job skills and future economic success.

It is predicted that positive education students will demonstrate:

- b) a recognition of the role of schools in enhancing individual happiness or subjective well-being, when compared to students who do not attend a school with a whole-school approach to positive education.

It is expected that students and teachers will also recognize:

- c) an awareness of the social purposes of education, including community-mindedness, social equity, social cohesion and the role of education in reducing crime rates and enhancing community safety.

An absence of support for hypothesis c) in student writings would suggest a potential avenue for further development of positive education towards the creation of schools that privilege education as a path towards the creation of more peaceful and cohesive communities.

Survey data will be used to examine teacher views on the purposes of schooling and how positive education may have impacted these views, and also to triangulate findings of the thematic analysis.

## **Method**

### ***Participants.***

Two hundred and fifty-six students completed the writing tasks and of these, 225 consented to be part of the study and completed this (second) part of the writing activity. All students were in the latter half of Year 10 (15-16 year-olds).

Participants and their teachers were subsequently invited to participate in an optional confidential online survey asking questions about their views on the purposes of schooling and the impact of positive education.

***The positive education groups:*** Ninety-three participants (PosEd Group) attended an independent (private), co-educational school in Melbourne, Australia. The school is large, with >2200 enrolments and has an above-average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 1183 (ACARA, 2018).

***The comparison group:*** One hundred and thirty-two participants attended an independent (private), co-educational, regional school near (Comparison Group) Melbourne, Australia, with an above-average ICSEA value of 1107. Students at this school live in surrounding inner regional (rural) towns and neighbouring outer suburbs of Melbourne. The school is large, with >2000 enrolments.

***The survey participants:*** One hundred and twenty-seven people accessed the survey, including 86 teachers, 36 students and five “others”. Of those, 24 students and 78 teachers went on to respond to the question about the purpose of schooling, to which this paper pertains.

### ***Description of interventions.***

Participants in the PosEd group attended a school with an unequivocal commitment to positive education. The aims of positive education are detailed in the school’s strategic plan and the school website refers to the tenets of positive psychology outlined in Seligman et al. (2009). All staff at the school received positive education training when the school commenced its positive education agenda in 2014, and training in positive education has been provided to staff arriving in years since. The school’s formative assessment plan used in all learning areas from Kindergarten to Year 12 (Ages 3-18) includes references to what they call their nine “positive learner attributes”, which reflect the goals of positive psychology. All students in the school participate in activities based on mindfulness, resilience, strengths, gratitude, self-reflection and building authentic relationships. Students participate in a Year 9 program that specifically applies a positive education perspective to learning both in and out

of the classroom and includes activities based on community service and personal development.

The comparison group takes a different approach to well-being and one that is not specifically derived from the tenets of positive education. Although the school would undoubtedly label themselves as “positive” in the sense that they are not negative, the tenets of positive psychology are not part of the school’s strategic plan and there has been no specific acknowledgement of positive psychology in their marketing to parents. Nonetheless, like many schools in 2018, they have incorporated *some* elements of positive psychology into their well-being programme and at least two staff at this school have attended a professional development course in positive education. Students in Year 10 complete negativity bias, meditation, “mind matters”, stress management and strengths activities as part of their leadership training course, which includes around six days of training throughout the year. The course is geared towards leadership and career-related skills however, and includes interview skills, study skills, creating a portfolio, drivers’ education and workplace safety. Comparison group students also attended a three-week Year 9 program camp involving strengths and goal-setting as well as career skills; and also participated in the Duke of Edinburgh award which entails community service and physical activity.

### ***Data collection.***

Writing tasks were provided to teachers at the schools who then administered the writing tasks by providing students with a link on their respective school intranet services. Students accessed the questions during a designated class period and completed the tasks online,

which were then collated and sent to the researchers. Students were asked to respond in writing using prose. The first writing task asked: What is the good life? The second writing task question asked: How does school contribute to a good life? Students were allowed a maximum of 40 minutes to complete both writing tasks and were not given additional coaching or direction from teachers, apart from the written instructions.

All participants were invited to complete an optional online survey using the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were asked to choose the main purpose of schooling from a list (See Appendix) and also whether they had participated in positive education training, whether their school was a “positive education school” and, in a separate part of the survey, they were invited to rate the impact positive education had on their school culture, curriculum and their ideas on the purpose of schooling. This paper refers to the question about the purpose of schooling.

## **Methodological, ethical and epistemological issues**

### ***Does “goodness” entail “purpose”?***

It is important to acknowledge that participants in the writing task were not explicitly asked to respond to the question, “what is the purpose of schooling?” (although some participated in a subsequent survey that asked this question). In this writing task they were initially asked to describe the “good life”, which they primarily attributed to relationships, positive emotions and accomplishment (Trask-Kerr, Chin, & Vella-Brodrick, 2019). For the purposes of this analysis, they were then asked to write about how school contributes to the “good” life, thereby establishing its purpose. It is also important to note here that in *this* study we are referring to the “purpose” of schooling (as in, its contribution to life, or what school is “for”), rather than “purpose” or “calling” in life, as relevant to other areas of positive psychology, philosophy and studies of “meaning”. Participants had read the plain language statement

referring to the purposes of schooling, but we nonetheless must acknowledge that the questions: “What is the purpose of schooling?” and, “How does school contribute to a good life?”, are not the same. One can, however, reasonably assume that describing what something is “good for” generally entails a description of its purpose. The question was posed in this way to encourage depth in the responses and to avoid confusion about present and historical “purpose”. Descriptions of “purpose” often invoke references to origins and historical purposes but describing the utility of something in enhancing a good life almost exclusively deals in the present: I.e. regardless of what it was originally designed for, what is school good for *now*? This reveals more about the purpose of contemporary education than asking explicitly about purpose. An unexpected outcome of this, though, was that many students described ways in which school does *not* contribute to a good life. These responses may also imply something about purpose, which will be outlined in this paper.

### ***Study bias.***

Having read the plain language statement and details of the study, students completing the task were aware that one objective of this study was to examine positive education and the purposes of schooling. One could therefore argue that they were being prompted to view the study through a positive education lens. This potential study bias is partly ameliorated by the depth of the study questions that extend beyond the scope of positive psychology interventions. Further, themes identified within all three groups were similar, as will be discussed further in this paper, with students in the positive education groups and comparison groups describing similar notions of the role of education. This lends support for the internal validity of the study.

### **Procedure for thematic analysis**

The process for analysis of the writing tasks was adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) who describe both theory-driven and data-driven generation of codes as part of a thematic analysis. The present study employs both techniques to ensure an adequate analysis of all relevant themes within the data. The following steps were taken by the researchers in interpretation and analysis:

***Data familiarization.***

First, the researcher (first author) read through the narratives to gauge a general understanding of the types of responses the task generated. Examples were noted. Themes were allocated a number and each student narrative was manually given a series of numbers corresponding its inherent themes. Nineteen themes were identified at this stage of analysis.

Although careful to note all themes, at this stage the researcher was mindful of competing viewpoints on the purposes of schooling that would later be used for classifying the themes. This ensured that similar themes fitting into separate philosophies of schooling were separated. For example, some students mentioned that school allowed “socialization and being with friends”, whilst others noted that school contributed to the “acquisition of social skills or life-long friendships”. Whilst these could potentially be coded as identical under a theme of “friends”, the former implies that school contributes to a good life in the present, whilst the latter conveys a more life-long idea of the benefits of schooling and therefore aligns more closely with eudaimonic happiness.

Coding of nodes (themes) and cases (study groups) using NVivo. This was informed by the first reading of the data and allowed for a thorough check of the codes allocated to each written response. At this stage “parent nodes” were related to time, (e.g. Present well-being, future well-being, both present and future). A separate parent node was created for themes

implying that school does not contribute to a good life. Separate cases were created for the PosEd group and the comparison group.

### ***Review and merging of themes.***

Themes were then reviewed and similar sub-nodes that fit into the same category were merged. For example, “stress from bad academic results” was merged with “pressure from academic performance”. Categories with negligible values were eliminated. At this stage there were 13 categories.

### ***Categorisation of themes.***

Themes were placed into five categories according to what they imply about the contribution of education to a “good” life: present well-being, present and future well-being, economic well-being, social purposes and, finally, a “no contribution” category. The “social purposes” category included explicit acknowledgement of social benefits but did not include benefits that have an indirect social benefit, such as higher employment and economic equality. Findings were analysed to deduce the “story” each theme told about the data and this was presented in pie charts.

## **Results (thematic analysis)**

Themes identified in the student writings were similar across both groups, with the percentage of responses differing significantly in only one category (See Figure 1.). The main purposes identified reflected many of those in the literature, such as vocational skills and student well-being, with a strong emphasis on daily happiness (or unhappiness), and relationships with both peers and teachers. Many students described the role of schools in “shaping” students.

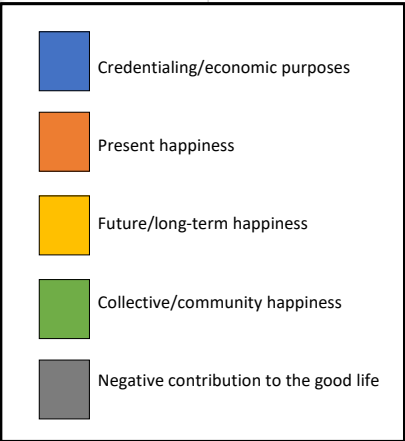
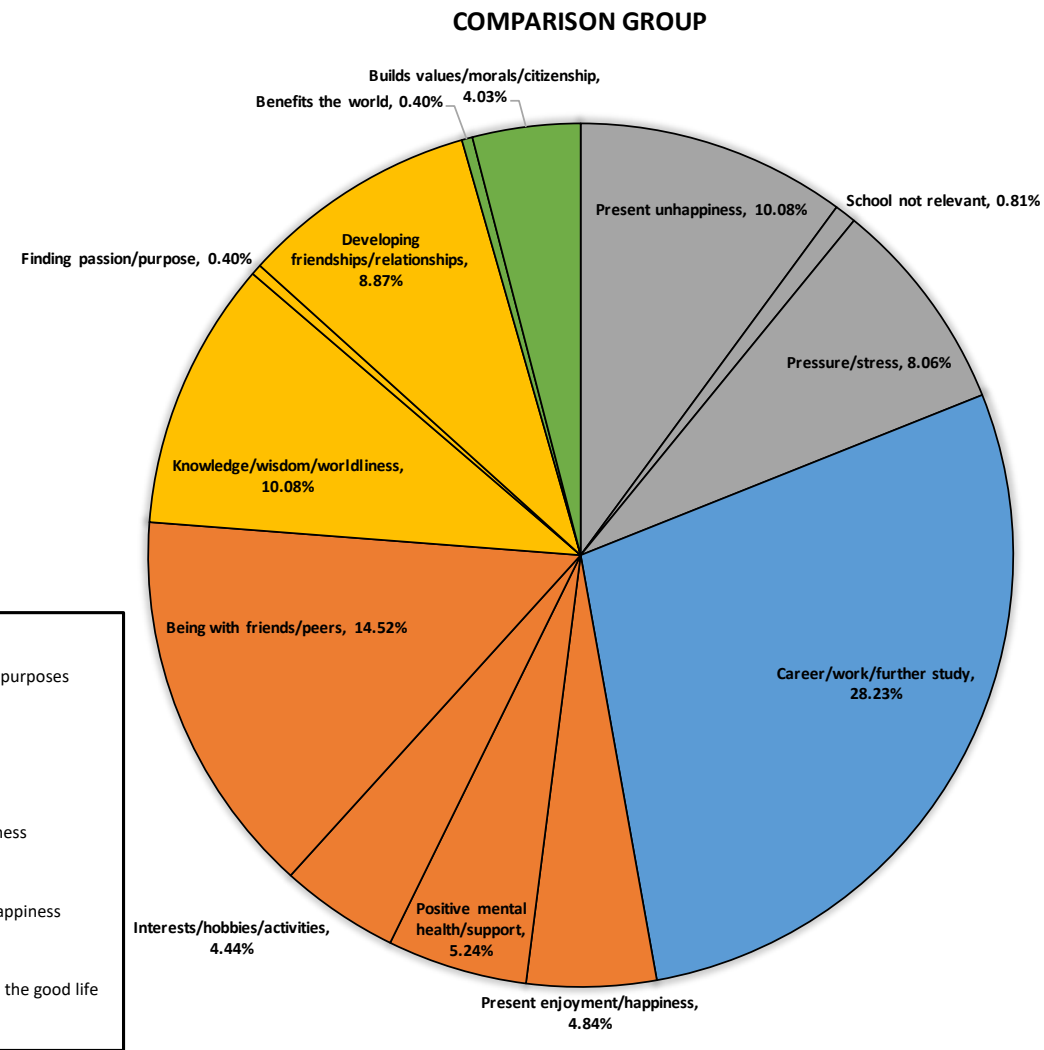
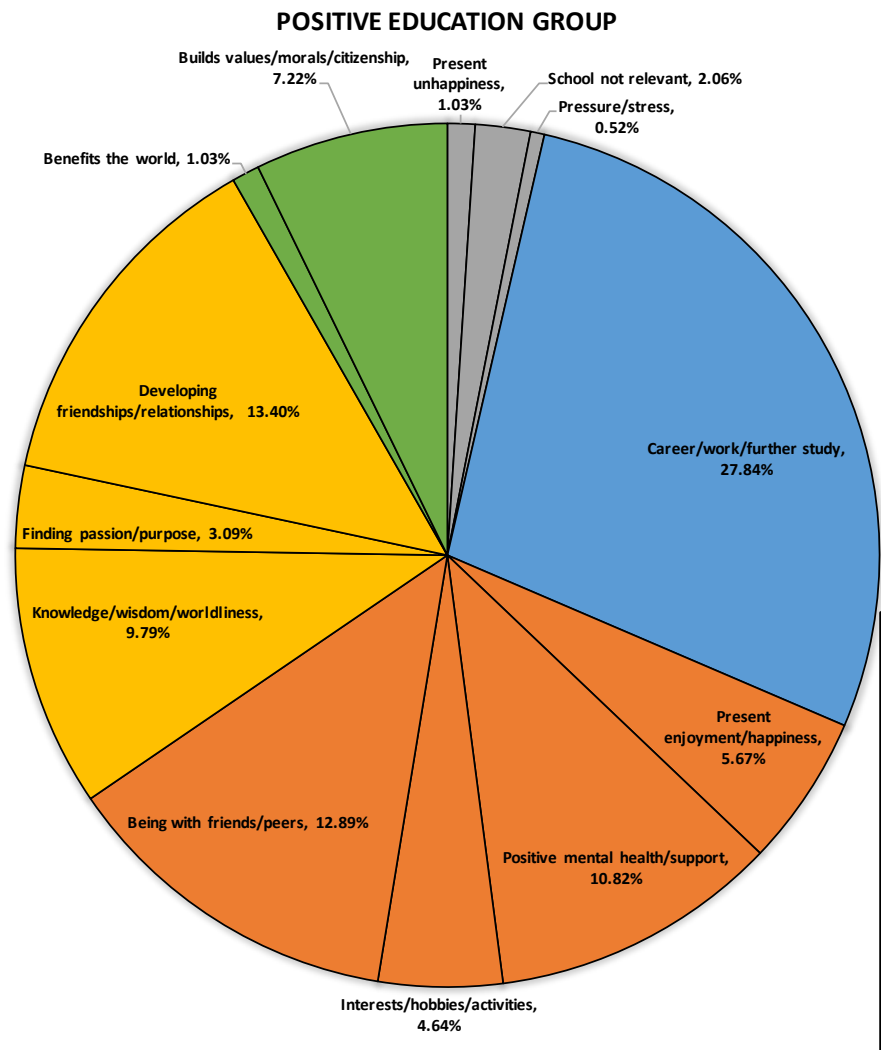


Figure 1. Theme categories as percentage of total coded themes

***School's contribution to future economic and academic success.***

The largest single idea discussed by all three groups was the notion that school's purpose is to contribute to future career, opportunities or economic success, with 27.84% of coded references in the positive education group and 28.23% in the comparison group. Some identified this as the sole contribution to a good life while others acknowledged this purpose alongside other benefits. Some students discussed school's role in helping them to find a suitable career, which could arguably also be placed in the category of eudaimonic happiness.

*"I think that schools have a really big impact on how good your life is. At school, you learn skills that will help you later in life that will contribute to getting a good job and living a good life". (PosEd group participant)*

*"...it allows them to understand what their strengths and weaknesses are and choose a career that they want to pursue accordingly". (PosEd group participant)*

*"...it gives us a broader pathway for what we can achieve in the future which can influence our satisfaction with our lives in the later stages". (PosEd group participant)*

*"...they can give you direction and a starting point to where you want to go, they provide you with the education needed to get the job that you want." (PosEd group participant)*

*“...School also encourages success through tests and exams, encouraging students to do their best in every subject. This is a good springboard for when they go into society and try to find jobs....” (PosEd group participant)*

Other comments reflected the credentialing role of schooling:

*“I think having a good schooling greatly contributes to a good life because it prepares you for your life ahead. It decides what Uni (sic) you go to and maybe even what job you get when you are older”. (PosEd group participant)*

*“...students are at (sic) constant competition with others and the only way to come out “winning” is to get a good education from a good school” (Comparison group participant)*

*“...schools are for education (sic) people for job opportunities in the future....” (Comparison group participant)*

*“...all I want to get from this (school) is my year 12 pass so can (sic) become a vet” (Comparison group participant)*

*“...better schools usually lead to the kids having a better life due to more job opportunities being opened up” (Comparison group participant)*

***The social purposes of education.***

This category included references to the role of education in instilling good morals, creating good citizens, benefitting future generations and making the world a “better” or more peaceful place. Acknowledgement of social purposes of education was higher in PosEd Group (8.25% of references) than the comparison group (4.43%). None of the students referred to the indirect social benefits of education such as equity, social cohesion or lower crime rates. Most students referred to school’s role in “shaping” good citizens:

*“Schools... help mold (sic) the kids for their future so if the school does not represent good values and does not impact on the child in a good way, this can majorly impact the child in their future environments”. (PosEd group participant)*

*“School allows people to have a fair chance at life and can discipline people to give the basis of being a good human being. (PosEd group participant)*

There were some references to societal role of schooling:

*“Without school many occupations would not be fulfilled and there would be holes in our society” (Comparison group)*

***School’s contribution to present happiness, positive emotions or present well-being.***

Daily happiness was important to several students, with 5.67% in the PosEd group and 4.84% in the comparison group discussing enjoyment of school. Many students pointed to the importance of spending time with friends on a daily basis (12.89% and 14.52% respectively):

*“Schools can be the place where friendships form and such friendships can bring you happiness....” (PosEd group participant)*

There were also students who explicitly identified positive education or well-being as a “break” from the main business of schooling:

*“In doing these positive education tasks, such as theme days, people find themselves forgetting about the upcoming assessments/tasks and allow themselves to be distracted slightly for a while which gives the brain a break from the stress of achieving”. (PosEd group participant)*

The role of school in creating a safe and positive learning environment was important, and was higher in the PosEd groups (10.82%) than in the comparison group (5.24%), with some referring directly to its impact on mental health:

*“... (Schools contribute) by providing a safe place for students to learn and develop socially and mentally”. (PosEd group participant)*

*“if a student is a part of a decent school community, that leaves them as a happier kid....” (PosEd group participant)*

Others identified sports and hobbies played at school as a key contribution to a good life.

This was similar in PosEd group (4.64%) and the comparison group (4.44%).

***School's contribution to present and future eudaimonic happiness***

This category included elements we often associate with more long-term happiness, or eudaimonia, such as wisdom, knowledge, life lessons, open-mindedness, character-building (as distinct from moral development, which was in the social purposes category), worldliness, passion, purpose, building social skills and developing life-long relationships (as distinct from spending time with friends). These were similar in all groups, with PosEd students placing more emphasis on finding passions and purpose (3.09% compared to 0.40%) and developing life-long relationships (13.40% compared to 8.87%).

***What if school does not contribute to a good life?***

The number of students who communicated the notion that school does not contribute to a good life was unexpected, given that it was not included in the task question, and was higher in the comparison group. Negative responses were in three categories: Pressure and stress from homework or expectations, which represented 0.52% of coded references in the PosEd and 8.06% in the comparison group; dissatisfaction due to what students saw as lack of relevance to their future or the outside world represented 2.06% of PosEd references, and 0.81% of comparison group references; and daily unhappiness due to bad results or for social environment, representing 0.52% of PosEd references and 8.06% in the comparison group.

*“...I don't always think school contributes to my happiness necessarily specifically, in fact more times than not it decreases my happiness, it makes me stress, and tired and angry. I think it most of the time brings out the worst in people, as some people thrive, while others just barely survive.” (PosEd group participant)*

*“...a way that schools can make our lives as students better is by eliminating homework that we have to do” (Comparison group participant)*

Some comparison group responses lamented a lack of freedom and frustration with school rules:

*“Schools ... act as if our education and overall well-being is less important than how we look when we come to school”. (Comparison group participant)*

*“...getting told off for insignificant things ... becomes extremely exhausting”.  
(Comparison group participant)*

Some students expressed frustration with their lack of academic achievement:

*“School is such a struggle for me, I try my absolute hardest but still don't get the results that my classmates do even tho (sic) they do not even try....” (Comparison group participant)*

Some students expressed a view that school did not adequately prepare them for the “real” world or the world of work, thus also revealing views about the economic purposes of schooling:

*“...being happy is important and that is hard at school. They give you a false sense of the real world and don't teach you anything about normal life” (PosEd group participant)*

*“...why cannot there be pre-Uni courses so I don’t have to learn useless things I am never going to need to know in my chosen field?” (Comparison group participant)*

Some students also expressed unhappiness at school because of bullying:

*“(Schools) do their best to provide a good setting to contribute to a good life. This works for the most part, however things like bullying and harassment let the school system down” (PosEd group participant)*

*“You could go to one of the best schools in the nations, with the best teachers, best facilities and best everything else but you could be bullied at school and that makes your life miserable” (Comparison group participant)*

## **Results (survey)**

Survey results (Figures 2 and 3) are used in this study to complement the findings of the thematic analysis and results show a discrepancy between the views of teachers and the views of students. When asked why we have schools, 61.54% of the 78 teachers who responded to the survey chose “nurturing good citizens that make the world a better place” from a list of possible answers (See Appendix). Only 24 students responded to the survey, but students were more likely to choose credentialing roles of schooling, with 25% choosing “improving job prospects” and a further 25% choosing “learning future career skills”. In contrast with the teachers, only 21% of students chose good citizenship or making the world a better place as the primary purpose of schooling.

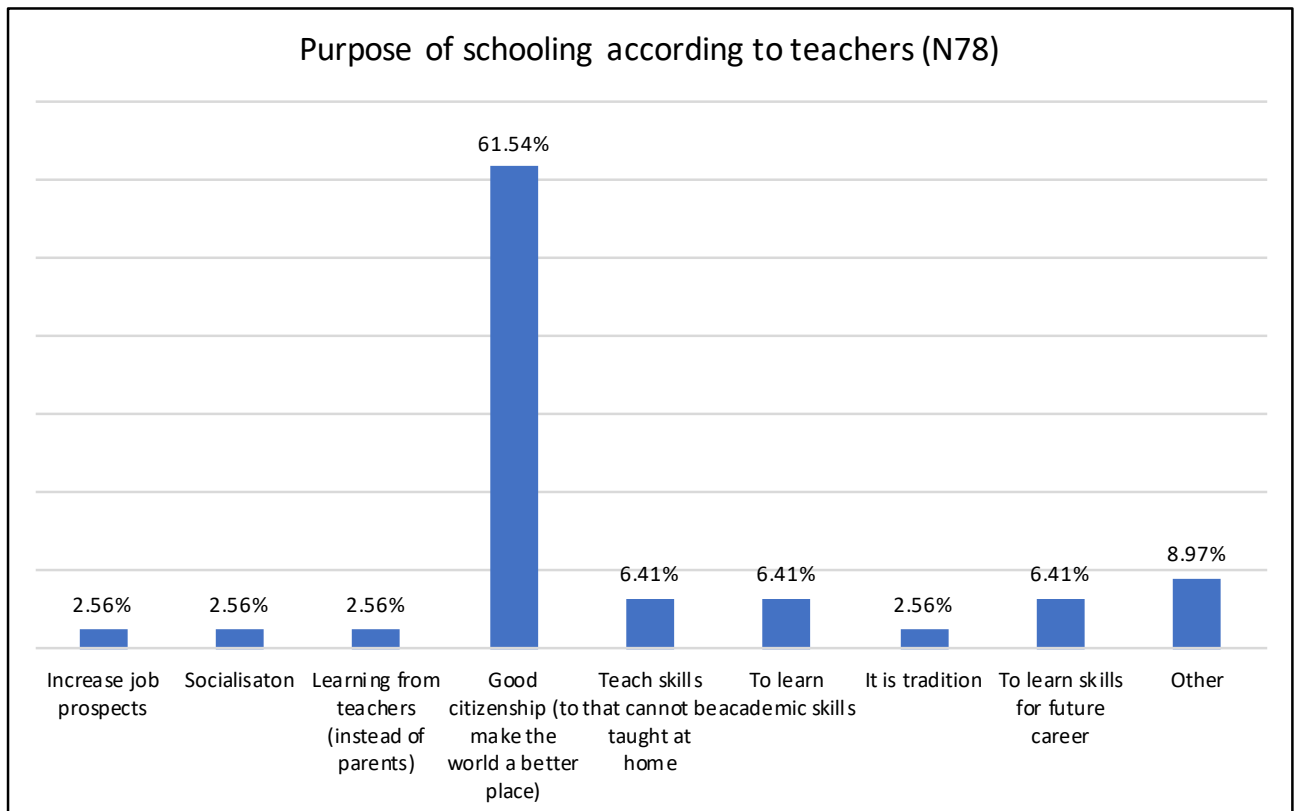


Figure 2. Purpose of schooling according to teachers. Refer to appendix for full list of survey options

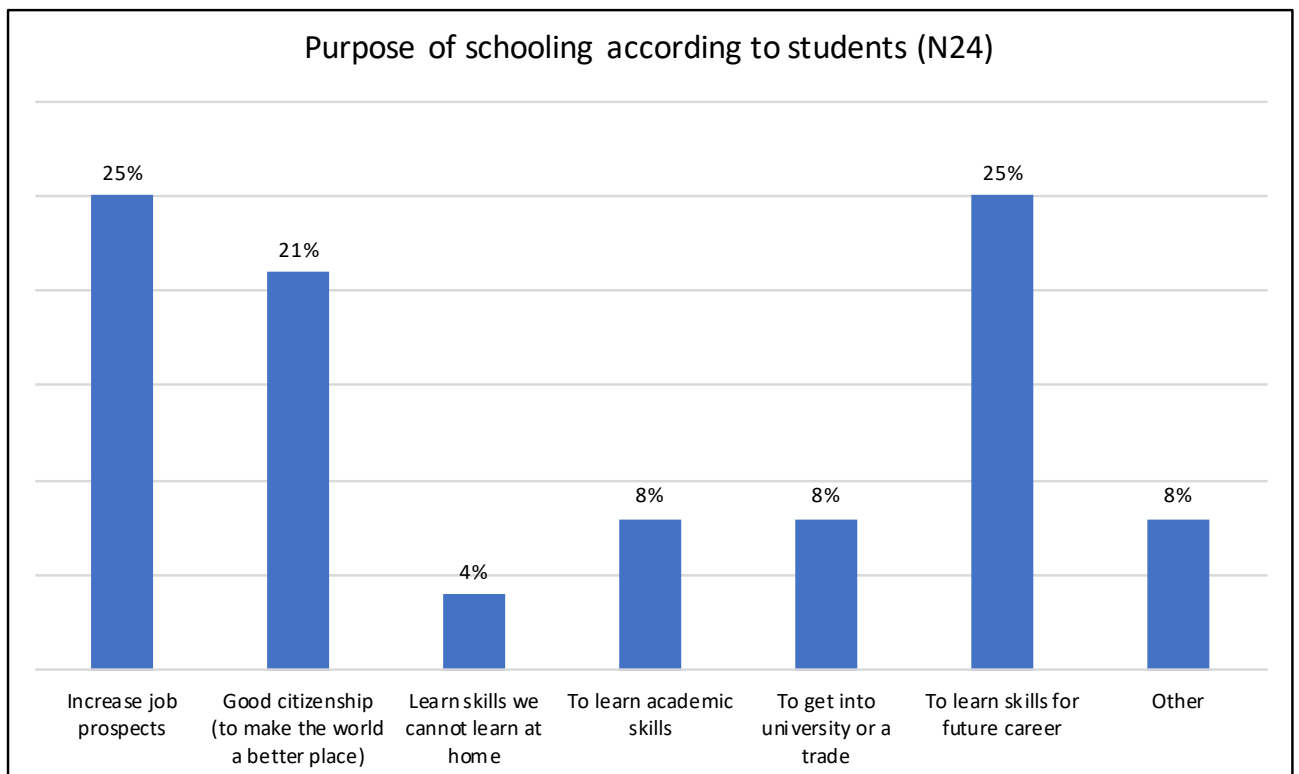


Figure 3. Purpose of schooling according to students. Refer to appendix for full list of survey options

## Discussion

Returning to the hypotheses, these writings did illustrate that more than half of the participating students held the view that school contributes to academic outcomes and the preparation of individuals for future careers, job skills and future economic success. They also revealed that students recognize the complexity of schooling and the role it plays in their everyday happiness. There was not a significant difference in the number of positive education students who recognized school's role in enhancing individual happiness or subjective well-being.

There were more students in the comparison group who expressed unhappiness with their daily lives at school. This cannot categorically be attributed to positive education based on this study alone, as one must examine the multitude of variables that may have caused these students to describe school in these terms on this particular day. Several of the comparison group participants mentioned their daily unhappiness due to strict rules about uniform. It is possible that this group had experienced a change in rules or simply a crackdown on the uniform code leading to dissatisfaction.

Nonetheless, the lower number of negative responses in the PosEd groups combined with the higher number of PosEd students who discussed a safe and supportive school environment is promising for positive education as a movement. Positive education students recognize the role schools play in creating a safe and happy learning environment and in supporting their mental health, and generally demonstrated an optimistic outlook. In addition, responses from both groups imply that students feel they *should* be happy at school and that school *should* contribute to a good life, regardless of whether or not they feel it is happening at present. Thus we can infer that students, to some extent, recognize school's broader purpose in improving well-being.

There was also a very low number of students who discussed “goodness” in collective terms and this is something that might be addressed by a clearer conception of educational purpose in positive education and in schools in general. It is significant that the overwhelming majority of students, despite being asked how school contributes to a good life (*in general*) focused primarily on how school contributes to the good life *for them* personally or for someone like them. With the exception of some of the aforementioned social purposes, students thought in terms of their own subjective experience, that is the individual “good” rather than the collective “good”. This is perhaps to be expected from adolescents, but nonetheless indicates a possible challenge for positive education, which aims to instil community-mindedness but is sometimes criticized for being too individualistic (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

Some students recognized school’s role in their moral development, in creating better communities and in making the world “a better place” for future generations is nonetheless heartening and reflects positive education’s goal of enhancing collective well-being. The fact that this was slightly higher in the positive education group is not statistically significant at present, but positive education programmes might have the potential for further development towards moral and collective “goodness”.

This paper has indicated that positive education students recognize the role schools play in creating a positive environment, but there is still work to be done in consolidating the message about “purpose” in positive education and in education as a whole. The significant number of students who see “credentialing” and future economic success as school’s chief contribution to their lives to some extent undermines positive education’s goal of creating a culture of well-being and enhancing community-mindedness in schools and is also in contrast with the views of teachers, resulting in a school environment where teachers and students are

working to achieve different purposes. If well-being continues to be promoted as simply an aide to enhance academic success, this message about purpose will continue to be murky and the definition of what it means to be “educated” will be left to limited measures like leagues tables and school rankings. A consolidated message about the social purposes of schooling has the potential to improve school environments, student well-being and communities.

If positive education *is* to succeed in shifting metrics towards measuring collective wellbeing, more needs to be done to shift the mindset of students who see their schooling experience as being *primarily* about credentialing. This might be achieved by helping students to redefine success rather than simply measuring their well-being and focusing on their positive emotions, as is arguably the focus of many current positive education programmes. Further, attention may be paid to more social approaches to academic success, such as the methods suggested by Dewey and other educational philosophers that emphasise experience, cooperation and the creation of learning communities. Such approaches are beyond the scope of this study but provide exciting opportunities for further research.

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## Appendix

### *Full List of Options for Survey Question*

<b>Teacher survey options</b>	<b>Student survey options</b>
To increase future job prospects (for the individual)	To increase future job prospects (for the individual)
To fill gaps in the employment market	To fill gaps in the employment market
Socialisation	Socialisation
To learn from teachers instead of solely parents/guardians	To learn from teachers instead of solely our parents/guardians
To produce good citizens that can make the world a better place	To produce good citizens that can make the world a better place
To teach skills we cannot teach them at home	To learn skills we cannot learn at home
To learn academic skills	To learn academic skills
To increase happiness and well-being	To increase happiness and well-being
It is a tradition	It is a tradition
To help students to get into a university or trade	To help students to get into a university or trade
To give students something to do during the day	To give students something to do during the day
To teach skills that will be useful for a future career	To teach skills that will be useful for a future career
To create a school community	To create a school community
To increase fun and enjoyment	To increase fun and enjoyment

<p>To serve parents' needs (i.e. similar to childcare for younger children or keeping adolescents occupied.</p>	<p>To serve parents' needs (i.e. similar to childcare for younger children or keeping adolescents occupied.</p>
<p>It is what we have always done</p>	<p>It is what we have always done</p>
<p>Other</p>	<p>Other</p>

## **6.2 Additional data: Teacher responses to positive education.**

As part of the optional online survey offered to participants in studies 2 and 3, participating Year 10 students and their teachers were asked to comment on the impact of positive education on the following elements of their school. Results were not used in the publications because they did not directly address the research questions on which the papers focused, and compared to the writing tasks, response rates were low, particularly among students. The differences between categories were not statistically significant but are nonetheless worthy of mention because they elucidate how students and, in particular, teachers, feel about the effectiveness of positive education and where it is having the most impact in their school. This survey was conducted on the Qualtrics survey platform and this report was filtered so that respondents who indicated that they had no involvement in positive education (through programmes, professional development or belonging to a positive education school), are excluded from these results.

As presented in the tables below (Tables 1 and 2), the teacher sample size was significantly larger than the student sample size, with 65-67 teacher respondents, depending on the category, but only 14-17 student responses. Teachers saw positive education as having the most impact on their teaching practice and the culture of their school with a rating of 6.29 out of a possible 10.00. The area of lowest impact according to teachers was the curriculum with a rating of 4.91, which is perhaps to be expected in schools following the Victorian Curriculum (as part of the Australian National Curriculum), which mandates a common set of knowledge and skills taught in the first 11 years of schooling. Surprisingly, teachers assessed the second lowest impact to be in the area of student learning at 5.49, which is perhaps

related to the mandated curriculum, but seems to contradict their notion of positive education's impact on teaching. In the middle was their ideas about the purpose of schooling at 5.58, which also had the highest degree of variance at 8.61, indicating that teachers were perhaps divided in their opinions of this impact. Their ideas about school success rated 5.97 and also had a reasonably large degree of variance at 7.60.

**Table 1*****Teachers' Ratings of the Impact of Positive Education***

#	Field	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Count
1	The culture of my school	0.00	10.00	6.13	2.35	5.52	67
2	The curriculum at my school	0.00	10.00	4.91	2.34	5.48	66
3	Student learning at my school	0.00	10.00	5.49	2.21	4.88	67
4	My teaching	0.00	10.00	6.29	2.51	6.30	65
5	My ideas about the purpose of schooling	0.00	10.00	5.58	2.93	8.61	65
6	My ideas about school success	0.00	10.00	5.97	2.76	7.60	65

Whilst mindful of the small student sample size, student results were similar except that they indicated their learning as the highest impact category at 6.86, perhaps reflecting the student perspective as learners who may have better insight into learning than teaching, or perhaps due to this question having the smallest response rate with only 14 respondents. The lowest category in the student group was the curriculum which reflects the opinions of their teachers. Other categories were also similar to the responses of teachers.

**Table 2*****Students' Ratings of the Impact of Positive Education***

#	Field	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Everyday life and culture at my school	1.00	10.00	6.59	2.52	6.36	17
2	The curriculum at my school	1.00	10.00	5.81	2.32	5.40	16
3	My learning	2.00	10.00	7.35	2.61	6.82	17
4	Teaching at my school	2.00	10.00	6.86	2.10	4.41	14
5	My ideas about the purpose of schooling	1.00	9.00	5.88	2.49	6.22	17
6	My ideas about school success	1.00	10.00	6.38	2.67	7.11	16

Ten teachers chose to add additional comments to their survey on positive education, revealing a range of approaches. Some of these comments supported the positive education ethos of their school:

*“Positive education is crucial in ensuring the ‘whole student’ is nurtured and their education and/or childhood is not undermined by a disregard for that which affects their personal wellbeing.”*

*“It can provide a more concrete vehicle to teach values.”*

*“It supports good mental health and positive social attitudes.”*

Whilst others demonstrated a more cautious approach:

*“Whilst I agree with everything that is said, I don't think it has changed my work much as I think I have always quite naturally worked positively with students.”*

*“The ideas of positive psychology and education can be conflicting with other practical and philosophical aspects of a school.”*

*“...I am incredibly on board with positive psychology. I really enjoyed reading Seligman's 2011 Flourish. I loved [school name]'s initial 3 day session with [positive psychology academic]. But we as a school have moved onto other things ....”*

The teachers' survey responses and the additional comments concur with results of studies in the three papers of this thesis in that they indicate that although current positive education approaches may influence various elements of school culture and teaching practice, there may be more work to be done if positive education is to be used as a vehicle for changing ideas about success and the purpose of schooling. Perceptions about new approaches, particularly among teachers, are integral for successful implementation and longevity of educational approaches and further investigation into these perceptions, perhaps with a larger and more diverse cohort, may be useful in future planning for positive education.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 The Results: What we have learnt from these studies?

*Hypothesis a) Students in a PosEd school will show evidence of increased knowledge of elements of quality of life and PERMA, when compared with non-PosEd schools.*

The first study strongly indicated that students of positive education valued relationships as the most important indicator of prosperity and success, with 28.82% of respondents discussing relationships compared to 2.31% in the comparison group. Relationships feature in both the PERMA framework, as studied in positive education, and in the PWI framework, so in this sense the hypothesis was accurate.

Interestingly, in groups participating in the second and third study, relationships were similarly valued by all participants. When describing the good life there was only a 2% difference between the positive education group at 21.22% and slightly higher in the comparison group at 23.26%. In the third study where students discussed the contribution of school to a good life, current friendships and life-long friendships, when combined, were slightly higher in the positive education group at 26.29%, than the comparison group at 23.39%.

This disparity between Study 1 and subsequent studies may be due to the difference in focus questions; the focus being on success and prosperity in the first study and the focus on the good life in the second and third study. This difference could also be attributed to the differences in student cohorts. All groups were reasonably well-matched, even across groups in different studies: all schools were independent (private), all groups were of a similar age

and all schools had higher than average ICSEA values. Even so, many variables including school culture and slight differences in demographics caused by city and regional locations may impact results, indicating a need to replicate these studies with different groups.

This being said, the *similarities* in other categories across groups may indicate that other factors are at play when it comes to the disparity in the discussion of relationships between comparison groups in the two studies, other than differences in cohorts. The first dataset was collected in 2014, only six years after the arrival of positive education at the first study school. This school was one of the first to implement positive education in Australia and arguably one of the first to adopt the whole-school approach in the world. By 2018, when the data were collected for the second and third study, positive psychology had become very much part of the zeitgeist in education and, arguably, popular culture. It may be described as having “taken the world by storm” (Wong & Roy, 2017, p. 142). It is possible then that the notion of PERMA as a framework for living well has influenced students in schools that have not explicitly implemented a positive education framework but a more general well-being approach. This indicates that even though positive psychology is relatively new, there are really no uncontaminated control groups due to the prominence of positive psychology and the regard for student well-being in popular culture.

Other elements of PERMA and the PWI framework were recognised by students, with accomplishment and positive emotions featuring strongly in Studies 1 & 2. The strong emphasis on the credentialing role of schooling in the third study might also be interpreted as recognition of accomplishment. Health, part of the PWI framework, was mentioned at a similar rate in Study 1 (10.42%/10.00%) and slightly more in the PosEd group in Study 2 (6.22%/2.99%), but perhaps was not relevant to questions posed in Study 3. Living standard

was also mentioned at a similar rate in Study 1 (6.21%/6.92%) and arguably in the second study as part of “basic necessities” (8.89%/3.65%), but was not relevant to the third study.

Other elements of the PWI framework did not feature strongly in student responses, including safety and future security, except arguably in Study 1 as part of “wealth”, which was much more prominent in the comparison group (9.09%/22.31%). Meaning, part of the PERMA framework, was not mentioned explicitly in Study 1, but may be considered part of “fulfillment” in Study 2 (6.22%/4.98%) and “finding passion/purpose” in the third study, which had a very low response rate (3.09%/0.40%).

Most notably, the concept of engagement in the PERMA framework and community in the PWI framework did not feature strongly in discussions of success or prosperity in Study 1, discussions of the good life in Study 2, or in discussions of school’s contribution to the good life in Study 3. Related discussions of social equity, governance and social stability were similarly low, with the PosEd group expressing these aspects at lower rates than the comparison group in Study 1 (2.44/9.23%). This points to a possible confirmation of the concerns raised by scholars about a compromised sense of social justice and lack of normative framework within positive education frameworks. Alternatively, students may simply have interpreted the questions as they pertain to the individual, which in itself shows that students are not thinking collectively. Future research may be needed to explore this in the hope of instilling in students the habit of being community oriented.

Similarly, the students in the positive education group were more likely to discuss prosperity and success as it pertained to the individual rather than the community or the nation. Although discussions of relationship may be counted as connecting with the

community, there was little sense of the community as a whole beyond other people as they pertain to the self. This shows that despite the solid foundation for connecting with others through relationships, a greater focus on collective and community well-being might be necessary within positive education.

***Hypothesis b) Students in a PosEd school will show conceptions of “the good life” that align with some elements of eudaimonic happiness***

As noted in the second paper, students demonstrated some elements of Aristotelian eudaimonic happiness through their acknowledgement of external “goods” such as relationships and accomplishment, which were similarly strong across both the positive education and comparison groups (23.26%/21.33% and 12.00%/14.62% respectively). Aristotle’s notion of “goods of the soul” was reflected strongly in discussions of positive emotions (13.33%/13.95%), however other “goods of the soul” such as gratitude (1.33%/1.66%) and moral goodness (3.11%/2.99%) had lower response rates, which is surprising given that gratitude, for example, is an explicit part of the positive education framework. Importantly, there was also very little discussion of anything that could be interpreted as Aristotelian concepts like the virtuous “golden mean”, community/political involvement or living a good life through moral choices and habits. Many discussions focussed on present happiness, which diverges from the Aristotelian notion that eudaimonic happiness takes a lifetime to achieve. This analysis concurs with scholars who argue for more philosophical and moral content within positive education, or education in general.

We must also acknowledge here the reality that participants in this study live in Australia and attend relatively privileged schools. Their conception of the good life may

differ if, for example, the students' basic needs were not being met. Similarly, although the students in these studies represented several cultural backgrounds, the majority in all schools were Caucasian and all resided in Australia. Cultural values and understandings of goodness might also have bearing on these results. For these reasons, a replication of this study in schools with different demographics, cultural groups or levels of socio-economic privilege would contribute to knowledge in this area.

***Hypothesis c) An emphasis on the “credentialing” role of schooling, or a belief that school is primarily to prepare students for future careers. (Study 3)***

The category of “career, work or further study” was the most prominent single category in Study 3’s discussion of the way school contributes to a good life, with very similar results in both groups (27.84%/28.23%), reflecting a belief that school is for helping students to achieve future careers, job skills or to lead to study towards a future career. The role of schooling in present enjoyment was also strong across several categories, with one surprising result being the number of comparison group students who stated that school did not contribute to happiness (10.08%), with many citing academic pressures or stress as the cause. This was surprising due to the question being specifically about the contribution of school to the *good* life, but perhaps to be expected amongst 15 and 16-year-olds. The low number of positive education students who mentioned not being happy at school (1.03%) may be attributed to a number of variables, including the potential for positive education to nurture a more positive mindset.

The general idea that schooling is primarily designed to lead to a future career or future study was prominent in the online survey, with only 21% indicating that school is for

nurturing good citizenship, 8% choosing “other” and all other students indicating that school prepares them for future careers, getting into university or a trade, or teaching them skills.

There was a disparity between the views of teachers and students, with 61.54% of the teachers ( $n = 78$ ) who responded to the online survey indicating that the purpose of schooling is to nurture good citizenship and make the world a better place. In contrast, students indicated that the most important purposes were to “improve job prospects” (25%) and “learn future career skills” (25%), bearing in mind the low student response rate in the survey ( $n = 24$ ). This result is reflected in the aforementioned student writing tasks, with a much larger sample size ( $n = 225$ ), demonstrating that there were similar findings in both components of the third study.

The disparity between student and teacher perceptions of the purpose of schooling may be fraught with implications for positive education and education in general. Firstly, the implementation of positive education may be seen by students as irrelevant or somewhat separate from the important business of preparation for future careers or further study. To see any programme as separate from the purpose of education is to diminish its importance and it is perhaps not surprising why positive education interventions are often promoted in schools by referring to their possible academic benefits. Further, introducing something to the already crowded school schedule that is seen as irrelevant may actually increase stress in students, particularly in the senior years, who may think time is being taken away from their more important work. Finally, a school environment where teachers and students have different ideas about the fundamental aims of school, cannot represent a cohesive community with a shared purpose.

To build flourishing communities we need a shared purpose. This is not to say that there are no purposes shared by students and teachers in education. At present, shared purpose may occur in individual classes: in components of the curriculum, for example, “learning algebra” or “understanding causes of the French revolution”, but as a community this is clearly not enough. A shared understanding of the purpose of education, or at least a dialogue about it, will increase school belonging and allow room for nurturing flourishing individuals rather than simply individuals ready for future work. The question now is, *how?*

## 7.2 Positive education: A vehicle for redefining school success?

### *The overarching questions*

Returning to our overarching questions:

- a) What beliefs about success, flourishing and the purposes of education are held by adolescents?
- b) Could PosEd be a vehicle for augmenting a conception of success or goodness based in eudaimonic flourishing?
- c) Can PosEd achieve an ideological shift towards education for collective flourishing, if it does not already exist?

**Overarching outlook a)** The good life according to these students primarily involves relationships with family and friends, accomplishment, positive emotions and sometimes fulfillment, material wealth or comfort and health. These findings are most evident in the Aristotelian categorisation of goods in the second study (Figure 5), and in the conceptions of success in the first study, which showed more positive education students discussing relationships than in the other studies where they are relatively even.

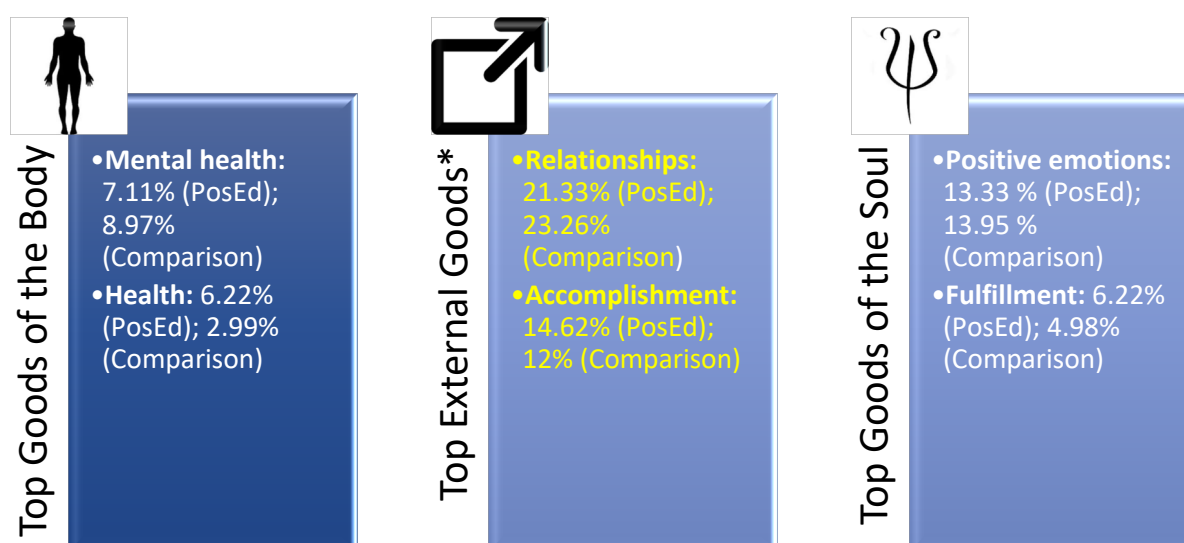


Figure 5. Aristotelian categorisation of the good life according to adolescents. \*Note that relationships could be re-classified as Goods of the Soul.

Across all three studies there were few mentions of collective well-being or moral goodness. This is not, necessarily, a bleak outlook, especially when we consider the apocalyptic predictions of many of my students mentioned in my introduction. Relationships may be seen to be a key component of a virtuous and therefore eudaimonic life, and, although included here as an ‘external good’ as translated in Nicomachean ethics, relationships may arguably be considered ‘goods of the soul’. Noddings (2002; 2003; 2010) emphasises caring in her conception of the purpose of schooling. Relationships, love and caring are also key components in many ethical frameworks. Moral philosopher Murdoch (1970), for example, sees love as the fundamental moral activity, although she also emphasises the importance of overcoming the self and the ego. Others might further suggest that talk of relationships *is* the contemporary substitute for virtues-talk (Harrison & Walker, 2018). López-Pérez, Sánchez and Gummerum (2016) found that as young people transition from childhood to adolescence, their conception of happiness became increasingly eudaimonic.

If one outcome of these studies is to similarly establish a baseline understanding of adolescents' conceptions of *success* and *goodness* in relation to flourishing upon which we can build, valuing relationships is an adequate, and some might say essential, first step. A plausible next step is to nudge this understanding in the direction of moral and collective goodness and away from more individual, neoliberal understandings of success, prosperity and flourishing.

As discussed, most students recognise the role school plays in credentialing, or preparing them for the future. This is perhaps unsurprising given the societal pressures on schools to prepare students for 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and the world of work, as well as the neoliberal emphasis on competition and education as a commodity. In Study 3 of this thesis, this view was somewhat balanced by students' discussions of school's contribution to their lives through their everyday happiness, facilitating lifelong friendships and providing a safe environment. Even the small percentage of students who discussed schools' negative contribution to their lives largely demonstrated a view that school *should* contribute to flourishing (even if it does not at present).

**Overarching questions b) and c)** ask whether PosEd may be a vehicle for augmenting a conception of success or goodness based in eudaimonic flourishing and whether PosEd has the potential to achieve an ideological shift towards education for flourishing. As discussed in chapter 7.1, the answer to this is: *maybe*. The first study in this thesis indicated that positive education may have had an ideological impact on students' conceptions of success and prosperity. The subsequent studies, however, demonstrated relatively similar views about the good life and schools' ability to nurture it, albeit with positive education students expressing a slightly more positive view of the impact of schooling in the third study. These findings

leave us with a clue as to the potential for positive education to shift mindsets, however a lot more needs to be done to align positive education with the purposes of schooling *and* to consolidate conceptual understandings of eudaimonic happiness, collective flourishing and moral virtue. The question remains: how is this to be done?

These studies conservatively show that positive education is emerging as a potential vehicle for achieving an ideological shift in the mindsets of school students and informing a stronger sense of what it means to live a good life. There is, of course, still much more to be done. A new positive education framework might address the need for specific moral content or normativity and attempt to instil a more social definition of success through specific examination and reflection of philosophical concepts. This would involve:

- An explicit moral framework within positive education beyond utilitarian notions of maximising happiness. This might be drawn from Aristotle or other normative ethicists and may also be (judiciously) linked to texts studied in religious schools. It would be important, however, to take a pedagogical approach that focuses on inquiry rather than dogma, to avoid the evangelism that is sometimes attributed to positive psychology.
- Drawing from the ideas of Noddings (2003), more “aims-talk” in planning for education and an explicit questioning of education’s purpose, thereby challenging neoliberal notions of education as a commodity.
- A nurturing of an existential understanding of the “self” that moves away from Western individualism and towards a sense of the self as a small but powerful component of a whole. Such an understanding moves beyond the existing focus on individual subjective

well-being, and combats concerns about purely utilitarian understandings of happiness that are commonly criticised for marginalising minorities. Implementation of this might employ a Deweyan framework for positive education:

*...The success of a Deweyan school is undeniably measured on the degree to which it achieves social harmony and good citizenship among its students, and fulfillment comes from being conducive to the 'vitality of the social organ' (Spencer in Dewey, 1971, p.285).*

A student in a Deweyan school is not a cog in the machine, however, but is acutely aware of the existential condition: his or her degree of power and the importance of his or her moral decisions in the creation of the universe (Trask-Kerr, 2015, p. 52)

### ***The question of longevity***

Sixteen years ago Diener (2003) expressed a hope that positive psychology would eventually disappear as a mark of its success. The language of positive psychology would be so ingrained in everyday practice that it would no longer be necessary as a distinct field. To some extent, the *language* of positive education *has* become ingrained in many schools. Talk of the growth mindset, resilience and mindfulness are now commonplace in schools even those not explicitly embracing positive education. (cf. Baker, 2019; Cahill, Beadle, Farrelly, Forster, & Smith, 2014; Catholic Education Melbourne, 2016). However, this does not necessarily represent an ideological shift towards a new concept of flourishing, and there has been some concern that positive education may not “stick” (White, 2016).

Education in general is subject to a plethora of fashions and fads (Dinham, 2017; Hattie & Hamilton, 2018; Paul, Elder, & Paul, 2006), which may threaten the longevity of any new initiative, least of all one that stems from positive psychology which has itself been accused of faddishness (cf. Lazarus, 2003; Simmons, 2013). Current incarnations of positive education that focus on individual positive affect are outside of students' view of the purpose of education as having a credentialing role *and* arguably somewhat outside of teachers' view of the purpose of education in nurturing good citizenship. There are also suggestions that schools may move on from interventions that have been "McDonald-ised" (Graham in Baker, 2019). This may be part of the reason why some educators are having some trouble making positive education stick (White, 2016): if educators and school leaders do not fully support positive education then students are unlikely to be on board.

In addition, positive education's methods and conventions have an individual focus that may be contrary to the social purposes of education. Whether this is due to positive psychology's emergence from clinical psychology which, for good reason, tends to focus its research on individuals, or due to neoliberal or general societal belief, have served it well to-date. What may be missing, however, are elements that are not traditionally studied in positivist fields like psychology: normativity, cultural sensitivity, pedagogy and social justice.

Now that we are aware of the possibility that PPIs may improve the lives of students, maybe it is time for positive *psychology* to take a step back and allow positive education to reside more comfortably in education rather than psychology. Since schools have traditionally involved many individuals learning together, education has largely had a more collective focus than psychology and, despite some turns towards differentiation and more

tailored approaches like clinical teaching, trends in education have tended to focus on learning and improvement at a group level. In addition to the PPIs that complement but do not necessarily impact the school curriculum, a more educational focus would open doors to a full examination of pedagogy, a utilisation of learning science, more “aims-talk” and an embedding of a new purpose, or “new prosperity” into the school curriculum through positive education interventions (PEIs) or, more specifically, in subject areas like the humanities through positive *humanities* interventions (PHIs). An interdisciplinary approach drawing from philosophy, sociology, health and psychology may be necessary, but unless education and educators are at the heart of this approach it risks becoming another add-on being imposed upon education from outside of it, rather than being developed from within it.

### **7.3 Future directions**

#### ***Positive Educational Interventions (PEIs) and Positive Humanities Interventions (PHIs)***

Positive educational interventions (PEIs) as part of the core curriculum may provide a content-driven pedagogical approach to positive education that is borne out of education rather than positive psychology. In the past, studies of both educational content and pedagogy have largely focussed almost exclusively on educational outcomes, but the social and emotional impact of educational content is arguably of equal importance. Similarly, as outlined in the literature review contained herein, positive psychology interventions have tended to be measured in terms of their impact on well-being and, sometimes, their impact on rather narrow educational outcomes. What may be missing is a reverse approach: instead of simply adding PPIs to existing school schedules and measuring their outcomes, an examination of pre-existing subject-based curricula and pedagogy might reveal a relationship with well-being that may be harnessed in a positive education framework. This approach

would link existing pedagogical approaches, such as inquiry, constructivism, experiential learning, thinking routines, direct instruction or differentiation; and examine the possible benefits from a well-being perspective. Similarly, examining specific content also has the potential to reveal a relationship with well-being, addressing many of the challenges currently faced by positive education, such as concerns about the hollowed-out curriculum or “changing the subject” (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009a, p. 371) and place positive education more fully in the hands of educators and educational researchers.

Further, to link positive education with the social purposes of education, to avoid an ethnocentric sensibility, and to embed normative content within positive education, specific PEIs might draw from the humanities in the form of PHIs: Positive *Humanities* Interventions. These might be worked into the curriculum in the same way as other directives in education. For example, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy progression documents are designed to complement the existing documentation in key learning areas, providing a resource for teachers to embed literacy and numeracy in their learning-area-based practices (ACARA, n.d.). PHIs might provide a framework for humanities teachers to refer to – prompting them to ask whether their learning outcomes address certain criteria in enhancing community flourishing. This will require a great deal of work at the policy level.

The humanities have already been linked to wellbeing (Tay, et al., 2018; Vaziri, et al., 2018), and it is possible that the content needed to harness this is already in the curriculum, but since the examination of this link has been limited thus far, it is possible that we are not fully utilising its potential. Vaziri et al.’s (2018) systematic review demonstrated that most studies of the humanities and positive functioning focus on educational outcomes such as engagement, with the exception of literature where many of the studies are outside the

educational setting. Despite this, as argued by Tay et al., (2018), there is likely to be a “robust connection” between the arts and humanities and human flourishing (p. 216), that has not yet been explored.

Despite the potential benefits of the humanities in terms of flourishing and in other cultural and academic areas, they have been in decline worldwide as some question their utility in an era of efficiency (Kent, 2012) and in the neoliberal competitive market. Schools in Australia, for example, increasingly prioritise STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) over HASS (Humanities and Social Sciences). Throughout the years we have seen, for example, schools parcelling the humanities into vague hybrids such as SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) or other integrated studies approaches, resulting in a reduction in class time devoted to the humanities and a devaluing of discrete humanities subjects. This may be either a symptom or a contributor to the rise of neoliberal individualism and what has been labelled the “decline of society” (Ikpe, 2015). A resurgence of the humanities in the form of PHIs might address the negative implications of this decline in the humanities whilst addressing the aforementioned challenges within positive education, including the charge that it limits human potential and does little to inspire social or political change (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009b). PHIs would explicitly focus on humanistic values, on social movements, social equity and values. Regardless of whether positive psychology may have emerged as a *symptom* of neoliberal sensibilities that emphasise commercial interests, commodification and competition; with a developed normative framework and a harnessing of specific educational content, positive education may paradoxically become the ideal tool to challenge neoliberal thinking by challenging the neoliberal hegemony, strengthening community and emphasising the social.

Among other benefits, the study of the humanities, especially in the senior years of schooling, has the specific power to instil a sense of “the social” in students, and appreciation of how humanity has overcome adversity in the past and a knowledge of societal trends, all of which have the potential to boost resilience. Philosophy in schools, often known as the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement has already been recognised for its potential to combat extremism (Ketchell, 2017) but is only beginning to tap into its potential for improving community cohesion. Philosophy-based PHIs as part of the curriculum may have the potential to be part of positive education’s efforts to create an economy of wellbeing and redefine school success. In addition, studies in Philosophy as PHIs would inject the normative content needed in positive education, and simultaneously address Ecclestone and Haye’s (2009a) concern that positive education contributes to a “hollowed-out curriculum” by focussing on skills rather than academic content. Similarly, PHIs have the potential to address the concerns about individualism by working on happiness without overemphasizing the self or emotions (cf. Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Ecclestone, 2009; Furedi, 2004). Most existing studies examining the impact of the Humanities within positive education have focussed on the arts and literature, with the few Philosophy and History studies focussing on specific methods that may not be generalisable (cf. Vaziri et al., 2018; Youssef, Campbell, & Tangen, 2016). This indicates an exciting avenue for further study of activities in the humanities and beyond that may align with the goals of positive education, potentially using the conceptual model suggested by Tay, Pawelski and Keith (2018). Further, many of these potential “interventions” may take the form of activities already being used in schools. A list of existing and potential humanities activities used in schools and their potential links to positive education’s aims is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3*****Existing and Potential Humanities Activities for Future Wellbeing Study***

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Activity or “intervention”</b>	<b>Potential benefits to be studied in relation to the goals of positive education</b>
History	Year 10 unit examining the history of catastrophe and how humans have survived natural disasters and war.	Increasing hope by emphasising the struggles humanity has faced throughout history and our potential to overcome adversity.
History	Year 9 activity analysing the film “300”, its representations of cultural groups and its distortion of historical events.	A strengthening of empathy through the recognition of differing perspectives on historical events.
History	Year 7 research project about inspirational women and how they achieved their goals.	Inspiring social justice action and examination of social conditions for minorities. Reflection on success and the “good life”.
Philosophy	Year 9 debate about the nature of utilitarianism and examination of how it is applied in the “Effective Altruist” movement.	Recognition of the worldwide impact of charity and the potential impact an individual may have to solve the world’s problems.
Philosophy	Year 12 ethics unit on classical Greek and	Examination of moral goodness and normativity. Encourages

	contemporary conceptions of “goodness”.	deep thinking about moral behaviour.
Geography	Year 9 field trip/excursion to other neighbourhoods analysing geopolitical change on a local level, changing populations, development and “gentrification”.	Strengthening connection and empathy within and between groups in the community.
Sociology/Social Studies	Year 8 unit interviewing “heroes” within the community and what inspires them.	Strengthening community connections and inspiring social justice action. Reflection of versions of success.

Such a move towards content-driven positive interventions may also solve the paradox of unhappiness that is found in the relentless pursuit of happiness. Happiness found through the pursuit of knowledge and education reflect the wisdom of philosopher Mill (2018), who described the direct pursuit of happiness as a “fool’s errand” and real happiness as a by-product of pursuing other goals such as, in this case, academic knowledge. Further, what we have described here as “interventions”, PEIs and PHIs may simply become the substance of education itself, for what is education aiming for if not towards flourishing? Similar observations have been made about psychology, with Richardson and Guignon (2008) declaring that any psychology worth pursuing must be positive. This thesis has alluded to the educational philosophers such as Dewey and Noddings who see *all* education as leading (one

way or another) towards the positive. If positive educational interventions are in daily use as part of the content-based curriculum, they become the substance of education itself.

Studies in this thesis suggest that a positive education has the potential to change the mindset of students. With this power to influence thinking about well-being and the “good” life comes the responsibility to instil in students a clear vision of the eudaimonic life and an understanding of the social purposes of schooling, so that students may choose a path towards flourishing. The studies have also given us a modest insight into what adolescents are thinking about the good life and the role of education in *nurturing goodness*, with the conclusion that, although we have far to go, our future may be in safe hands. Far from reflecting the “terrifying burden of the demise of humanity” to which I referred in the introduction, these students are considering their lives and futures and the important role their families and friends might play in their flourishing.

Nonetheless, there is clearly room for a consolidated approach to moral goodness, to community flourishing and potentially altruism as part of their education for flourishing. Further research, with a broader group of participants, possibly including parents, might shed more light on these concepts. Some important work is already being done in the area of character education by the *Jubilee Centre* (cf. Harrison, Dineen & Mollen, 2018). Further, there appears to be a need for students to take a step back from the fervent pursuit of credentials and competition as part of their educational experience. It is also hoped that these studies might provide an understanding of what students are thinking about schooling, and that this insight might be utilised as tool for combating damaging neoliberal approaches to education. These approaches include the emphasis on the pursuit of credentials, basing

educational decisions on market-driven forces, and attitudes that see education playing a role as a measurable commodity rather than an integral social function.

Despite the large number of participants in these studies, they do reflect only a limited demographic sample and, with the exception of the teacher survey, are all within one age group. These studies are only the beginning and there is enormous potential for further research into these questions of whether our students are aiming for the right things; aspiring to be the right people; engaging in moral questions and connecting with their community in ways that enhance collective wellbeing. Further research may also explore the potential for PEIs and PHIs to enhance community-mindedness in schools.

Further, while the many and varied current incarnations of positive education in schools aim to enhance wellbeing, such studies dealing with ideology might be a step towards treating the cause of low levels of wellbeing, rather than the symptoms. The potential for placing collective and community flourishing at the heart of education in the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences; to become an integral part of a truly *positive* education system is largely untapped and is, plausibly, the next step in achieving a “new prosperity” and moving schools towards a new definition of success.

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