

# The positive educational practices framework: A tool for facilitating the work of educational psychologists in promoting pupil wellbeing

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## Abstract

*This paper outlines the Positive Educational Practices (PEPs) Framework, an organising tool for facilitating the work of educational psychologists in promoting pupil wellbeing and supporting pupils to achieve learning outcomes and engage in pro-social behaviour. The PEPs Framework is an example of applied positive psychology, in itself a movement which has shifted the primary focus of psychologists from deficits, problems and treatment to a preventative focus on positive experiences, strengths and the intentional promotion of wellbeing and resilience. PEPs is a wide-ranging prevention framework based on five foundations of wellbeing drawn not only from research in positive psychology but also from research in other contemporary psychological and educational movements that are consistent with positive psychology. The five foundations: social and emotional competency, positive emotions, positive relationships, engagement through strengths and a sense of meaning and purpose are outlined along with examples of practical suggestions that can contribute to their achievement.*

The Positive Educational Practices (PEPs) Framework offers educational psychologists an innovative and optimistic approach to planning for and working with individual pupils, small groups, whole classes and whole schools. It is an application of the core principles and directions from the positive psychology movement. The major focus of the positive psychology movement is how to facilitate flourishing lives that promote individual and organisational wellbeing. Seligman (2007a), as one of the leading proponents of the positive psychology movement, believes wellbeing is underscored by positive emotions, positive relationships, engagement, accomplishment and meaning. The emphasis is on individual and collective strengths rather than deficits, on positive experiences rather than problems, on competency building rather than pathology and on what is going well rather than what is not working (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology focuses on programs and interventions that contribute to wellbeing but also prevent or minimise psychopathology.

Many of the components of positive psychology are not new, but Peterson (2006) and Linley & Joseph (2004) believe that it is a useful umbrella term that has the potential to unite a range of related but disparate directions in theory and research about what makes life most worth living. Positive psychology is also different to previous 'positive' approaches in psychology in that it is firmly grounded in empirical research (Seligman, 2007b). Many researchers and theorists have contributed knowledge about how, why, and under what conditions positive emotions, positive relationships, strengths, engagement, meaning (and the institutions that enable them) flourish (e.g., Cameron, *et al.*, 2003; Gardner, *et al.*, 2001). However, proponents of positive psychology have clearly pointed out that although the focus of its research is on identifying outcomes that enhance wellbeing and happiness, it is not intended to replace what is already known about human suffering and disorder but rather to supplement it (Seligman, *et al.*, 2005).

Positive psychology is consistent with a number of other approaches as outlined below.

#### *Humanistic psychology*

Resnick et al. (2001) have noted that many of the principles and components of positive psychology are consistent with those of humanistic psychology, for example, the pursuit of peak experiences and self-actualisation, a focus on positive human potential, diversity and self-acceptance, the role of empathy and an emphasis on the importance of positive experiences and emotions.

#### *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*

Karwoski et al. (2006) have identified the following elements of CBT as being consistent with positive psychology: a focus on not just fixing problems but also assisting in the achievement of a happier life; a focus on discrete and meaningful goals rather than broad-based 'therapy'; an emphasis on the here-and-now rather than the past; realistic and positive reframing of negative thoughts to reduce negative emotions; a focus on developing competency in helpful and reality-based thinking as a buffer to future problems; scheduling of pleasant activities accompanied by mood monitoring; identification and review of success experiences; and the development of problem-solving competencies. Many of these CBT elements are also shared with solution-focused therapy. Karwoski et al. (2006) argue a case for the integration by psychologists of more elements of a positive psychology approach with a CBT approach. In particular they advocate for a stronger emphasis on identifying and cultivating individual latent strengths (especially those that may have been compromised by stress or adversity), moving beyond a focus on the reduction of negative emotions towards a focus on the enhancement of positive emotions, incorporating more work on hope and optimistic thinking and assisting with the development of a stronger sense of meaning and purpose.

#### *The positive youth development approach*

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach focuses on developing programs for young people that emphasise building skills and assets. The aim is to develop multi-faceted prevention programs that help pupils grow into mature, civic-minded and successful adults. A core principle, articulated by Pittman (2005) is that being problem-free is not the same as being fully prepared. PYD programmes (e.g. Benson, 1997, 1999; Catalano et al., 1999) commonly focus on:

- promoting positive relationships with peers;
- emphasising strengths;
- building competencies;
- providing opportunities to learn healthy behaviours;
- connecting youth with caring adults.

Both positive psychology and PYD encourage those working with young people to focus on the development of positive emotions, individual strengths, positive values and positive character traits and to facilitate young people's connections to positive institutions like school (Larson, 2000).

The USA National Research Council's recent review of PYD community research (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) identified features of positive settings for PYD which included physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, opportunities for skill building and integration of family, school, and community efforts. An earlier review of PYD programmes indicated that the most effective programs targeted a combination of social settings (e.g. family, school, church, community and work) and sought to strengthen social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural competencies (Catalano et al., 1999).

A significant component of the PYD movement is the shift from a focus on 'risk' to a more positive focus on the protective factors associated with 'resiliency'. A protective factor is an individual or environmental resource that helps to buffer a young person

against the negative impact of adversity or difficult circumstances and minimises the impact of risk (Fraser & Terzian, 2005). There are clear similarities between this shift to a 'protective factors' approach and positive psychology's shift from pathology to wellbeing (Fraser et al., 2004). Many researchers have identified similar key competencies that can help to 'protect' and buffer children from the effects of adversity (Jimerson et al., 2004; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Barnett et al., 1996). Benard (2004) listed the following protective factors in her review of a decade of research on children and resilience: social competency problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose, caring relationships, connection to school, participation and contribution and high educational and moral expectations.

### **Positive psychology and educational psychology**

So far there have been only limited applications of the positive psychology framework to the context of education (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004). Arguably, there are many examples of educational psychology practice slowly moving away from a model of deficit-focused service delivery toward more positive and preventative models that focus on the strengths of pupils, schools and families (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Fagan & Wise, 2000; Reschly, 2000; Wilson & Reschly, 1996). However the predominant approach is still reactive rather than proactive in that educational psychology services are available only after students demonstrate difficulties with learning or behaviour (Akin-Little et al., 2003).

Damon (2004) argues that this problem-based focus in education and educational services has directed a huge share of the available resources to attempting to remediate the incapacities of young people with labels like ADHD and 'learning disorder'. This is hardly surprising given that educational systems and external agencies usually provide extra support services and personnel on the basis of documentation of a pupil's

assessed problems, deficits and difficulties, as noted by Morrison et al. (2006). They further suggest that many educational professionals may therefore have difficulty seeing those pupils in a positive way that motivates them to design individual or whole-class interventions that build on their strengths.

Clonan et al. (2004) argue that an applied positive psychology approach is a 'good fit' with educational psychology as research studies over time have highlighted the dissatisfaction of EPs with the typical deficit-oriented approach. Many EPs have advocated for role expansion in the direction of a stronger focus on prevention and greater collaboration with teachers and schools (e.g. Reschly, 1976, 1988, 2000). The increasing emphasis on the role of schools in the prevention and promotion of mental health and wellbeing reflects this shift in focus (Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit, 2004, Weare & Gray, 2003) and there are now many EPs working on early intervention, school improvement and SEAL delivery teams. Reschly and Ysseldyke (1999) assert that it is essential for EPs to continue to move toward competence enhancement and capacity building, a recommendation that aligns with the positive psychology approach. Similarly Clonan et al. (2004) assert that the time for a *positive educational psychology* is long overdue.

PEPs adapts and applies Seligman's five pillars of wellbeing to school wellbeing. All five foundations of PEPs are supported by examples of school based research evidence of the practices that enhance pupil wellbeing. By synthesising and organising the research evidence under the five foundations, PEPs is offered as a useful and comprehensive framework to facilitate EPs' work in developing individual, group or school-wide wellbeing. The next section outlines the five foundations of the PEPs Framework in more detail. This is outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The Positive Educational Practices (PEPs) Framework:**  
 A positive psychology approach to pupil wellbeing (Noble & McGrath, 2008).

<p><b>Foundation One: Social and emotional competency</b></p> <p>Pupils are more likely to experience wellbeing and behave in a more pro-social way when they have a sense of social and emotional competence. An effective social and emotional learning curriculum focuses on pro-social values (e.g. respect, cooperation, acceptance of differences, compassion, honesty, inclusion and friendliness) and the following social and emotional skills</p> <p><i>Resilience skills</i> such as: optimistic thinking, skills for acting with courage, coping skills, adaptive distancing, using humour appropriately and helpful thinking skills.</p> <p><i>Social skills</i> such as: sharing resources and workload, co-operating, respectfully disagreeing, negotiation, having an interesting conversation, presenting to an audience and managing conflict well.</p> <p><i>Emotional literacy skills</i> such as: managing strong feelings like anger, fear and disappointment, amplifying positive emotions, recognising and understanding the feelings of others and showing empathy and support</p> <p><i>Personal achievement skills</i> such as: identifying one’s own strengths and limitations, metacognitive skills, identifying personal goals, planning and setting time-lines, prioritising, persistence, problem solving and seeking assistance when needed.</p>	<p><b>Foundation Two: Positive emotions</b></p> <p>Experiencing positive emotions can enhance pupils’ wellbeing by increasing their capacity for optimistic thinking and problem solving and by contributing to their resilience, behavioural flexibility and persistence. Schools can design policies, programs, structures and strategies that can ensure that pupils experience the following emotions on a regular basis.</p> <p><i>Feelings of belonging</i> to their school and class(es).</p> <p><i>Feelings of safety</i> from putdowns, bullying and violence.</p> <p><i>Feelings of satisfaction, and pride</i> through opportunities for experiencing and celebrating success.</p> <p><i>Feelings of excitement and enjoyment</i> through participating in fun activities, special events and educational games.</p> <p><i>Feelings of optimism</i> about their success and their school.</p>
<p><b>Foundation Four: Engagement through strengths</b></p> <p>Wellbeing, positive behaviour and achievement are more likely to occur when pupils are aware of their cognitive and character strengths and have opportunities to demonstrate and further develop them at school. Curriculum differentiation provides more opportunities for students with diverse strengths to be engaged in learning and achieve more</p>	<p><b>Foundation Three: Positive relationships</b></p> <p>Positive peer relationships and positive teacher-pupil relationships help pupils to feel connected to school and to experience support and acceptance. They can also enhance motivation to achieve and to behave in accordance with a school’s pro-social culture.</p> <p><b>Foundation Five: A sense of meaning and purpose</b></p> <p>Wellbeing and achievement are enhanced when pupils are provided with opportunities at school and in the community to develop a sense of meaning and purpose. Pupils have a sense of ‘<i>Meaning</i>’ when what they do has impact on others beyond themselves. They have a sense of ‘<i>Purpose</i>’ when they pursue worthwhile goals.</p>

## **Foundation One: Social and emotional competency**

Helping pupils to develop competency in the social and emotional skills related to wellbeing is the core of the first foundation of the PEPs Framework. Research indicates many positive outcomes from proactively and explicitly teaching pupils social and emotional skills. These outcomes include: more positive attitudes; higher levels of pro-social behaviour; a better understanding of the consequences of their behaviour; improved school performance; improved learning-to-learn skills; better problem solving and planning capacity; and greater use of higher level reasoning strategies (Devaney et al., 2006; Greenberg et al., 2000; Zins et al., 2004).

Directly and explicitly teaching pro-social values and skills and then providing pupils with naturalistic opportunities to practise and reflect on their performance is the most effective approach to develop pupil social and emotional competency (McGrath, 2005). The most significant values and skills are elaborated in more detail below.

### *Pro-social values*

Many researchers have identified the importance of teaching of pro-social values as part of wellbeing or 'anti-bullying' interventions (e.g. Battistich et al., 2001; Cowie & Olafson, 2000; Cross et al., 2004; Flannery et al., 2003; Frey et al., 2000). The most significant of these are respect, co-operation, acceptance of differences, compassion, honesty, and friendliness/inclusion.

### *Resilience skills*

Many researchers have identified individual skills that can help pupils become more resilient including optimistic thinking skills, skills for acting with courage, coping skills, adaptive distancing, using humour appropriately, helpful thinking skills, problem solving and seeking assistance when needed (e.g. Benard, 2004; Seligman, 1995, 1998; Gilham et al., 1995).

### *Social skills*

There are several key social skills that are related to both learning activities and out-of-class interactions that can be taught at school such as: sharing resources and workload, co-operating, respectfully disagreeing, negotiation, having an interesting conversation, presenting to an audience; and managing conflict well (McGrath & Francey, 1991; McGrath & Noble, 2003; McGrath, 2005).

### *Emotional literacy skills*

These skills focus on understanding one's own feelings as well as understanding those of other people and include: managing strong feelings such as anger, fear and disappointment, recognising and understanding the feelings of others; and showing empathy and support towards others.

### *Personal achievement skills*

Many of these skills also link with resilience and include: identifying one's own strengths and limitations; metacognitive skills (ie thinking about how you learn); setting and working towards personal goals; planning (e.g. setting time-lines and prioritising); and persistence.

Embedding the teaching of these skills within the curriculum with age appropriate resources provides naturalistic opportunities for pupils to develop social-emotional competency. BOUNCE BACK! is a wellbeing and resilience curriculum program that applies positive psychology principles (McGrath & Noble 2003), makes extensive use of Circle Time (Mosley, 1993; Roffey, 2006) and co-operative learning (Johnson et al., 2001) and can be integrated with the literacy curriculum. The program is widely used in Australia and has three levels of classroom materials organised as the following curriculum units: Pro-social Values, Coping skills, Relationships skills, Courage, Emotions, Bullying, Optimistic thinking, Using Humour and Being Successful. The program provides developmentally appropriate curriculum resources and activities from school entry

through to the end of junior secondary and is based on an acronym, BOUNCE BACK, that incorporates 10 prompting statements that promote the use of resilient thinking and behaviour for both pupils and staff (McGrath & Anders, 2000).

### **Foundation Two: Positive emotions**

In the past empirical psychologists have focused more on how to manage negative emotions and attitudes (e.g. depression, anxiety and anger) rather than how to amplify positive emotions. However recent research highlights the role of positive emotions in broadening people's capacity to learn and in building an organisation's capacity to thrive (Fredrickson & Joiner 2002). Positive emotions can increase 'behavioural flexibility' and build cognitive and emotional resources. Positive emotions enhance people's capacity for optimistic thinking, problem solving and decision making and lead to more flexible, innovative and creative solutions (Isen 2001, 2003). Research has demonstrated that positive emotions also have the ability 'to undo' the effects of stress and encourage both emotional and physical resilience (Fredrickson & Tugade, 2004).

The following section provides a brief overview of a range of typical pupil positive emotions and some of the school-based practices that can assist in generating them.

#### *Feelings of belonging*

Baumeister and Leary (1995) have argued that the need to belong is a basic human and pervasive drive. In her review of research Osterman (2000) identified trends that suggested that when pupils experience a sense of belonging and acceptance they are more likely to:

- Participate more at school, be more interested and engaged with classroom and school activities, show more commitment to their school and their school-work and have a positive orientation towards school and teachers.

- Act supportively towards others and demonstrate more pro-social behaviour.
- Have higher expectations for their own success.
- Demonstrate greater acceptance of authority.
- Accept more responsibility for regulating their own behaviour in the classroom.
- Achieve more highly through the indirect effects of higher levels of participation, interest and engagement.

On the other hand, when pupils experience feelings associated with a lack of belonging, rejection or isolation, such as grief, jealousy, anger and loneliness, they are less likely to conform to school rules and norms (Wentzel & Asher, 1995) and more likely to have negative perceptions of school and school-work, avoid school and leave school at an early age (Ladd, 1990).

Many classroom and school-based approaches have been suggested to increase a pupil's sense of belonging. These include:

- Maximising opportunities for pupils to work together in small groups so that they can share ideas and get to know each other (Jones & Gerig, 1994).
- Using co-operative learning approaches to instruction. Osterman (2000) has argued that cooperative learning is especially effective as it increases the frequency of positive pupil interactions each day.
- Looking for opportunities to let pupils know that they are cared for. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have argued that a pupil's perception that they are cared about and supported is especially significant in creating a sense of belonging. This feeling can be developed in a range of ways such as: celebrating birthdays, sending home 'get well' cards when pupils are absent and establishing peer support structures such as cross age buddies (Stanley & McGrath, 2006), peer tutoring, peer mediators, and circle of friends (Frederickson & Turner, 2003; Newton & Wilson, n.d).

*Feelings of safety*

Pupils are most likely to report feeling safe in schools that have low levels of putdowns and bullying. Low levels of bullying are more likely in schools in which there is effective leadership which articulates a vision for school-wide wellbeing underpinned by pro-social values (such as respect and acceptance of differences) and an effective and consistent whole school positive behaviour management program (McGrath & Noble, 2007a).

*Feelings of satisfaction, affirmation and pride*

Pupils experience feelings of pride and satisfaction when they have opportunities to be successful and when their school focuses on the celebration of those successes. To provide such opportunities schools need to value different kinds of achievements and not just success in the traditional academic or sports domains (Kornhaber et al., 2003; Noble, 2004). Dweck (2006) has also highlighted the importance of framing success in terms of pupil effort and persistence as well in terms of goal attainment.

*Feelings of excitement and enjoyment*

Research studies confirm that pupils find playing both physical and educational games engaging, motivating and interesting (Dempsey et al., 1994; Jacobs & Dempsey, 1993). Games can also help pupils to remember and apply content (Dempsey et al., 1994; Jacobs & Dempsey, 1993; Mantyla, 1999) and improve reasoning skills and higher order thinking (Rieber, 1996). When pupils have fun together or play games together (especially co-operative physical and educational games) they not only experience positive emotions such as excitement and enjoyment but also opportunities to:

- Interact with classmates within a positive context and develop relationships.
- Practise emotional skills (such as self regulation of anger and aggression) and social skills (such as those involved in conflict management or being a good winner/loser) within a naturally occur-

ring social context (McGrath & Francey, 1991; McGrath, 2005; Sugar, 2002; Nemerow, 1996).

Research also suggests that, during games, pupils are more likely to demonstrate more pro-social behaviour and less hyperactive and/or aggressive behaviour (e.g. Carlson, 1999; Garaigardobil et al., 1996; Landazabel, 1999; Street et al., 2004).

*Feelings of optimism about school success*

Teachers can teach their pupils optimistic thinking but also commit to modelling it for pupils by focusing pupils' attention on the things that are going well and the effort they have put into their work, not just their ability. They can also challenge children's negative or pessimistic thinking and helplessness and help them to track even the small good things in a difficult situation or what they've learned from their mistakes (Gilham et al., 1995; McGrath & Noble 2003).

**Foundation Three:  
Positive relationships**

One of the most significant and recurring themes in the school wellbeing literature (e.g. Zins et al., 2004) and the school leadership literature (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2004) is the power of positive relationships to facilitate schoolwide wellbeing. The systematic promotion and facilitation of positive relationships at school have been identified by many researchers as a core component for improving wellbeing, enhancing school culture, preventing school violence and bullying, successfully engaging pupils' intrinsic motivation to learn and improving pupil academic outcomes (Benard, 2004; Battisch, 2001; Battisch et al., 1995; Resnick et al., 1997).

A positive school culture is characterised by both positive peer relationships and positive teacher-pupil relationships (McGrath, 2007). When a school works to facilitate positive school-based relationships bullying is less likely to thrive, pupil wellbeing is enhanced and there is a greater likelihood of higher pupil engagement with school

(Blum & Libbey, 2004; Galloway & Roland 2004; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; McGrath & Noble, 2003). Schaps (2003) has argued that a positive school culture underpinned by the intentional facilitation of positive relationships predisposes pupils to:

- Adopt the goals and values of the school
- Show more compassion and concern for others and more altruistic behaviour.
- Be more prepared to resolve conflicts fairly.
- Engage in more altruistic and pro-social behaviour.
- Adopt an inclusive rather than exclusive attitude toward others.

#### *Positive peer relationships*

Feeling accepted by peers and having positive peer interactions can increase the self-esteem of vulnerable pupils and this makes it more likely that they will behave in ways that further encourage positive interactions with others. Friendships provide pupils with social support, opportunities to practise and refine their social skills and opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas and, in doing so, develop empathy and sociomoral reasoning (Thoma & Ladewig, 1991; Schonert-Reichel, 1999). The more pupils get to know each other the more likely they are to identify and focus on similarities between themselves and other pupils and become more accepting of differences. Criss et al. (2002) have demonstrated that peer acceptance and peer friendships can moderate aggressive and acting-out behaviour in young children with family backgrounds that are characterised by family adversity (such as economic/ecological disadvantage), violent marital conflict and harsh family discipline.

Many research-based strategies have been identified as directly or indirectly contributing to the development of positive peer relationships. One of the most effective of these is the extensive classroom use of *co-operative learning*. Over a thousand research studies have documented the many benefits of co-operative learning (Benard, 2004; Marzano et al., 2001) which include improvements in

academic outcomes, positive peer relationships, social skills, empathy, motivation, acceptance of diversity (ethnic, racial, physical), conflict resolution, self-esteem, self-control, positive attitudes to school, and critical thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson et al., 2001; Slavin, 1995). Cooperative learning and co-operative group work have also been associated with lower levels of bullying, an increased ability to tolerate different perspectives on the same issue and increased levels of assertive problem-solving skills (Johnson et al., 2001; Ortega & Lera, 2000).

The development of positive relationships between same-age and cross-age pupils can take place through a range of approaches at both the class or year level and the whole-school level, for example:

- The use of circle time and/or classroom meetings encourages the development of social skills and a sense of connectedness.
- Pupils working in a group to each make an individual digital story about aspects of their life or interests have an opportunity to get to know each other at a deeper level as they share their draft stories about themselves and receive feedback.
- The establishment of classroom committees such as the classroom newsletter committee or the classroom 'birthdays' committee can provide pupils with an opportunity to work collaboratively with a shared goal and responsibility.
- Random grouping for small group activities or short-term projects (across each term and year) enables pupils to get to know each other over time and share positive experiences.
- Small group higher-order thinking tools such as the Ten Thinking Tracks (McGrath & Noble, 2003; 2005) enable pupils to get to know each other, work successfully together and develop higher-order thinking skills at the same time.
- The adoption of Restorative Practices can help pupils to develop empathy, conflict management skills and social responsi-

bility as well as repair damaged relationships (Armstrong & Thorsburne, 2006).

- A cross-age 'House' system that enables pupils from many different year levels to have regular, meaningful and co-operative interactions, and develop positive relationships between pupils of different ages, as can cross-age extracurricular activities such as orchestra, choir, sporting activities, lunchtime clubs and drama performances.
- The establishment of pro-social peer support structures such as peer counselling, peer mediation, peer mentoring/buddy systems and peer tutoring can also enhance relationships (Stanley & McGrath, 2006).
- The use of 'Circle of Friends' (a network of pupils who offer support and inclusion for an isolated pupil) can enhance relationships and a sense of acceptance and support for some vulnerable students (Frederickson & Turner, 2003; Newton & Wilson, n.d).

#### *Positive teacher-pupil relationships*

Positive teacher-pupil relationships can contribute significantly, not only to pupil well-being and pro-social behaviour but also to their learning outcomes (Benard, 2004; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Pianta et al., 2002; Battisch, 2001). Many pupils feel they 'owe' something to a teacher who shows genuine interest in and care for them (Davidson, 1999; Stipek, 2006) and may be less likely to disappoint them by failing to complete assignments or engaging in anti-social behaviour. Children who recognise the satisfaction that derives from teacher approval may be more likely to work towards academic achievement (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

In a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies, Marzano et al. (2003) found that the quality of the pupil-teacher relationship was also the most important factor in effective classroom management. Over a year, teachers who had high-quality relationships with their pupils had 31 per cent fewer discipline

problems, and related problems than other teachers. Many different research studies are remarkably consistent in their conclusions about pupils' ideas about the qualities of a 'good teacher', focusing mostly on the interpersonal quality of their relationship with their teachers (e.g. Arnold, 2005; Rowe, 2004, Trent, 2001; Werner, 2000; Ruddick et al., 1997). These qualities include being respectful and friendly, showing affection and support, listening, being empathic, noticing when a pupil is absent and being interested in them.

Marzano (2003) argues that relationships with pupils cannot just be left to chance and that it is a teacher's professional responsibility to ensure that they establish a positive relationship with each pupil. Educational psychologists can work collaboratively with teachers to select from a range of research-based strategies/approaches in order to strengthen teacher-pupil relationships. These include:

- Teachers working harder to get to know pupils, treating them as individuals and expressing interest in their personal lives outside school (Trent, 2001).
- Teachers using more effective classroom management. Marzano et al. (2003) identified from a meta-analysis of research studies that the most effective form of classroom management includes remaining emotionally objective and maintaining an appropriate balance between teacher 'assertion' and teacher 'co-operation'.
- Pupils having more contact over time with fewer teachers. Multi-age grouping can assist teachers to develop sustained relationships with pupils, as can 'looping' in which one teacher or a set of teachers moves up with a group of pupils for two or more years. In secondary schools, block scheduling (classes of at least 90 minutes long) can offer teachers more opportunity to interact with pupils for sustained periods of time. Since the classes are less rushed, informal interactions as well as academic inter-

actions are more likely to occur (Stipek, 2006).

- Teachers being available in their classroom for some time before class starts (eg before school) can facilitate one-on-one pupil access to teachers and can help build stronger pupil-teacher relationships (Stipek, 2006).

### **Foundation Four: Engagement through strengths**

Positive psychology places a heavy emphasis on the importance of identifying and using individual strengths and, similarly, many writers and researchers have argued for a strength-based orientation in educational psychology (e.g. Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee, et al., 2001). A 'strength' can be defined as a natural capacity for behaving, thinking and feeling in a way that promotes successful goal achievement (Linley & Harrington, 2006). When individuals engage their strengths they have a greater sense of wellbeing (Seligman, 2002). Strengths are usually *cognitive* or *personal* (i.e. about 'character').

The PEPs Framework incorporates a strengths-oriented approach to engagement with schoolwork. Using one's strengths in schoolwork or in one's job is far more enjoyable and productive than working on one's weaknesses, especially for those pupils whose strengths are not in the traditional academic domain. This strengths-based approach does not ignore weaknesses but rather achieves optimisation when strengths are built upon and weaknesses are understood and managed (Clifton & Harter, 2006). When people work with their strengths they tend to learn more readily, perform at a higher level, are more motivated and confident, and have a stronger sense of satisfaction, mastery and competence (Clifton & Harter 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Linley & Harrington, 2006).

The first step for EPs is to work with teachers and pupils to select strategies for the identification of pupil strengths so that pupils develop a deep understanding of their relative strengths and weaknesses. The

second step is to collaboratively design and implement educational programs and environments in which pupils can use and further develop their strengths in a productive and satisfying way, and learn that things that they find difficult may require a lot more effort.

Howard Gardner's (1999) model of multiple intelligences (MI) is consistent with positive psychology's strengths orientation and provides directions for identification and development of cognitive strengths. MI theory has been widely adopted in schools since its publication over 20 years ago and identifies eight intelligences. A differentiated curriculum based on Gardner's multiple intelligences model has the potential to build positive educational communities in which pupils value and celebrate pupil differences and for pupils who struggle with learning to achieve more academic success (Kornhaber, et al., 2003; McGrath & Noble, 2005a, 2005b; Noble 2004). Kornhaber et al. (2003) evaluated outcomes in 41 schools that had been using MI theory for curriculum differentiation for at least three years and found significant benefits of the MI approach in terms of improvements in pupil engagement and learning, pupil behaviour, and parent participation. There were particular benefits for pupils with learning difficulties who demonstrated greater effort in learning, more motivation and improved learning outcomes.

The MI/Bloom Matrix (McGrath & Noble, 2005a, 2005b) is a curriculum planning tool which assists teachers to develop tasks based on each of the eight intelligences at each of the Revised Bloom's levels of thinking. The planner helps teachers to provide opportunities for pupils to make meaningful choices about their learning tasks and products (Noble 2004). The MI/Bloom Matrix is accompanied by a number of MI assessment and tools that can be used to assist pupils to identify their own relative cognitive strengths.

EPs can also help pupils to identify their character strengths. A useful tool for this

purpose is Peterson and Seligman's online VIA (Values in Action) Signature Strengths Questionnaire ([www.viastrengths.org](http://www.viastrengths.org)). The children's version of the questionnaire is for children from 10 years to 17 years of age. For younger children, Park and Peterson (2006) successfully asked parents of children who were too young to complete the questionnaire to identify their children's strengths.

Engagement or psychological flow is a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi (2003). He has identified that young people are more likely to be fully engaged and experience 'flow' when involved in an activity that utilises their strength(s) and has a degree of challenge that requires a reasonably high level of skill and attention in a specific domain (e.g. building a model, or playing a musical instrument) (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). Being in a state of 'flow' also increases young people's satisfaction (from the completion of a task or the creation of a product or performance) and enables them to have some respite from worries and problems they may be experiencing. Tasks that engage pupil strengths in the service of others also contribute to their sense of meaning and purpose.

### **Foundation Five: Meaning and purpose**

According to Seligman (2002, p.260) 'a meaningful life is one that joins with something larger than we are – and the larger that something is, the more meaning our lives have'. He states that life is given meaning when we use our signature strengths every day in the main realms of living 'to forward knowledge, power or goodness'.

EPs can work with pupils and teachers to select projects and activities that create a sense of meaning or purpose. Pupils have a sense of '*meaning*' in their lives when they are engaging their strengths and using them to do something that has impact on others beyond themselves (e.g. working with a group to make a DVD about the history of their town that will be placed in the local library for other members of the community

to access). They have a sense of '*purpose*' when they pursue worthwhile goals (e.g. working on an entry for a short story competition).

Most current curriculum initiatives focus on the importance of an authentic curriculum for pupils that has relevance, meaning or 'connectedness' to their lives. Educational psychologists can work collaboratively with teachers to design and implement a range of educational and community experiences that provide opportunities for pupils to select, make decisions, exert some control over the progress of their project and have a voice. A strong theme that emerged in a Nationwide Australian Government Project involving 171 schools planning and implementing 'safe schools' projects, was that project effectiveness and satisfaction was high in schools where pupils had significant ownership of the projects (McGrath, 2007).

Pupil-directed group tasks (e.g. McGrath & Noble, 2007b) and inquiry-based group learning projects also have great potential for developing a sense of meaning and purpose as do community-based projects (Yates & Youniss, 1996). Wierenga et al. (2003) conclude that community-based projects are most successful when pupils believe in what they are doing, have opportunities to make real decisions, are heard, have the skills to see the task through and do it well and work with others to be part of something bigger than just themselves. Morsillo & Fisher (2007) worked with year 10 pupils who were disengaged from school and alienated from their neighbourhoods. This project incorporated the active ingredients of 'service learning' where pupils are placed in the active role of problem-solvers confronting a relevant but loosely structured community-based problem or goal. The intent is that the outcomes benefit both the recipients and the pupils who provide the service (see [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)). In Morsilla and Fisher's study pupils worked in small groups to create meaningful community projects of their choice designed to show how 'we will make a difference in our

community'. The projects included a public underage dance party, and the development of children's activities at a refugee cultural festival.

Other initiatives that can foster a sense of meaning and purpose include: encouraging pupils to participate in peer support programs (e.g. peer mediation, buddy systems, mentoring systems); finding ways for pupils to participate in class-wide or school-wide leadership and decision-making structures (e.g. circle time, classroom councils, classroom committees or school-wide Pupil Representative Committees); arranging for pupil products and performances to reach a wider audience (e.g. posters or artwork displayed in a shopping centre, performances recorded on DVDs that can be bought or borrowed by parents, pupil-made books placed in the library, etc.); and developing pupil's sense of pride in and commitment to their school (eg by establishing pupil 'School Pride Committees' at each year level).

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## Conclusion

PEPs is a positive psychology framework that is consistent with a number of traditional and more recent directions in education and psychology. It is intended to supplement the more traditional work of EPs, not replace it. It offers EPs new directions for working with individual pupils and groups and working collaboratively with schools and teachers to design and implement school-wide and class-wide prevention. The challenge is to shift the direction and mindset of both educational systems and school personnel from a deficit model of pupil learning and behavioural difficulties to a preventative wellbeing model which focuses on developing social and emotional competency, designing learning and social experiences that generate positive emotions for pupils, facilitating positive peer relationships and teacher-pupil relationships, identifying, incorporating and nurturing pupil cognitive and character strengths and developing opportunities for pupils to discover a sense of meaning and purpose at school and in life.

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