

“Those Who Can, Teach”: Reflections on Positive and Strength-Based Schooling

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The issues relating to the adequacy of teacher preparation were discussed in the context of the changes in pre-university and university education curriculum structure and the positive psychology movement. Positive schooling as well as identifying and using character strengths were described as promising approaches to improve teacher preparation. The use of positive intervention exercises that promote for teachers a satisfying life that encompasses the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life interpretable as the antithesis of teacher burnout was explored.

*Key words: positive psychology, teacher preparation, positive schooling,
character strengths*

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In Hong Kong, recent education reform changes on the years of pre-university and university education moving from a 5-2-3 (secondary/matriculation/university) to a 3-3-4 (junior-secondary/senior-secondary/university) curriculum structure have generated heated debate and discussion on the future of Hong Kong teacher education programs. Assuming that the normative study period of undergraduate teacher education programs, like other undergraduate programs, moves from n to $(n + 1)$ years, one grave concern of many teacher educators is the decreasing appeal of teacher education programs to aspiring teachers, as the lengthened duration of five-year preparation for teachers might deter good and aspiring teachers from entering the teaching profession.

Admittedly, the concern is not without good reasons, reasons that are based on the observation that the teaching profession is rarely the career of choice for many students seeking admission to university education. Indeed, it is said that very capable students will choose to enter into a career of more prestigious applied professions or academic disciplines, capable students who enter into the university teacher preparation program might later seek transfer to programs of other disciplines, and less capable students who maintain their choice to become teachers are those who “can’t get jobs in the real world.”

Although this might not be the total picture of students entering the teaching profession, and there is dubious validity and no merit to such statements as “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach; those who can’t teach, teach teachers”, the very existence of such sentiments suggests that teachers in pre-university and university education could sometimes become targets of derisive comments and often are not recognized for their efforts. Nonetheless, it is likely that some of us might have endured some bad or poor teachers in our education. But it is also more likely that many of us have encountered some truly wonderful teachers who have made positive differences in our lives.

Inadequacies in Teacher Education?

Then, some natural questions to ask include whether poor teachers come from poor preparation in teacher education programs, whether there exist teacher-preparation-program inadequacies that result in the turning out of poor teachers, and how current teacher education programs could be improved. Certainly, there are many more such questions that teacher educators need to address. While there are also multiple answers to these questions, one wonders whether there should be more to the conventional ready-made responses that emphasize strengthened content and pedagogic knowledge and skills as well as a lengthened and more intensive supervised internship or teaching practice to bridge theory and practice in induction programs.

Even with a focus on learning, it has to be noted that our current conceptions of learning have moved far away from repetition and reinforcement as at the times when we were young students. We now have increasingly come to see students in their active construction of knowledge, each getting it a little differently as they assimilate and store it in the context of their prior knowledge and experience. We also now emphasize learning in relation to reflection and deep processing. More importantly, as teachers, we understand that we not only should care about students' learning but also should care about their feelings and about them as individuals.

Along this line, as we reflect on the differences between good and bad teachers in our lives for insights into the adequacy of teacher preparation, it is obvious that poor teachers not only impair our learning, they may also inflict psychological pain and damage on us as students. They may make fun of us in front of other students, they may not trust or believe us, they may make us feel dumb, they may make fun of our speech and clothes, and they may give us the impression that they couldn't care less about us and our success in life. In sharp contrast, good teachers not only inspire us to learn, they also lead us to live a more satisfying life. They make us hold certain positive views of ourselves, they make us feel smart or clever, they

make a point to give us credit when we do well, and they truly care that we succeed in life.

Thus, while strong content and pedagogic knowledge and effective teaching skills might be very important, what distinguishes good teachers from bad teachers in students' perceptions could be the positive and appreciative stance of good teachers on students' attitudes toward learning, their behaviors and performances, in stark contrast to the somewhat negative and unappreciative stance of poor teachers. In a broader context, good teachers are those who apply, knowingly or unknowingly, the tenets of positive psychology to the education or teaching of students.

Positive Psychology and Positive Schooling

The recent positive psychology movement that focuses on the study and applications of human strengths and positive emotions to promote positive human functioning is spearheaded by Martin Seligman as efforts to meet the need to redress the imbalance in psychology's traditional focus on human weaknesses, deficits, and pathologies (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive schooling or the applications of the concepts or tenets of positive psychology to education to foster a positive environment is however not a new development. Many notable educators have paved the way for this approach. They include well-known philosophers such as Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and John Dewey who focused on the strengths and assets of students (see Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Alfred Binet, noted for his concept of mental age, stressed the enhancement of student skills as much as the remediation of student weaknesses (Binet & Simon, 1905). Lewis Terman throughout his career explored the thinking of brilliant learners (Terman & Oden, 1947). These and many other pioneering efforts of educators however can be seen in the light of the wider applications of positive psychology to major realms of living.

In their recent text on positive psychology, C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (2007) introduced major components of positive schooling for

effective schools. The foundation components involve caring, trust, and respect for diversity. Teachers are seen as role models whose care and positive emotions provide the secure base that allows students to explore and achieve their academic and life goals. These foundation components of care, trust, and respect for diversity also engender a supportive atmosphere and environment in which students with different views and backgrounds can flourish.

The second set of components involves goals, plans, and motivation. Goals, especially those that are concrete, understandable, reasonably challenging, and mutually agreed upon by teacher and students, have been shown to provide a means of targeting students' learning efforts and engender productive learning (Dweck, 1999; Elliot, 2005). It is also helpful that large learning goals could be broken down into subgoals to be tackled in stages. However, the success of class learning goals depends on making the materials relevant to students' real-life experiences. With appropriate learning goals and relevant materials, it is believed that students will become more motivated and more involved, and learn the materials that are tailored to their experience (see Dweck, 1999). Thus, the achievement of learning goals depends on careful planning on the part of the teacher who also models enthusiasm and provides energizing feedback.

Another set of components in positive schooling involves hope and societal contributions. By hope, it is meant that students will pick up the spirit of inquiry and passion in learning, expanding to increase their sense of empowerment to become lifelong problem solvers. While hopeful students will continue to learn long after leaving school or the classroom, they will share what they have learned with other learners. Thus, by becoming teachers of others, the benefits of the learning process are passed on to a wider range of people.

Positive Psychology and the Strength-Based Approach

From a slightly different perspective distinct from the perspective of learning,

Donald Clifton pioneered efforts to the study and applications of a strength-based approach in applied work settings (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Essentially, Clifton argued that people generally have two major misconceptions (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). One misconception is that anyone can learn to be competent in almost anything, and a second misconception is that a person's areas of greatest potential for growth are in their areas of greatest weakness. Contrary to these false beliefs, Clifton has advocated a strength-based approach to education. Rather than focusing on student weaknesses for remediation, teachers are advised to focus on identifying and expanding on the specific talents of students for development (see Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

In Clifton's exemplary StrengthsQuest Program, students first identify and recognize their talents through completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an online computerized assessment of areas of greatest talents (see Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Students then learn which five of the 34 possible themes are most applicable to them and work on applying and expanding these five signature strengths in the pursuit of desired goals, thereby integrating these areas of strengths into their self-conceptualizations for positive behavioral changes. To date, the available outcome studies suggest that the program has positive effects on students' whole-person development, as students reported significant increases in altruism, confidence, efficacy, and hope (see Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Parallel to Clifton's work, with similar aims but in the domains of psychopathology and psychotherapy, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have also attempted to construct a comprehensive classification scheme on human strengths (as opposed to diagnostic categories of disorders) across history and culture based on extensive literature search. They grouped similar strengths together into 24 distinct strengths that pass their twelve criteria for character strengths (see Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). The unique feature is that the scheme has been claimed to represent human strengths across cultures, and the 24 character strengths are subsumed under six universal virtues. They are:

(1) wisdom and knowledge (cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge) that encompass creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective; (2) courage (emotional strengths that involve the exercise of the will to accomplish goals) that encompasses authenticity, bravery, persistence, and zest; (3) humanity (interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others) that encompasses kindness, love, and social intelligence; (4) justice (civic strengths that underlie healthy community life) that encompasses fairness, leadership, and teamwork; (5) temperance (strengths that protect against excess) that encompasses forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation; and (6) transcendence (strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning) that encompasses appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Subsequent studies on using signature strengths in new ways as interventions suggested that such interventions could help participants increase happiness and reduce depressive symptoms, at least for the six months under study (see Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). It is anticipated that the classification scheme and the use of identified signature character strengths could have important applications in the development of strengths and talents for students in the educational setting.

Beyond Learning and Character Strengths: Positive Psychology and the Full Life

While it is believed that positive psychology and its applications can make a real difference to our teaching and practice as teachers, and students' learning, strength building, and talent development, it should also be obvious that such impact also applies to teacher educators and prospective teachers as students in teacher preparation programs. Indeed, it is more likely that teachers and prospective teachers could become good or even better teachers if they, for example, also identify and recognize their strengths and build on their natural talents before they start helping students to identify and develop

their talents. Similarly, it can be argued that teachers who attend well to their own development and lead satisfying lives should be more able to help students in their whole-person development as well as lead satisfying lives.

Although it has long been recognized that teachers' personal development is as important as their professional training and development, the focus of many research studies has been almost entirely on the negative or pathological aspects such as teacher stress and burnout (e.g., Chan, 2003; Chan & Hui, 1995; Maslach, 1986, 2003). From a slightly different perspective, one is essentially asking the question on what factors prevent teachers from becoming good teachers, or from staying as good teachers. A further question is whether, given these factors, good teachers could turn bad.

Teacher burnout, the phenomenon that teachers lose enthusiasm after repeatedly coming across blockages and lack of support for their efforts, has often been described as the outcome of teacher stress (see Maslach, 2003). Thus, interventions to combat teacher burnout can be regarded as efforts to prevent teachers from turning from good to bad. In this regard, the three tripartite components of burnout as described by Maslach and Jackson (1986) are revealing. Specifically, burnout is decomposed into emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of being emotionally drained by intense contact with other people (students and other teachers and colleagues); depersonalization refers to negative attitudes or callous responses toward people; and reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one's sense of competence and of successful achievement in working with people. More recently, Maslach and her colleagues have extended studies of burnout in human services to job burnout in different work settings that may not involve interacting extensively with people (Maslach, 2003; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In parallel, they have also reinterpreted the three components of burnout as exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, calling for a more positive look on the antithesis of burnout (see Chan, 2007).

Interestingly, from the positive psychology perspective, the characteristics or components of burnout seem to be describing a life that is far from satisfying, in contrast to the full or satisfying life described by Seligman (2003) in relation to the notion of happiness (see Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Specifically, Seligman describes three aspects of the good life to encompass three components in the notion of happiness: The pleasant life (positive emotions), the engaged life (engagement), and the meaningful life (meaning). The pleasant life is a life that successfully pursues the positive emotions about the present, the past, and the future. The engaged life is a life that pursues engagement, involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations, and leisure. The meaningful life involves the pursuit of meaning, and consists in using one's signature strengths and talents to belong to and serve something that one believes is bigger than the self.

Positive Intervention Exercises for the Full Life

Thus, burnout, broadly conceptualized, can be interpreted as the negative end of the good or full life. To combat or prevent burnout when teachers are emotionally exhausted and dominated by negative emotions, felt detached or alienated rather than engaged in the teaching activities, and felt a lack of personal accomplishment, the focus has nonetheless been on making up or repairing the deficits or pathologies. Perhaps, under the positive psychology movement, it is timely to consider shifting the focus onto the positives, and intervention efforts should be on helping teachers to lead the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life.

In this connection, Seligman and his colleagues have designed a number of positive intervention exercises based on the approach of positive psychology to help people become happier and lead a more satisfying life (see Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Initial research results have been positive especially with the exercises of "using signature strengths" where participants were asked to use their

top strengths in a new and different way, “three good things” where participants were asked to write down three good things that went well each day with causal explanation, and “gratitude visits” where participants were asked to write and deliver letters of gratitude to someone who had been kind to them but had never been properly thanked.

Building on the positive results of these exercises, I have enlisted a small group of 32 schoolteachers to participate voluntarily in an eight-week self-improvement mini-project. Teachers first completed a questionnaire that allowed them to identify their strengths in terms of the Peterson-Seligman scheme of 24 character strengths. They were then given feedback on their signature strengths and were requested to use one or more of these signature strengths more frequently on more occasions or in new ways in the succeeding eight weeks. At the end of the eight weeks, these teachers gave a narrative description of what they had done to use their signature strengths and how they felt in general. Their reports on positive and negative emotions and their satisfaction on life were also assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), respectively, before and after the eight-week period. Overall, it is reassuring to examine the initial results, as all teachers except one reported that they felt happier and had greater satisfaction with life in the post-assessment.

In summary, the present mini-project demonstrated that teachers can be helped to lead a more satisfying life through positive psychology intervention exercises as an antithesis of teacher burnout. The initial encouraging findings support the need to attend to the personal development of teachers, which together with positive schooling and strength-based approaches, provide new insights into the avenues through which teacher education programs can be improved.

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