Does the positive psychology movement have legs for children in schools?

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COMMENTARY

Does the positive psychology movement have legs for children in schools?

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Introduction

In a provocative article, Lazarus (2003) posed the question, ‘Does the positive psychology movement have legs?’ Based on a critique of psychology in general and positive psychology in particular, Lazarus exhibited considerable skepticism about the contribution of positive psychology at that time, given concerns related to: (1) an overemphasis on cross-sectional research designs, (2) lack of attention to context in determining the valence of emotions, (3) one-time assessments of participants’ emotions, ignoring the flow of emotional experience, and (4) an overemphasis on cohort differences relative to individual differences in comparative studies. Lazarus concluded that ‘as of now, the movement is, in my view, in danger of being just another one of the many fads that come and go in our field, and which usually disappear in time’ (p. 93).

Status of positive psychology research with children

Similarly, it is easy to imagine skeptics raising the question ‘Does the positive psychology movement have legs to stand on for children and adolescents, particularly in the setting where they spend the majority of their time—their schools?’ Based on our reading of the literature in the emerging area of positive psychology research applied to children and adolescents in schools in general as well as the articles in this special issue of The Journal of Positive Psychology in particular, we are inclined to conclude that positive psychology does indeed have legs in this context. That is to say, the development of a science of positive psychology related to children and youth is alive and well (see Froh, Huebner, Youssef, & Conte (in press) for a content analysis of publications in school psychology journals). Although research with children was somewhat slower to develop relative to research with adults, much progress has been made in the past decade or so. For example, the recent Handbook of Positive Psychology in the Schools (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009) included a total of 35 chapters covering a wide array of individual, group, and systems applications of positive psychology in the schools, yet has been criticized for omitting substantial material of interest (Yeager & Fisher, 2009). Our belief is that there is much to be done, but also much to be learned by school professionals from the burgeoning research in this area.

With respect to Lazarus’ critique, a review of the articles in this special issue reveals a number of key points. First, as with adults (King, 2003), positive psychology research with children and adolescents is broader in scope than Lazarus’ description. Even a cursory review of the articles herein illustrates considerable breadth and depth beyond the study of positive thinking and emotions as suggested in Lazarus’ critique. Second, the articles contained herein or elsewhere reflect a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches, including longitudinal designs (Gillham et al., this issue; Suldo, Thalji, & Ferron, this issue) and experimental studies (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008), integrative theories incorporating contextual factors (Schmid et al. this issue), multi-occasion studies of emotional flow (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), and integrative, balanced perspectives on positive and negative well-being (Suldo et al., this issue). Furthermore, the research incorporates a wide variety of topics and ranges across individuals, groups, and institutions. The age range of studies includes preschoolers (Eggum et al., this issue) to adolescents (Bundick, this issue; Chaplin, Lowrey, & Neto, this issue). In short, the extant research appears to have

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begun to address many of Lazarus' concerns and extends far beyond the initial conceptualization of what constitutes positive psychology. Thus, although we believe that much additional research needs to be done, we also believe that the research to date provides a reasonable scientific foundation for enhanced professional knowledge and practice with children and youth.

**Status of practice of positive psychology in schools**

Despite our enthusiastic conclusion that positive psychology has legs for schoolchildren, we also feel pressed to ask the question, ‘But are the legs of positive psychology really moving forward with children and adolescents in the schools?’ ‘Is positive psychology really having an impact on children in schools?’ Our response to these questions is less enthusiastic but similar to other fields of psychology, such as community psychology (Schueller, 2009).

However, as with any new area of knowledge, there is a process involved in the diffusion of research to practice. As described by Riley-Tillman, Chafouleas, Eckert, and Kelleher (2005), this process includes building usable knowledge, transferring usable knowledge (training, intervention research, dissemination), and supporting usable knowledge within the given ecology. Researchers create new knowledge through research and development and then develop this knowledge into something usable (i.e., now that we have substantial evidence that attention to positive emotions, character traits, and institutions is necessary, what should practitioners do?). Research to practice in psychology has faced many challenges given the contextual differences between the lab and the targeted context/population. As highlighted in a 2005 special issue in *Psychology in the Schools*, increased attention to the contextual factors involved in diffusion of an innovation is necessary in order to effectively translate ‘research to practice’ (Forman, Smallwood, & Nagle, 2005).

The development of an intervention is only complete when it has effectively been diffused into the targeted contexts, which is only possible through the understanding of organizational context variables. Given the complexity of schools, maintaining a systems perspective is critical to promoting student well-being and diffusing positive psychology within the schools.

Although, we have no strong empirical data to reply upon, our experiences suggest that at best, the legs of positive psychology in schools are moving slowly. This situation is occurring despite the fact that schools house virtually all children at some point, thus providing a unique opportunity to enhance the learning and well-being of all students through applications of positive psychology. We believe that the infusion of a positive psychology perspective in the schools would be enhanced significantly by the support of psychologists and other school professionals who serve children in the schools. Nevertheless, we remain skeptical that the key educational practices of these professionals have markedly changed to include such an emphasis. For example, the literature base in the school psychology journals does not reflect significant increases in attention to research and practice related to positive psychology. A recent content analysis of major school psychology journals demonstrated that although articles on positive psychology have appeared in this literature, notable increases have not occurred over the past 50 years (Froh et al., in press).

Furthermore, there was a decided lack of breadth in the topics covered in the school psychology literature, with little attention paid to such current ‘hot’ topics as the VIA strengths, life satisfaction, optimism, empathy, gratitude, purpose, civic engagement, and so forth, all of which are relevant to students’ academic success. Finally, given the relatively few articles in which positive psychology constructs were coded as being the main (versus secondary) focus of the research, the authors concluded that additional attention in the school psychology literature would benefit psychologists and other professionals in the schools who seek to promote optimal functioning of all students as well as to understand and address traditional student problems.

The practices of various professionals, including school psychologists, also do not appear to reflect major changes. As is discussed in major introductory textbooks, school psychologists provide a wide array of professional services to individuals, groups, and systems. For example, the provision of individual psychological assessment services continues to be the most frequent activity of psychologists in the schools (Fagan & Wise, 2007). How do psychologists deliver this service? They typically deliver this service through a process initiated by a referral from a concerned party (e.g., teacher, parent) that is generally aimed at identifying the key ‘problem’ of the student, exploring its presumed antecedents and consequences, and subsequently developing an individualized intervention plan to ‘fix’ the problem. Or to put it in medical terms, the psychologist has done her job when she has written a psychological report that provides a ‘diagnosis’ and a ‘treatment.’ Assessment and interventions for children are primarily reactive within this ‘referral-test-place’ model in which services are provided only after a diagnosable disorder is determined to be limiting a student’s access to learning. A plethora of prevention science research shows that this reactive approach may miss critical opportunities to intervene earlier, more effectively, and less intrusively with students in school settings (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Although we do not advocate that psychologists should cease conducting assessments and developing
interventions to address psychological and educational problems, we do advocate that students and school personnel (e.g., teachers) can benefit from more holistic assessments that incorporate positive psychological information, such as personal strengths and environmental resources (Wright & Lopez, 2002). The benefits of such assessments are illustrated by recent variable-centered and person-centered research. Using variable-centered methods, Lewis, Huebner, Reschly, and Valois (2009) showed that assessments of positive emotions added significant amounts of variance to negative emotions in explaining variance in middle school students’ engagement and coping behaviors in school. Furthermore, using person-centered methods, Suldo and Shaffer (2008, this volume) demonstrated that incorporating positive subjective well-being measures (high life satisfaction, frequent positive emotions, infrequent negative emotions) along with traditional psychopathology-based measures (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behavior reports), supported a more differentiated, dual-factor model of adolescents’ mental health. In contrast to the traditional one-factor model of mental health (psychopathology versus no psychopathology classification outcomes), they found that four groups of adolescents could be identified, including a group of students who showed low levels of psychopathology, but also low levels of subjective well-being. This group of students, who would not be identified using traditional screening measures of psychopathology, showed significantly lower functioning on a variety of psychosocial, physical, and academic measures than a group of students who showed high levels of subjective well-being and low levels of psychopathology. Similar results have been reported by Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, and Valois (2010) with respect to adolescents’ levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement at school. Taken together, these studies clearly demonstrate the incremental utility of using positive assessment data along with traditional problem-oriented data.

The aforementioned research on the benefits of positive psychological information (e.g., the dual-factor model of mental health) supports the notion that the absence of psychological symptoms is not equivalent to the presence of optimal functioning. Although more longitudinal research is needed, the extant research suggests that the current deficit-based model used in schools is limited in its utility to identify individuals who are exhibiting prodromal indicators of psychopathological conditions and/or poor adjustment. Further, if the sole use of pathology-based measures were sensitive enough to identify all individuals at risk for negative outcomes, then the identification rate in most schools should be equal to the rate of school dropout, delinquency, and academic failure in schools, which is obviously not the case. Identification processes, including psychological assessments that address negative ‘problems’ and positive ‘assets’ of children’s emotions, behavior, and environments should provide a more comprehensive lens through which to understand, predict, and promote optimal outcomes for all children. From a consultation and intervention perspective, including measures, observations, and interview questions that focus on students’ assets may enhance professionals’ expectations for positive behavioral outcomes (Donovan & Nickerson, 2007), rapport, satisfaction with services, and treatment compliance from children and their caregivers (Cox, 2006).

Research to practice: Systems-based considerations
To get the legs of positive psychology moving forward in schools, we suggest that interested positive psychology scholars should consider systematic strategies to enhance the research-to-practice process. Specific action plans are likely to be needed to prevent positive psychology in the schools from becoming a passing fad, as suggested by Lazarus (2003).

In a review of the research-to-practice literature in schools, Forman et al. (2005) recommended that academics and practitioners form dynamic, ongoing, and collaborative relationships to thoughtfully promote the infusion of evidence-based practices into the practice of psychology and education. The collaborative relationships were described as based upon shared goals and methods, long-term commitments, and bi-directional communication. These criteria reflect a significant shift from traditional models of scientist–practitioner relationships in which the scientists simply produce new research findings and the practitioners are expected to implement them, often without adaptation based upon the particular implementation agent and context. Such a new model would require changes on the part of the behaviors of both the scientist and the practitioner, however, such a model may facilitate a more lasting implementation of positive psychology practices in contexts, such as schools, which have a long history of operating from a problem-solving or ‘repair’ mode (Sarason, 1997).

Action plans developed through the collaborative efforts of positive psychology scholars and school professionals should be informed by theoretical models describing the process of innovation diffusion and reasoned action to guide endeavors to increase the positive psychology perspective in psychology and education training and practice. Many tools are now available that emphasize and help facilitate a shift from one-directional research-to-practice models to more bi-directional models in which practitioners, such as school professionals, take more active roles in diffusing an innovation or participating in research (e.g., empowerment evaluation; Fetterman &
Wandersman, 2004). These tools and processes attend to unique individual and contextual factors that must be addressed when translating research to practice.

Rogers’ (2003) model of the innovation decision-making process underscores five key qualities that determine successful adoption of innovations. These qualities include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Scholar–practitioner teams that seek to develop effective action plans thus need to address each quality from a systemic perspective. Relative advantage and compatibility involve perceived consistency with a profession’s values, ideas, norms, and experiences, which are generally exemplified in various training materials. It is important to note that psychologists and other educators are not likely to be exposed to training curricula infused with a positive psychology perspective. Thus, many educational professionals may have a limited understanding of positive psychology. Furthermore, given that students’ graduate training is not only an introduction to their field’s values, ideas and norms, but also their most intense period of training, consideration of thoughtful infusion of positive psychology into respective training curricula is an important starting point for teams. However, trainers will only expand their training models to include a positive psychology perspective if they believe there is a relative advantage to this inclusion and that it is compatible with the profession.

The basic tenets of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Albarracin, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001) may be useful in guiding understanding of how trainers’ perceptions of relative advantage and compatibility may be shaped through planned interventions. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) posit that before individuals decide to perform a behavior (e.g., expand training models to include positive psychology perspectives), they consider the implications of their actions. Indirect factors, attitudes and subjective norms, and intention to perform a behavior can all influence resulting actions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Albarracin et al., 2001). For example, as part of their collaborative activities, both positive psychology scholars and practitioners may need to critically examine whether their current perspectives meet their objectives. For example, practitioners who work exclusively within a problem-solving framework may come to question the fit between their practices and more holistic intentions to understand and help children and their families through more explicit consideration of goals and objectives.

To address compatibility issues in innovation, scholars and practitioners of positive psychology need to increase their efforts to emphasize how this perspective can be integrated into traditional training practices for psychologists and related education professionals. One important way to communicate this viewpoint with respect to trainers’ notions of advantages relative to pre-existing models of training and practice is to direct efforts toward disseminating research and practice information within new editions of commonly used graduate textbooks, journals, and other documents (e.g., website materials, newsletter articles) in applied psychology and related venues in education. For example, integrative contributions to school psychology and education publications from leading scholars in the field (e.g., the authors of the articles in this special issue), which highlight the implications of the research for psychological and educational practices in the schools, should help draw attention to the benefits of positive psychology. This type of synthesis and dissemination of research would be an important step toward influencing trainers’ indirect attitudes. Without integrative models and research, the field is likely to continue to view positive psychology and psychology in the schools ‘as usual’ as separate fields, with positive psychology perceived as irrelevant to current models of applied psychology training.

The influences of accrediting bodies (e.g., American Psychological Association, National Education Association) on graduate training programs and the values of the profession as a whole suggest that efforts to synthesize and disseminate positive psychology into graduate training must also include advocacy and collaboration with the accrediting bodies. The accuracy of trainers’ and working professionals’ perceptions of the degree to which inclusion of positive psychology into training and professional development is normative and the degree of influence of important others (e.g., accrediting bodies) on the behavior of the professionals significantly affects indirect, subjective norms. As there appears to be a significant gap between research and practice, a trainer’s perception that including positive psychology into training models is non-normative is likely to be accurate given the limited attention by stakeholders. The positive psychology perspective is compatible with various accrediting bodies and legal requirements; however, the emphasis on the positive aspects of these standards may be an area of opportunity. For example, one of the major domains of expected competencies included in the Standards for Training and Field Placement Program in School Psychology involves prevention or intervention services that promote the mental health and physical well-being of students. As critical stakeholders increase their attention to including both positive psychology and pathology into training models, the motivation of practitioners to meet these expectations should increase.

Focused attention to the relative benefits and perceived acceptability among other stakeholders may also facilitate diffusion. Expanding the scope of psychology in the schools to include emphasis on
strengths and resources is likely to be well-received by other stakeholders, namely students, parents and teachers. As demonstrated by Suldo et al. (this issue), the use of more integrative models (e.g., dual-factor model) may increase the sensitivity of screening procedures for identifying children at-risk for failure as well as those students who are flourishing. Identifying a child’s strengths and resources within the context of a problem-solving framework may further serve to increase the perceived advantages of psychological services, treatment acceptability, and compliance by students and parents. Inclusion of strengths and resource information can be especially powerful for the type of student typically referred for psychological services, for these students and parents may have rarely experienced extensive discussions of the nature and possible roles of their strengths in the development of systematic plans to enhance their school programs. Research investigating individuals’ responses to a strength- versus weakness-targeted intervention suggests that a focus on strengths and other positive interventions may serve to increase students’ motivation and persistence for positive behavioral changes (Haidt, 2002).

Efforts toward increasing diffusion and compatibility of positive psychology perspectives with the goals of education through universal approaches are evident in interventions that promote social and emotional competencies through school programming (e.g., Positive Behavior Supports, Social Emotional Learning), targeted youth programming (e.g., Positive Youth Development programs; Schmid et al., this issue) and specific curricula (e.g., Positive Psychology for Youth Project; Reivich et al., 2003). A review of positive youth development programs by Durlak and DuPre (2008) revealed that despite the fact that the majority of programs attempted system-level change, few actually measured system-level changes. Future research addressing the transformative power of such interventions beyond the individual to include families, schools, and communities will be critical in the diffusion of positive psychology perspectives within the school context (Schueller, 2009).

Rogers’ (2003) third quality of complexity of innovations will also likely require thoughtful attention. Lent (2004, p. 483) has described the positive psychology literature as a ‘hybrid enterprise-part intraprofessional rallying cry, part public imaging campaign, part loosely-connected (though hugely worthy) scholarly efforts’. This description suggests that the perceived complexity of an innovation, or the degree to which an idea/innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use, may be limiting the diffusion of positive psychology into practice. An increased emphasis on more systematic integration of positive psychology goals and activities into training curricula would likely decrease perceived complexity for students in training, as would the development of manageable, user-friendly materials for professionals ‘on the run.’ For example, Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, and Furlong (2006) provide an excellent example of a practical blueprint to guide psychologists’ efforts to give comprehensive consideration to risk factors and protective factors in conceptualizing, collecting, and presenting assessment information relevant to intervention planning for students in schools.

The fourth quality of Rogers’ model, trialability, refers to the degree to which an idea or innovation can be put into practice on a limited basis. The infusion of a specific positive psychology activity into traditional educational practice on a ‘trial’ basis allows educators to discover its usefulness within their own unique contexts, which is key in the translation of research to practice (Forman et al., 2005). Encouraging psychologists and other education professionals to ‘try out’ small changes may also dispel uncertainty about a new idea and increase the likelihood of diffusion. For example, encouraging psychology practitioners to simply add a personal strengths section to their psychological reports and/or add a strengths-based intervention recommendation to all individualized educational programs should address trialability as well as minimize complexity and incompatibility with traditional practice (Snyder et al., 2003). For another example, psychologists who use DSM-IV might try including an Axis VI, which requires the delineation of personal and environmental assets pertinent to the diagnosis, prognosis, and intervention (Snyder et al., 2003).

Finally, observability issues need to be addressed. According to Rogers (2003), practitioners need to see results clearly to maintain efforts to continue an innovative practice. Thus, practitioners and scholars will benefit from developing systematic program evaluation plans to determine the success of their efforts to incorporate positive psychology practices into their work. Ongoing evaluation efforts should provide important feedback to practitioners and scholars to critically evaluate changes and modify plans accordingly.

Before closing, we would be remiss if we did not note the significant effect of cultural norms on attitudes and beliefs. It is critical to address at the forefront the possible reasons why diffusing positive psychology might be challenging from a cultural perspective. Historically, our society and its professions have been indoctrinated in a problem-based, reactive worldview, which was adaptive in earlier eras but limited in its current utility (Buss, 2000). As noted earlier, schools tend to operate from a problem-solving or ‘repair’ mode as well. It is thus important to acknowledge that efforts to diffuse positive psychology within applied psychology and education in general
will require a major shift in mindset for many. Further, some of the scientific findings from the field of positive psychology, such as the potential drawbacks of an overemphasis on pursuing money, fame, and beauty, may conflict with specific cultural norms (e.g., Buss, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). These overarching challenges can be overcome, as long as they are acknowledged and addressed in appropriate and systemic ways as discussed above.

Conclusion

The science of positive psychology offers psychologists, teachers, and educational administrators the opportunity to develop an expanded professional paradigm, which promotes the conceptualization and delivery of more comprehensive services to students in schools. The time seems ripe to increase efforts to integrate positive psychology concepts and practices into schools so that practitioners may move beyond the relatively limited focus on solving problems to a more comprehensive focus on promoting an optimal quality of life for all children and youth. The state of the research suggests that the field of positive psychology is concurrently addressing the need to continue to build a solid research base, determine ways to translate this information to practice, and develop innovations within appropriate contexts. Continued systemic efforts to infuse positive psychology within the traditional practice of psychology will be required to ensure that positive psychology is not another passing fad. We hope this article provides additional impetus for such efforts.

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