Positive Psychology and Positive Education: Old Wine in New Bottles?

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The recently fashionable theories of positive psychology have educational ramifications at virtually every level of engagement, culminating in the model of positive education. In this critical review, I scrutinize positive education as a potential theory in educational psychology. Special attention is given to conceptual controversies and suggested educational interventions. Positive psychologists have yet to explore in detail the school as a positive institution. They have written at length, however, about such positive personal traits as moral virtue and resiliency, and about positive emotions both as embodied in experiences of classroom “flow” and as facilitators of students’ personal resources. Because the empirical evidence concerning these positive factors remains partly mixed or tentative, and because most of them had a home in other theoretical frameworks before the advent of positive psychology, searching questions remain about the effectiveness and originality of positive education. This article addresses some of those questions.

The recently much-discussed theory of positive psychology has been defined briefly as a scientific theory of “what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between” (Peterson, 2006, p. 4). The aim of this article is to explore this theory insofar as it is relevant for educational psychology. A natural starting point is to say something about the advent and nature of positive psychology and why it should be of interest to educational psychologists.

Positive psychology is not only a theory. It is also a movement, and movements (as distinct from periods) are started by people. Driven by a concern for the systematic study of human happiness in all its guises, the movement of positive psychology was founded in 1997 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman, two psychologists discontented with the self-limiting grooves in which mainstream psychology had become stuck (see Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), and its official manifesto appeared 3 years later (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recent years have witnessed exponential growth in the output and influence of positive psychology—a growth that amazes both its supporters and opponents. Whereas the supporters say that positive psychology is heralding a new era, the opponents consider it exaggerated in its claims and cultlike in its aspirations (see, e.g., Lazarus, 2003, for a harsh critique of positive psychology as methodologically suspect, conceptually unclear, and faddish). Positive psychologists have ruffled quite a few feathers by suggesting that much of what they call “business-as-usual” psychology incorporates a “misanthropic bias” (King, 2003, p. 129). That bias is said to lie in mainstream psychology’s traditional focus on what goes wrong in life and how life’s unhappinesses can be ameliorated—for example, on how unmotivated students can be motivated or depressed people made less despondent. Positive psychologists promise to replace this amelioration agenda with an enhancement agenda, thus increasing knowledge of “what makes life worth living” and how that worth can be magnified through massive research on human happiness: positive traits, positive emotions, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Although pledging to turn the tide of psychology as a whole, positive psychologists do not suggest that positive variables in psychological research and theorizing have always been neglected. They are quick to acknowledge the legacy of the humanistic psychology of the 1950s to 1970s, with its emphasis on positive self-fulfillment and self-education, and of what one could call the adaptability psychologies of the 1980s and 1990s, referring to literatures addressing coping, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination theory, multiple intelligences, and emotional intelligence. What earmarks these perspectives as relevant
precursors to positive psychology is their focus on the positive aspects of human development—on human flourishing rather than languishing—and how those factors can be promoted in the home and the school. Nevertheless, positive psychologists cross swords with certain aspects of all those earlier psychological trends.

Positive psychologists fault humanistic psychology for its lack of scientific rigor, for ignoring wellness-enhancing social (as distinct from personal) variables, and for confusing description with prescription (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). In contrast to the humanists’ lack of rigor, psychology must retain its scientific credibility as “hard-headed and dispassionate” (Peterson, 2006, p. 15). On the other hand, they fault the adaptability psychologies for refusing to take seriously the moral factors that make life worth living for most people. For instance, they complain that moral intelligence is missing from the list of multiple intelligences, that the idea of emotional intelligence conflates the virtuous regulation of emotions with mere instrumental cleverness, and that self-esteem theory champions feeling good about oneself irrespective of whether one has anything worthy to feel good about (see, e.g., Seligman, 2002).

Positive psychology has so far mostly eluded discussion in journals in educational psychology. For example, a text search of more than 200 articles published in the last decade in the present journal failed to locate the term “positive psychology” in the article bodies. Particular positive psychologists, such as Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Barbara Fredrickson, tend to be cited from time to time in this journal and other publications in the field, but the citations typically concern specific findings or claims made by these theorists, for instance, about optimism, positive emotion, or flow. Those claims have not, however, been addressed as part of an overarching positive psychology theory about education. Is this a well-founded and well-motivated omission? Let me suggest three reasons why it is not.

First, insofar as positive psychologists are gradually establishing an independent approach to education (qua “positive education”), with practical classroom interventions through “happiness lessons” in schools (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), the movement has undeniably entered the educational arena. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the educational claims of positive psychology have not been greeted with the greatest enthusiasm in its homeland of the United States. Rather, it is in Great Britain where it is being adopted in public policy and has, in Seligman’s words, created more “buzz” than anywhere else (as cited in Suiissa, 2008, p. 576). The UK Education Secretary announced in 2007 that happiness lessons were to be introduced in all state secondary schools by 2011. This move came on the heels of an extensive 2005 pilot program in primary schools called SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning, which is similar to the U.S.-based SEL, or social emotional learning). A clear connection seems to obtain between the ideas behind this new happiness initiative and recent theoretical inroads made by positive psychology in the United Kingdom (Suiissa, 2008).

Second—to turn from a practical to a theoretical reason for engaging with the educational ramifications of positive psychology—the theory posits happiness (or well-being) as the ultimate aim of education. There have been philosophers at various times and with diverse theoretical orientations (ranging from Aristotle, 1985, to Noddings, 2003, and Brighouse, 2006) who have made similar claims, considering happiness in various guises to be the fundamental educational goal. Moreover, in recent educational psychology, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001) works on a similar assumption. Although exploring the meaning and possible merits or demerits of happiness as the fundamental goal of education should be a worthy task for educational psychologists, the received wisdom among many of them seems to be that their ultimate focus should be on learning. But are they perhaps, as positive psychologists suggest, focusing their attention on a less important goal rather than exploring what is the most important goal of all education? In the following section, Happiness, I pave the ground for such an exploration.

Third, in the last few years, educational psychology has seen an unprecedented upsurge of interest in emotions as intimately involved in virtually every aspect of the teaching and learning process (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002). As becomes evident in following sections, positive psychology foregrounds emotions at two levels of engagement: moral emotions as parts of the virtues that contribute to human happiness (with obvious implications for moral education), and positive emotions that, more generally, broaden and build personal resources for learning well and living well. Those who are interested in the relationship between emotions and education will, I submit, ignore the message of positive psychology at their peril, whether or not they eventually agree with it. So far, however, emotion theorists among educational psychologists have not explicitly and systematically considered the possible contributions of positive psychology to their work. I offer some comparisons of the two literatures in a later section.

Those reasons for giving heed to the educational implications of positive psychology are insufficient to show that it constitutes a theory of educational psychology—at least not a new and original theory. For that, positive psychologists need to present novel, independent, and empirically testable programs—programs that are grounded in the theoretical framework of positive psychology and that have been, or are to be, implemented in schools. Yet Seligman and his colleagues (2009) have made claims for such programs. They have described an international pilot project (the Penn Resiliency Program), in addition to U.S. (the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum) and Australian (the Geelong Grammar School Project) pilot projects, providing a rationale for these programs grounded in the tenets of positive psychology (cf. also Noble & McGrath, 2008).
Notwithstanding these suggested reasons for taking positive psychology seriously as a theory of educational psychology, one might ask if educational psychologists really need a general change of compass from negativity to positivity? An initial doubt can be raised about the extent to which positive psychologists’ accusations of a “misanthropic bias” (King, 2003, p. 129) really apply to traditional educational psychology. Even if one were to concede that mainstream general psychology has succumbed to an exaggerated focus on remedies for disorders rather than wellness enhancements, and that the same applies to clinical psychology and even to school psychology (as suggested by Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004, and Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004), one may want to argue that educational psychologists have historically maintained a strong positive and progressive focus on their subject matter. Jack Martin (2006) suggested, therefore, that the wellness-enhancement agenda of positive psychology may come as less of a novelty to educational psychologists than to “business-as-usual” psychologists in other fields. Nevertheless, positive psychologists will retort that, despite surface trappings, once educational psychology has left the textbooks and entered the rough ground of school and classroom practice, the emphasis on the remedy of weaknesses rather than the enhancement of strengths is still overwhelming (Huebner, Gilman, & Furlong, 2009). Moreover, they could argue—and seem to want to argue—that even if many educational psychologies have refrained from an exclusive focus on negativity, they have neither emphasized happiness as the preeminent goal of their activities nor hit upon the correct mixture of positive interventions that work best in the classroom. “Positive education” is meant to serve as an umbrella term for certain interventions that do work.

Now, whereas the message of positive psychology as a theory of positive education has mostly failed to register on the radar screen of educational psychologists, educators in other areas have been quicker to respond. Academic responses to the “happiness lessons” in British schools have been mixed, however, to say the least. British sociologist Frank Furedi (2006) lamented the “ascendancy of psychologization” (2006) was subtler in his words but no less biting in his critique. Cultivation of our higher faculties is valuable as an educational goal, he contended, by moving, absorbing, engaging, puzzling, and daunting us, but it may well make us miserable in the bargain. Positive psychology’s happiness is, in contrast, Smith argued, ultimately only about pleasure. In a similar vein, Alastair Miller (2008) argued that positive psychology exclusively promotes a particular personality type: a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extrovert, who is nothing in the end but a shallow careerist. Judith Suissa (2008) bemoaned the reduction of happiness to measurable empirical outcomes. She rued the exclusion of a “normative dimension” to education, which makes the alleged quest for happiness not only shallow but antieducational. She also objected to the way in which education is being psychologized at the expense of philosophical (namely, conceptual and moral) considerations (cf. also Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009).

I propose in what follows to move this general debate about the educational credentials of positive psychology closer to the hearts of educational psychologists. More specifically, I set out to explore the purported inroads that positive psychology has made into educational psychology in order to answer the question of whether or not it offers anything valuable or new. This question comprises two subquestions, for it could well be that positive psychology’s offerings to educational psychology were valuable although they were not new, or new even if they offered little of value. Although the subtitle of this article, “Old Wine in New Bottles?” only addresses the question of newness, my aim is to say something pertinent about both these subquestions, and if not to resolve them definitively, then at least to aid readers in obtaining their own answers. The subtitle may also elicit philosophical considerations about the very concept of newness: What constitutes new wine as distinct from a new cocktail of old wines? I briefly address these considerations in the final section.

Throughout, I pay special attention to the available empirical evidence. Seligman and his colleagues have acknowledged common complaints about the lack of empirical evidence for many school programs, and they want to avoid falling into the same trap—so much so that they say that their research team has spent 15 years, using rigorous methods, to ascertain if what they call “positive education” really works. They claim to have already accumulated substantial empirical evidence indicating that skills for happiness and for educational achievement, along the given theoretical lines, can be taught to schoolchildren (Seligman et al., 2009). One needs to explore, first, whether they have succeeded in collecting the necessary empirical evidence on in vivo classroom deployment and, second, if the available results bode well for the future of positive education as a theory of educational psychology. Here I need to proceed on a relatively extended front, as little of what transpires in the name of the movement is devoid of educational interest. Indeed, the work that has already been produced by positive psychologists and is germane to education is so abundant (and represents such a polyphony of voices) that it would require a book-length rather than an article-length review to do justice to it. In what follows I narrow the focus—of necessity—by singling out for consideration theoretical constructs and empirical findings produced or emphasized by some of the leading authorities in the field: in particular Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Fredrickson. The first two are the founders of the movement, and Fredrickson has suggested a specific educationally relevant theory that is unique to positive psychology (see later). I also make abundant use of Christopher Peterson’s (2006) textbook, as well as a recent handbook on positive psychology.
in schools (edited by Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009). The provenance of the objections raised is more varied. In any case, I hope that subsequent sections will provide the reader with a reasonably objective view of the educational claims made in the name of positive psychology, as well as both sides of the debate about them.

The outline of this article is as follows. I begin in the following section with a survey of what I consider to be the key concept on the positive psychology agenda—happiness—and explore some of the conceptual and practical problems associated with it. I also suggest a possible modification of positive psychology’s happiness theory that may make it more serviceable. According to one of its two founding fathers, Seligman, the label positive psychology is an umbrella term for the study of the three actual pillars of happiness: positive emotions, positive traits (in particular, personal virtues and strengths), and positive (“enabling”) institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and good schools (Seligman, 2002, p. xi). Next is a short section discussing educational interventions related to the school as a positive (“happy”) institution. That section is short simply because positive psychologists have so far focused almost entirely, in educational contexts, on the two other pillars and their implementation. The next section is about positive traits that can, according to positive psychologists, be cultivated in schools: moral virtue and mental resiliency. Subsections follow on (a) the relevant empirical evidence and educational interventions and (b) the evaluation of (a) in the light of comparisons with other approaches. The section after that is about positive emotions related to schooling. I discuss there both the notion of flow and that of positive emotions simpliciter (namely, emotions felt as pleasant). As before, subsections follow about (a) empirical evidence and educational interventions and (b) the evaluation of (a) with relevant comparisons. In the final section, I draw the foregoing explorations together in order to answer the fundamental questions just posed about the novelty and value of positive education.

**Happiness**

For readers who are not well versed in the theory behind positive psychology, I begin by discussing the contours of and controversies related to the movement’s key concept: happiness. I have written a separate article about the conceptual and philosophical foundations of positive psychology (Kristjánsson, 2010a). In the present review, however, I enter the theoretical debate only insofar as I consider it able to shed light on the (potential) practical ramifications of positive psychology in its incarnation as positive education. The present section summarizes the discussion from my earlier article on the concept of happiness and adds further considerations.

First, a terminological point: Seligman (2002) and most of his colleagues formerly used the terms happiness and well-being interchangeably. Seligman (2011) now thinks this may have been a mistake, because the word happiness carries connotations of a mere subjective theory of well-being (see later). I stick to the more embracive use of “happiness” in what follows, which sees it as synonymous with well-being and leaves open for debate the question of whether happiness truly includes only subjective or only objective elements, or both. According to positive psychologists, it is an empirical fact that happiness (in this inclusive sense) is the “ungrounded grounder” of all human strivings (Peterson, 2006, p. 75). Why is this a fact? The answer they give is based on the Aristotelian insight that when people are asked for a rationale for wanting $X$, further rationales can be given until we hit the rock bottom of happiness: The question “Why do you want $X$?” where $X =$ happiness has no more fundamental response than happiness itself. Yet positive psychologists refrain from proclaiming it as a conceptual truth that everyone seeks happiness. Rather they cite empirical studies showing that happiness is essential to standard conceptions of the good life.

In a well-known study, King and Napa (1998) examined folk conceptions of what makes life good. Samples of college students and community adults were asked to judge the desirability and moral goodness of certain life paths. As it turned out, the variables “happiness” and “meaning in life” were most closely associated with high desirability ratings of different life paths. The authors cited various similar findings from previous research on the topic. The wish for happiness occupied the top spot, or the joint top spot, in all the cited findings—much higher, for example, than the wish for riches and worldly goods or for knowledge. The authors concluded, “Clearly, people want to be happy” (King & Napa, 1998, p. 157). As well as referring back to these findings, positive psychologists produce further evidence of their own, showing that what parents report wanting for their children is primarily happiness (Seligman et al., 2009). The good life is thus a happy life, and education is successful insofar as it is conducive to happiness.

But what is meant by “happiness”? Historically, three main accounts of happiness have competed for ground, each with its own pros and cons. Two of them are subjective theories in which happiness is understood as a privately known psychological state; the third is an objective theory in which happiness is understood to be the same as “flourishing” (blossoming as a person, living a well-rounded life) with regard to certain externally evaluable variables. The subjective theories comprise, on one hand, hedonistic accounts of happiness and, on the other, life-satisfaction accounts. Under hedonistic accounts, happiness is identified with pleasure as a raw, undifferentiated, subjective feeling. The happy life is the life of such maximized pleasures. These accounts are typically criticized for not making a qualitative distinction between types of pleasure and for implying that being mindlessly “high” on a pleasure-inducing pill counts as true happiness. Life-satisfaction accounts gauge people’s perceptions of their satisfaction with their life accomplishments—how close their
lives are to their aspirations—dependent of their feelings, pleasant or otherwise, about those perceptions. Such accounts of happiness entail the counterintuitive claim that to enhance happiness, it is as useful to lower aspirations as it is to increase achievements. Life-satisfaction accounts are rarely seen in isolation anymore but appear in conjunction with hedonistic accounts, manifested in measures of so-called subjective well-being (SWB). SWB measures, which are widely used in the social sciences, thus track life satisfaction and pleasure (the presence of positive mood), resulting in a total happiness score. All subjective theories—hedonistic, life satisfaction, and hybrid (SWB) accounts—make subjects the final arbiters of their happiness, thereby failing to account for systematic self-deception.

In contrast to the subjective theories, eudaimonistic accounts of happiness—harking back to Aristotle—assume an objective theory according to which happiness can and must be measured externally via a number of operationalizable dimensions. These dimensions refer to capabilities or opportunities for optimal functioning: life, bodily health, emotion, thought, and affiliation to other people. For instance, an optimally functioning emotion is one that is capable of tracking objects of emotional value rationally and justifiably; an optimally functioning thought is one that has developed the capacity to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s own life (Nussbaum, 1999). A common rejoinder to eudaimonistic accounts is to insist that “we cannot credibly say that someone is happy if that person says she is not,” for to say so appears both patronizing and paternalistic (Noddings, 2003, pp. 22, 25). Proponents of eudaimonistic accounts insist, however (as explained later), on the Aristotelian point that a flourishing life will normally in the end also elicit deep and fecund pleasures.

What position do positive psychologists take on this thorny issue of how to conceptualize happiness? With the concept of happiness at its core, they would be expected to take a firm stand. On this matter, unfortunately, positive psychology is beset by ambiguities. Drawing as they often do on Aristotelian eudaimonistic precedents, positive psychologists tend to view subjective accounts of happiness with a critical eye and to judge them as overly simplistic. Positive psychology is thus not mere “happiology” (Peterson, 2006, pp. 7, 48; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). But purely objective accounts will not do, either, as they entail that people can be “really stupid” about “a topic as important and transparent” as their own well-being. The “best theory” of happiness is pluralistic: one that somehow combines the divergent accounts previously discussed here (Peterson, 2006, pp. 84, 87). The core claim of such pluralism is that there are different pathways to happiness. In his 2002 book, Authentic Happiness, Seligman described the destinations of those pathways: The pleasant life is a life of successfully pursuing pleasant emotions. The good/engaged life consists of using one’s “signature strengths” (one’s already strongest virtues; see later) to obtain abundant life satisfactions. The meaningful life refers to the use of those signature strengths in service of something larger than oneself: the pursuit of a higher purpose (e.g., religion, morality, politics, family, nation, or environment). The pleasant and good/engaged life are subjective, but the meaningful life is at least partly objective, for my life can have meaning even if I do not appreciate it until later (e.g., sacrificing my career prospects for the needs of my sick child)—and in such cases, mere self-reports will not suffice as evidence. Finally, the full life is a life that satisfies all three criteria of happiness, synthesizing them and making the happiness truly “authentic” (Seligman, 2002, pp. 262–263).

Despite the moral message that seems to be implicit in this happiness theory, positive psychologists insist on keeping their hands clean of prescriptive moral philosophy. They want to engage morality without moralism: to pursue the factual foundations of what moral philosophers call “virtue ethics” without becoming full-blown virtue ethicists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). At the same time, however, Seligman’s analysis of happiness pathways tends to draw on moral/philosophical rather than empirical sources. Furthermore, in reading about these pathways, it is difficult to shake the impression that the “engaged life” is qualitatively superior to the “pleasant life,” the “meaningful life” superior to the “engaged life,” and so forth. In other words, that Seligman ranks the pathways to the happy lives in an ascending order of primacy. But his official theory is that these pathways constitute neither a lexical order (in which one must complete an earlier stage before embarking on the next) nor a qualitative order (in which later stages are better—“happier”—than the earlier ones). Admittedly, Seligman (2002) found that later stages are better (more happiness producing) for him than earlier stages, but if he took the decisive step of deeming these stages intrinsically better than the earlier ones, he would (or so he feared) have started to prescribe rather than to describe and would no longer be a scientist. To summarize, a person can, in principle, achieve happiness merely by following a single pathway to the happiness of, say, the “pleasant life” or the “engaged life” without ever learning to appreciate what for Seligman are the more refined and desirable pathways. Even the despots, the hedonists, and the con man can all be counted happy if they have followed at least one pathway to happiness (cf. Seligman, 2002, p. 303).

Notice here how visibly torn the positive psychologists are between their personal views on happiness and the caveats about moral neutrality that they believe their scientific stance forces them to employ. Thus, on the same page in Peterson’s (2006) textbook (p. 79), one finds (a) the empirical claim that, according to recent research done by positive psychologists (using different samples and different methods), those who pursue eudaimonia are more satisfied than those who pursue pleasure (cf. Huta, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005); (b) Peterson’s own view that that one does not need to choose between the two but can rather experience both eudaimonia and pleasure synergistically; and (c) Seligman’s official...
theory that a person needs at least one (but not necessarily more than one) pathway to happiness in order to be truly happy. The positive psychologists find themselves here impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If they prioritize the pathways to happiness, they fear that they have started to issue moral prescriptions and stepped out of the scientific frame. By refusing to prioritize those pathways, however, their theory becomes not only ambiguous at times but significantly underspecified, both morally and educationally. The reason is that the most pressing problem about happiness for ordinary people is not a definitional problem but an aggregation and adjudication problem: the problem of choices and trade-offs between competing pathways to happiness. If the empirical and anecdotal evidence cited by Seligman and his colleagues (2009) is to be believed, it would be difficult, for example, to find a teacher who, when presented with positive psychology’s pluralistic theory of happiness, would reject the claim that an overarching aim of classroom practice is to make students happy in the sense of one or more of Seligman’s “pathways.” The teacher would probably be able to provide us with various options, all of which would be likely to make students happy (subjectively, objectively, or both). Given the limitations of time and space, which make such options mutually exclusive, however, the crucial question remains of what combination of options will make students happiest in the long run. That is basically a question of trade-offs that no sufficiently specified happiness theory can shirk.

The happiness theory of positive psychologists can be commended for rejecting the simple equation of happiness with pleasure and for invoking a nuanced classificatory system of different pathways to happiness. But their happiness pluralism is beset with ambiguities and unsolved problems. Is there something educational psychologists can learn from this theory over and above the message that emanates from other general frameworks of the good life and good education? Perhaps the message here is to stay focused on happiness as the overall aim of education; to abandon any illusion (if illusions are, in fact, held) that happiness should be viewed as nothing but self-reported pleasure; and to continue to help students find their authentic combinations of the “full life,” as long as that version does not prevent other students from attaining their authentic combinations. For those who seek more specific instructions about happiness maximization, the conceptualization of happiness by positive psychologists offers scant help.

Can these ambiguities and shortcomings be mended? I have argued elsewhere (Kristjánsson, 2010a) that positive psychologists take a serious misstep when they assume that passing normative judgments about what constitutes overall happiness would undermine their scientific stance. It is true that psychology need not and should not collapse into moral philosophy and that it must retain the distinction between facts and prescriptions, or what tends to be known in philosophical circles as the “is–ought” distinction. It is also true, however (see Kristjánsson, 2011), that psychology can and should incorporate value judgments into its theories and abandon any rigid distinction between facts and values. How can these two claims be compatible? It is easiest to answer that question by explaining first why psychologists have tended to see them as incompatible.

Two meta-ethical positions have pervaded social science—explicitly or implicitly—at least since before the middle of the 20th century. The first is called moral antirealism. According to moral antirealism, moral language does not describe objective facts but rather expresses subjective (or at least culturally relative) preferences. The second position is called motivational internalism. According to motivational internalism, all moral judgments are intrinsically motivating: If I say that X is morally good, then that judgment contains (by way of conceptual necessity) a motivation to pursue X. A corollary to motivational internalism is the principle that any full-blown thesis about moral goodness contains at least a prima facie prescription to abide by the thesis. Moral antirealism and motivational internalism are mutually supportive. The former explains why all moral judgments are intrinsically motivating (because they allegedly express one’s preferences rather than describing objectively evaluable facts); the latter gives one a reason to be a moral antirealist (as no other meta-ethical theory explains as well the apparent built-in motivational element of moral judgments). The combination of moral antirealism and motivational internalism thus yields a consistent moral position, albeit one strongly criticized by many moral realists, including today’s virtue ethicists to whom Peterson and Seligman allegedly want to give empirical support (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89).

Notice that positive psychologists break out of the combination of moral antirealism and motivational internalism—so fashionable in social scientific circles—by suggesting that (at least) some objective judgments can be passed about what constitutes happiness. They depart even further from moral antirealism when they reject cultural relativism about moral virtues (as noted later in this article). Yet they implicitly retain the assumption of motivational internalism by insisting that they cannot advance a full-blown theory about happiness without falling prey to prescriptive (antiscientific) moralism. What they could do instead is to follow the precedent of various contemporary moral realists (e.g., Railton, 1986) who argue that naturalistic evaluative moral facts can be established empirically and objectively but reject the claim of motivational internalism that statements about such facts necessarily entail motivation or prescription. The key here lies in the ambiguity of the term “normative,” which can mean either “evaluative” or “prescriptive.” Judgments such as “It is morally wrong to feel pleasure at someone else’s undeserved bad fortune” or “A life of virtue is happier than a life of vice” are normative in the sense of being evaluative (they evaluate a certain state of affairs from a moral point of view, amenable to empirical evidence, and thus concern what could be called empirically grounded evaluative facts, or factual values, according to moral realism), but they are not prescriptive;
they do not tell people to refrain from feeling schadenfreude or to lead virtuous lives unless those people are concerned with—and hence motivated to pursue—morality and the happy life. And that is something one cannot and should not take for granted. The inclusion of empirically grounded moral evaluations in psychological theories does not undermine their objectivity, therefore. On the contrary, correctly describing the world of factual values strengthens their objectivity. It is only prescriptions—imperatives to act—that undermine objectivity and violate the “is—ought” distinction.

I would suggest, then, to positive psychologists that in order to give their happiness theory more practical salience—for instance as a firm, measurable basis for educational practice—they should drop their happiness pluralism simply opt for a pure objective theory of happiness as eudaimonia (an option to which Seligman, for one, seems in any case seriously inclined; see especially his latest book, 2011). Would such a maneuver undermine their standing as scientists and—to return to Noddings’s misgiving about pure objective accounts of happiness—land them in paternalism? No, because, as I have explained, they would be operating with evaluative facts rather than moral prescriptions. Would it force them to make the patronizing claim that a person P is happy when P consistently feels she is not? Not if they drew even more explicitly on naturalistic (e.g., Aristotelian or utilitarian) theories of moral value according to which the best evidence for something being objectively valuable is that it, in fact, subjectively valued. Indeed, it is part and parcel not only of classical utilitarianism but also of Aristotle’s pure eudaimonistic theory that true and fecund pleasure is the natural outgrowth of an objectively happy life (a view supported both by conceptual and empirical considerations, see further in Kristjánsson, 2002, Chapter 2.3). For although Aristotle renounced the equation of happiness with pleasure, as only fit for grazing animals, he was also quick to observe that those who live well will naturally (barring serious personal misfortune) enjoy the activities that make them flourish: Pleasure “completes” their activities “like the bloom on youths” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 276). Therefore, an objective theory of happiness does not necessarily disregard pleasure; quite the contrary, such a theory can give positive (pleasant) emotions all the weight that positive psychologists desire. Moreover, it can do so within a framework that yields itself better to aims-based interventions and objective measurements.

THE HAPPY SCHOOL

Positive education is, as already noted, the application of positive psychology to educational settings. It is meant to deal with the school as a positive institution, with the cultivation of positive traits, and with the creation of positive emotions for educational purposes. Given that positive psychologists consider happiness to be the fundamental aim of education—and setting aside the unfortunate ambiguities just noted—one would expect them to come up with educational interventions for making the school as a whole a happier place. So far, however, they have concentrated on more specific interventions (reviewed in subsequent sections) aimed at individual change rather than school change, relating to the other two “happiness pillars” of positive traits and positive emotions.

There seem to be two reasons for this prioritization of positive traits and emotions over the creation of schools as positive institutions. One is that positive psychologists simply have not had any whole schools to work with. That situation may soon be changing, however, as they have now found a testing ground where they can put all its ideas into practice at once: the Geelong Grammar School in Australia, with 1,500 students on four campuses. It will be exciting to see what happens when an international team of top positive psychologists has implemented wide-ranging interventions in this school (Seligman et al., 2009), testing their contentions that, for the methods of positive education to work, “more is better,” “earlier is better,” “broad is better,” and “sophisticated is better” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 84–85). Indeed, Seligman and his colleagues (2009) consider schools to be excellent venues for positive psychological initiatives, precisely because children and adolescents spend so much of their waking time there.

The other reason for the lack of research into happy schools is also practical. Because personal change—through individual effort or through small-scale initiatives—is usually easier to administer than large-scale political transformation, positive psychologists have seen good pragmatic reasons for starting with positive emotions and traits rather than positive institutions (see, e.g., Lyubomirsky & Abbe, 2003). Some critics have considered this choice as a betrayal of an individualist bias and “morally repugnant” (Becker & Marecek, 2008, p. 1771). Bearing in mind, however, that the positive psychology movement is only 10 years old (if one dates its origin back to Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi’s, 2000, manifesto), it may be premature to accuse it of not having yet exhausted the repertoire of all its three pillars (see further in Kristjánsson, 2010a). In any case, it is stated in no uncertain terms in the positive psychology literature that the “eventual benefit” of individual-oriented happiness initiatives is the creation of enabling institutions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 5) and that the happy school is the next big item on their agenda (cf. Clonan et al., 2004).

Positive psychologists could also respond to grumblings about their lack of engagement with schools as positive institutions by pointing out that most of the theoretical tenets about happiness-promoting schools have already been established empirically. Such schools offer a supportive ethos, have well-trained and motivated teachers, model the types of character skills one would like young people to embody, have high expectations of their students, and give them sufficient opportunities to actualize those expectations (see, e.g., Hoffman, 2009). How the lessons of positive psychology can
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be applied to the promotion of such schools and incorporated into educational policy at the national or international level is, however, an empirical question that we are not in a position to answer just yet—not until more specific interventions have been tried and tested at the personal or small-group level.

POSITIVE traits

Although positive psychologists have so far done little work on the happy school, they are adamant that schools should teach happiness (or well-being) to children. That is, after all, what parents want most for their children (Seligman et al., 2009). Such happiness lessons are meant to cultivate both (a) positive dispositions or traits and (b) positive experiences in the form of pleasant emotions. In this section I discuss positive dispositions or traits. The types of positive traits addressed in the positive psychology literature can be divided roughly into moral character traits—namely, virtues and character strengths—and the mental-health trait of resilience. I start with moral character traits.

Moral Character Traits

In 2004, positive psychology officially turned virtue theoretical—starting to pursue the “social science equivalent of virtue ethics” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89)—by drafting Christopher Peterson as the movement’s “director of virtue” (Peterson, 2006, p. 137). The aim was to “reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 3). The original idea behind the virtue (or Values-In-Action [VIA]) project was to create a “manual of sanities”—a guide to optimal development modeled on the established Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. The result was a detailed classificatory system of six core moral virtues (wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) and 24 subordinate empirically measurable character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Chapters 2 & 3). The distinction between “virtues” and “strengths” is admittedly tenuous. Moral philosophers would name all of them “moral virtues,” perhaps reserving the title of “cardinal virtues” for the former and “subordinate virtues” for the latter. The rationale behind this terminological distinction in positive psychology theory seems to be that whereas “virtue” refers to a general state of moral character, “strength” denotes the actual manifestation of a virtue in daily life. For example, for the virtue of “humanity,” the manifested strengths are “kindness,” “love,” and “social intelligence.”

So how were these virtues and strengths derived? The answer is through a variety of considerations, some conceptual (such as being measurable and traitlike) and some historical (being ubiquitous and morally valued across cultures; see Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 21–28). It was a “shocking” empirical discovery for the positive psychologists as “reluctant moralists” with relativistic tendencies (Seligman, 2002, p. 120) to discover not only that moral characteristics are generally considered a necessary ingredient in human happiness but also that these are basically the same characteristics universally no matter where one goes in the world—from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe—and no matter what time in history. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) treatise on the virtues has explained in detail how they made these two discoveries: by digesting and distilling Aristotle’s (1985) account (echoed in today’s fashionable virtue ethics) of virtuous activity as the most important constituent of eudaimonia, by surveying systematically all major world religions and philosophies, and by drawing on a host of empirical research.

More specifically, positive psychologists set out to read children’s books from various cultures (searching for positive role models described there); they undertook thought experiments trying to imagine the viability of cultures that did not stress the cultivation of a given character strength; they studied some of the most famous treatises ever written about the virtues (from Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ancient Greece, Christianity, etc.); and they explored more recent attempts at making virtue inventories (e.g., the Boy Scout codes and character education programs). Finally, they sifted carefully through recent psychological theories and findings on positive socio-moral traits, ranging from Thorndike’s behavioral character theories, through Erikson’s psychosocial stages, Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning, all the way to Gardner’s multiple intelligences—to name but a few of the stepping stones. To summarize, they argued that their survey of all these literature, philosophical, religious, and psychological traditions revealed the six broad virtue classes (the “High Six”) to be ubiquitous (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 51). People at all times and in all places have always sought to cultivate these virtues; without those virtues human societies would scarcely survive; and, for most people at least, those virtues are seen as conducive to and even constitutive of happiness. Thus, despite their initial fear of entering the minefield of morality and moral education, positive psychologists had found overwhelming theoretical and empirical evidence against moral relativism concerning the virtues. Moreover, for those who resent the uppercase abstractions of happiness talk, more earthbound evidence for the use of their moral strengths beckons. For instance, one of the strengths, self-discipline, is twice as good a predictor of high school grades as IQ is (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). In general, good character is “what parents look for in their children, what teachers look for in their students, what siblings look for in their brothers and sisters, and what friends look for in each other” (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 65).

It is particularly interesting to see how positive psychologists want to distance their theory of (good) character from the Big Five tradition in personality research, harking back all
the way to Gordon Allport’s exclusion of value-laden character terms (what he called “personality evaluated”) from personality research, to be replaced by morally neutral personality descriptors as “character devaluated” (Allport, 1937, p. 52). Positive psychologists have complained that the Big Five traits are too broad to set individuals out from one another in a meaningful way (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 68). When comparing their list of allegedly universal virtues with the Big Five indices, distinctive features remained, suggesting that the virtue scale reflects “something more than the Big Five measure—specifically, the moral flavor of the character strengths” (Park & Peterson, 2006, p. 903). This fact has also suggested, in their view, the possibility of a deep theory about human moral nature, couched in evolutionary terms (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 51). Without importing a moral dimension, one cannot truly capture what is distinctive about an individual as a person among persons; therefore, the Big Five tradition must be said to be misguided not only morally but also psychologically (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 68; for further arguments, cf. Kristjánsson, in press; for possible counterarguments, see Nofile, Schnitker, & Robins, 2011).

A common complaint about the VIA project is that its derived list is nothing but a “bag of virtues,” to use the derisory Kohlbergian term (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 184), without any critically reasoned internal cohesion. According to contemporary virtue ethics, which draws on Aristotle, an action is morally right if and only if it exemplifies the virtues that are, in turn, conducive to or constitutive of the good (happy) life. Yet Aristotle did not recognize any life as happy unless its cultivation of virtues was accompanied by critical reflection and possessed reflective unity. To be fully virtuous, it is not enough to act correctly; rather, one must have learned to decide upon the right actions and emotions from “a firm and unchanging state” of character, and after having submitted them to the arbitration of one’s own deliberation (Aristotle, 1985, p. 40). Many theorists, especially of Aristotelian orientation, are concerned about the absence of this “reflective element” in positive psychology: the absence of a commitment to a ceaseless critical scrutiny of one’s beliefs (see, e.g., Nussbaum, 2008).

Positive psychologists may respond that theorists with this concern overlook the fact that one of the six core moral virtues is wisdom or knowledge and that an agent who possesses this virtue can bring it to bear on specific decisions and on life in general. However, the crucial point of the concern is a lament, not about the lack of one virtue among many that can be called upon for guidance if the agent so chooses, but about the lack of a unifying master virtue, a moral integrator and arbitrator, such as Aristotle’s (1985) phronesis, which oversees and chooses between competing virtues (pp. 153–164). Seligman (2002) explicitly accepted that people who do not display all six of the core moral virtues can be virtuous (p. 137), and Peterson and Seligman (2004) were “comfortable saying that someone is of good character if he or she displays but 1 or 2 strengths within a virtue group” (p. 13). No attention has been given to the problem of one virtue colliding with another or to the bigger picture of how different characteristics fit into a well-rounded life. Positive psychology is vulnerable here to the same considerations as in the case of the possible adjudication between different pathways to happiness: the problem of nonarbitration. Because no clear consensus allegedly exists in world religions and philosophies about an integrating “master virtue,” Peterson and Seligman believed that they would exceed their calling as scientists if they were to demand virtuous unity, guided by an overarching principle of priorities, in virtuous agents. What forced them down this path was their insistence that psychology can only be “descriptive of what is ubiquitous” rather than normative (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 51). I consider them, however, to commit the same misstep here—in confusing evaluation with prescription—that I described earlier in their account of happiness. Passing evaluative moral judgments about the balancing and trade-offs of virtues is, for reasons already given in the case of happiness, not tantamount to the issuing of moral prescriptions. One can be normative by passing empirically grounded evaluative judgments without being normative by passing moral prescriptions.

Resiliency

Let me now turn from virtues to resiliency. Positive psychologists understand resiliency as a mental health concept rather than a moral concept (Peterson, 2006, pp. 238–241). Resiliency is specified as a personal resource that helps people stay clear of, or bounce back from, negative emotional experiences, ranging from mild anxiety to trauma and general depression (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Resiliency is by no means a concept unique to positive psychology; its history predates that movement. People’s resiliency is most commonly measured on a self-report scale in which subjects are asked to agree or disagree with such attitudinal statements as “My daily life is full of things that keep me interested” and “I enjoy dealing with new and unusual situations” (Block & Kremen, 1996). Positive psychologists do not pretend to have unearthed any new theoretical insights concerning resiliency, as distinct from having found efficient ways to cultivate it in the classroom. I shelve further discussion of resiliency, therefore, until the following section on educational interventions.

Educational Interventions

Positive psychologists want to teach both moral virtue and resiliency in the classroom. In this section I discuss educational interventions designed to promote each of these.

Promoting moral character traits. Good character, positive psychologists have said, is not inborn. It can be
cultivated, and they claim to be able to supply the conceptual and empirical tools to craft the necessary interventions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 3). First on the agenda are ways to measure existing strengths. Although they are aware of the shortcomings of self-report measurements of virtue and are eager to supplement them with more objective tools, the most tangible methods devised by positive psychologists are self-report surveys: the VIA Inventory of Strengths and—more relevant for present purposes—the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth), developed by Nansook Park and intended for the 10-to-17 age group. The 198-item assessment is typically administered in a single 45-min session. As VIA-Youth is already widely used, data on the distribution and relevant correlates of the character strengths of young people are rapidly accumulating. One significant finding is that youth possess all the same strengths as adults; nevertheless, some strengths are more common among youth (hope, teamwork, and zest). Furthermore, although love, hope, and zest are most consistently related to happiness for individuals across all ages, gratitude has appeared as an additional factor associated with happiness among youth (Park & Peterson, 2009).

In the relatively sparse writings on the way virtues should be taught, what is most commonly discussed in the positive psychology literature is the identification and strengthening of “signature strengths,” those strengths (out of the original list of 24) that happen to be most central to the given individual. Positive psychologists have advocated first helping children locate those strengths and name them (Seligman, 2002, p. 245), either by writing stories about what brings out the best in them or (preferably) by letting them take the online VIA measure of strengths and note their highest scores. Subsequently, one should encourage children to use their signature strengths in a novel way in the following week, thus expanding their scope and application (Peterson, 2006, p. 99; see also pp. 159–162 for examples of how this can be done for each strength; cf. Seligman et al., 2009, pp. 300–301). Frequent allusions are made to the writing of gratitude and forgiveness letters, and one is told of numerous empirical studies that have shown the effectiveness of such writing in cultivating the character strengths of gratitude and forgiveness/mercy, respectively. For instance, several research groups have explored the effects of asking people to stop negative beliefs by considering alternative interpretations. Building on that assumption, students learn to detect beliefs about events mediate their impact on emotions and behavior. What is needed is a curriculum to increase students’ ability to handle day-to-day stressors and avoid a downward spiral of personal problems. That is precisely the goal of the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), the most widely tested of the specific positive education initiatives. Seligman and his colleagues (2009) have argued that PRP, with at least 17 controlled studies, is already one of the most extensively researched programs designed to prevent depression in young people. More specifically, a meta-analysis of those studies found that PRP significantly reduced hopelessness and increased optimism, prevented clinical levels of anxiety and depression, reduced behavioral problems, and worked equally well for children of various ethnic backgrounds (Brunwater & Gillham, 2008). A closer look at individual studies, however, does reveal more mixed findings. A study of 271 eleven- and twelve-year-olds with elevated depressive symptoms, randomized to PRP or usual care over a 2-year period, found significant effects of PRP, but only among the high-symptom participants—and more among girls than among boys. Overall, PRP’s effects on depressive symptoms (measured through standard depression inventories, diagnostic interviews, and parental consultations) were rated as “small and inconsistent” (Gillham, Hamilton, Freres, Patton, & Gallop, 2006). Furthermore, these authors noted that the strongest findings for the effectiveness of PRP have been produced in studies by its own developers and research team. Another controlled study of 697 students from three middle schools revealed no PRP-intervention affect on average levels of depressive symptoms in the full sample. Two of the schools showed much better results than the third, however, without any plausible explanation emerging for the difference (Gillham et al., 2007). The UK Resilience Programme is the British equivalent of the PRP. It has been implemented beginning in September 2007 in Year 7 in 22 secondary schools, and like the PRP, it has been subjected to a controlled trial. The first interim report suggested that symptoms of anxiety and depression were reduced among the students, in the short term at least, and that disadvantaged students and those of below-average educational attainment gained more from the program than other students did (Challen, 2009).

What is taught in these resiliency programs? The answer is that they teach primarily cognitive-behavioral and problem-solving skills, based on Albert Ellis’s (1962) postulate that beliefs about events mediate their impact on emotions and behavior. Building on that assumption, students learn to detect inaccurate thoughts, evaluate their accuracy, and challenge negative beliefs by considering alternative interpretations. PRP is typically delivered in twelve 90-min or eighteen to twenty-four 60-min lessons. Within each lesson, resiliency
Evaluation of Educational Interventions

**Moral character traits.** The best way to summarize and evaluate positive psychology’s contribution to the education of positive traits is to say that its extensive research into the universality of human virtues and character strengths has solidified the naturalistic foundations of contemporary virtue ethics and helped it to deal with dissenting voices such as Prinz’s (2009), which consider all virtue talk to be subjective, culturally relative, or situation specific. Moreover, two of positive psychology’s fundamental claims about virtue—the universality of the virtues and the empirically established link between virtuous living and happiness—are leaves taken straight from the trees of respectable philosophical (Aristotelian and quasi-Aristotelian) naturalistically grounded virtue theories. I complained earlier about the nonarbitration problem. At least Peterson and Seligman (2004) freely acknowledged that it is a problem and that they are in search of a “yet-to-be-articulated good theory” (p. 9) to ameliorate it.

It is no novelty to maintain that young people possess moral strengths of their own (Aristotle, the first virtue ethicist, claimed as much; see Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 25–26) or that they have budding strengths that require further development. In Philip Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, the author cleverly foregrounded people’s characters by externalizing them in the form of accompanying “daemons.” Because of the plasticity of their personalities, the children in these novels have shape-changing daemons. Insofar as positive psychologists want to establish themselves as authorities on both the measurement and the cultivation of moral virtues in the young, they need to advise us of their formulae for giving children’s “daemons” the correct shape. Serving as a backdrop, there is the proverbial tension between Aristotelian methods of habituation and role-modeling versus Kantian/Kohlbergian methods of moral reflection and autonomous choice (see Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 3). It must be said, however, that the positive psychology literature on virtue education does not take a firm stand on the issue of whether such education needs to be mechanically and externally administered or voluntarily chosen and enacted through critical thinking by students. Indeed, the teaching tips from the leaders of the VIA project scarcely amount to a comprehensive program of virtue education. The typical examples taken (as seen earlier) are about the cultivation of gratitude and forgiveness. But those are only two of the 24 strengths listed in the positive psychology virtues-and-strengths inventory, and positive psychologists have provided no empirical evidence showing that those particular strengths are the efficient starting points or, more generally, that focusing on signature strengths first is the most efficient starting point of a program of virtue education. Using literature—in the form of novels and plays, for instance—to nourish ethical sensitivities has been mentioned in connection with positive education (Flourishing schools, 2010; Morris, 2009, Chapter 4). This tends to be the favorite method of Aristotle-inspired educators for fleshing out conceptions of the good life (see, e.g., Nussbaum, 1983), at least for older children and adolescents who have already been habituated into morally proper frames of mind. But this method has not been developed in any detail in the positive education literature, or connected to the philosophy-for-children movement (Lipman, 1991), which had already turned the story-and-discussion method into a broad curricular initiative.

Another aspect of Aristotle’s virtue theory is, however, reflected directly (albeit perhaps unwittingly) in the VIA project: his insistence that virtue is about both action and reaction (emotion). The truly virtuous agent is not the one who only does the right things at the right times but the one who feels the right emotions at the right times as well. Of the 24 character strengths listed by positive psychologists, some are clearly emotion based, partially or even exclusively...
(e.g., hope, zest, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty). Others imply moral emotions such as kindness, which implies compassion, and fairness, which implies righteous indignation. Understood as a program of virtue education, the VIA project thus forges a welcome bond between two recent moral-education agendas: social emotional learning (SEL) and character education (CE). SEL focuses on methods of emotion regulation and is based largely on the idea of emotional intelligence, which is considered by its proponents—in part rightly, and in part wrongly—as the modern equivalent of Aristotle’s theory of emotion-virtues (Goleman, 1995). What is wrong about that characterization is that emotional intelligence and SEL do not—contra Aristotle—place any substantive moral constraints on the content of emotionally intelligent emotions (for a critique, see Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 6). SEL used to have an uneasy relationship with CE (Lickona, 1991), whose exponents also take pride in their Aristotelian roots but model their theory primarily on Aristotle’s account of action-virtues (which require doing, not only feeling, what is right). The proponents of CE have suggested that students should be mechanically habituated into action-virtues through methods such as reciting pledges, emulating role models, and reading virtuous slogans on classroom walls (Lickona, 1991). Positive psychologists have deemed such methods to be “psychologically naïve” because they fail to engage the students’ moral understanding (Peterson, 2006, p. 284).

Jonathan Cohen (2006), one of the founders of SEL, has described the recent peacemaking efforts between SEL and CE scholars, resulting in the alliance of what he calls SEEAE: Social, Emotional, Ethical, and Academic Education. Aware of the moral gap afflicting emotional intelligence and, by implication, SEL, which undermines their standing as methods of moral education, Cohen explained how that gap has now been bridged through the rapprochement with CE, while CE proponents have softened their hard, action-oriented stance. Cohen’s presentation of the main tenets of SEEAE is strikingly similar to the description that Seligman and his colleagues (2009) have used for virtue education. This similarity is not surprising, given that both models are based on Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian precepts. There are, however, two very different ways of interpreting the affiliation between positive education’s virtue theory and SEEAE. One is to say that it counts in favor of positive education to have lined up alongside a recent conciliatory and sophisticated approach to moral education. Another, less favorable interpretation is to say that because CE and SEL have gradually reached a compromise without the help of positive psychology, there is nothing new and original that the movement can add to the deal. The only additional element that it has imported is the nonarbitration problem (between competing virtues). But that hardly counts to the credit of positive psychology.

As previously noted, positive psychologists have so far produced little empirical evidence for their claims in the area of virtue education. In their defense it might be said that even SEL and CE, with their much longer histories, still suffer from a lack of large-scale independent and systematic evaluations (cf. Hoffman, 2009). Yet I am struck by Seligman’s (2002) modest and merely anecdotally supported suggestion that if one systematically rewards children for the display of their signature strengths, one will find them happily “drifting in the direction of a few of them” (p. 245)—as if that were quite enough. I doubt even that the emphasis on the cultivation of signature strengths can count as a truly novel feature of positive education. Other recent theories of virtue development acknowledge that, initially at least, the virtues chosen for cultivation will be a select few (Lickona, 1991) and geared toward individual temperament (Trianosky, 1993). In any case, holding that students can, in principle, lead a morally fulfilling life by concentrating on a few chosen strengths in which they excel, without attention to a coherent, all-embracing structure of virtues, may constitute half a loaf—but it is surely not the bread one expects from a program of virtue education.

Resiliency. Regarding training in resiliency, my earlier discussion noted that the techniques to enhance resiliency in positive education are techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness, which had a reputable history preceding the advent of positive psychology. The reported findings of effectiveness in those techniques in school settings have been encouraging at best and mixed at worst. No studies of the combined instructional effect of these recommended techniques (cognitive behavioral theory and mindfulness) seem to be available. Resiliency training is probably effective, but does positive psychology as such add anything to the equation? I have seen no indication that positive psychologists approach resiliency interventions differently from other (nonpositive psychology) practitioners. One could even question the appropriateness of resiliency as a positive psychological concept. To be sure, resiliency training is not meant to remedy an existing weakness, but neither is it primarily wellness enhancing. Rather, it is prophylactic against possible future weaknesses. Furthermore, one should remember that mindfulness is an ideal that draws on Buddhist meditation philosophies (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The ultimate goal of mindful mediation, as practiced along Buddhist lines, is not to stimulate positive emotions but rather to develop nonjudgmental equanimity in the face of both positive and negative emotions. I am not sure if that goal fits with any of positive psychology’s listed pathways to happiness.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Happiness—and teaching for happiness—is not only about the cultivation of positive traits but also about the creation of positive experiences, in the classroom and elsewhere. Positive psychologists thus place great stock in positive emotions. This emerges most clearly when their theory turns...
educational, the claim being that positive emotions produce “increases in learning, the traditional goal of education” (Seligman et al., 2009, pp. 294–295). But when precisely are emotions positive? The problem is that the label “positive emotion” has a number of different meanings, ranging from “morally appropriate” to “conducive to health.” Among emotion researchers in psychology, however, the term “positive emotion” is most commonly used to denote “pleasant emotion” (sometimes called “positively valenced emotion”; see, e.g., Colombetti, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 4), and here positive psychologists tend to follow suit. More specifically, they tout two types of positive emotional experiences relating to two of their chartered pathways to happiness: positive emotions simpliciter (namely, emotions that are immediately felt as pleasant), which form part of the “pleasant life,” and flow, a type of un-self-conscious gratification, which is part of the “engaged life.” It may seem odd at first to specify the latter as a type of positive emotion, because it lacks the active feel-good element that one normally associates with pleasure. However, this terminology has a clear analog in Aristotle’s well-known distinction between two kinds of pleasure: pleasure as unimpeded activity, on one hand, and as a complementary pleasant feeling that completes activity, on the other (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 201, 276).

How can positive psychology avoid collapsing into “happiology” if its proponents one-sidedly valorize positive emotions? The first thing to note is that if one looks carefully at the examples of helpful positivity that positive psychologists discuss, they still fall short of a wholesale recommendation of positive emotions. Positive affectivity, as well as Pollyannaism and optimism in general, is said to be conducive to optimal living, but only within reasonable limits. The idea seems to be that when people evaluate present or future states of affairs as painful or pleasant, they operate with a baseline of expectations. If things are clearly on the wrong side of that baseline, unfounded optimism is not helpful (see, e.g., Seligman, 2002, pp. 30, 57). Most of our daily experiences, however, take place somewhere close to the baseline itself. For the average person, they call for reactions of neutrality or indifference. Children, for instance, wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, brush their teeth, and head for school. Yet some children meet those “neutral” events with a smile and think of their glasses as half full; others meet them with a grumpy look and consider their glasses to be half empty. It is here that positive psychology steps in with its advice that it is more propitious for happiness to belong to the former group than to the latter: “When there is room for doubt, people should fill that gap with hope” (Peterson, 2006, p. 128). Nonetheless, mere positive affect “alienated from positive character” leads to “emptiness” and “lack of meaning” (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003, p. 161). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, some of the moral virtues celebrated in positive psychology actually imply painful emotions such as compassion and righteous indignation. In sum, although positive psychologists clearly prioritize positive over negative emotion, their substance is considerably less radical than it may seem at first, and clearly less radical than some other latter-day approaches with which educational psychologists are familiar, such as many of the feel-good self-esteem theories of the 1980s and 1990s (reviewed and criticized in Kristjánsson, 2010b, Chapter 5), which uniformly promoted pleasant feelings about oneself.

Educational Interventions

Let me start with pleasure as unimpeded activity—namely, flow—before moving on to the more active kind of positive emotion.

Flow. The flow concept originally emerged from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) qualitative interviews with such successful people such as sculptors and basketball players, describing optimal experiences of activities going well. They described their experiences in terms of intense and focused concentration, the merging of action and awareness in total absorption, a feeling of being the locus of control, having clear goals with instant feedback, an experience of the activity in question as “autotelic” (intrinsically rather than extrinsically rewarding), and loss of reflective self-consciousness or the sense of passing time—making it something of a self-justifying experience (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Much like “optimal performance” in Kurt Fischer’s (1980) dynamic skill theory, flow is meant to capture the optimal balance between skill, on one hand, and task/challenge, on the other. Whereas the combination of low skill and low challenge results in apathy, high challenge and low skill creates anxiety, and low challenge and high skill fosters boredom, high skill and an aptly high challenge promote flow (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). As the validity of promoting flow in positive psychology theory depends on demonstrating the linkages between flow and happiness, Csikszentmihalyi has made great effort with his colleagues since his 1990 book to establish such linkages. One need not, however, rely on the positive psychologists themselves to show that flow promotes happiness; a much-discussed recent study has demonstrated that a failure to experience flow undermines happiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Using data from 2,250 adults collected through a specially designed iPhone application, Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) found that the more people’s minds wander from the activities in which they are engaged, the unhappier they become. Such mind-wandering occurred in 46.9% of their samples.

The idea of flow seems to harmonize well with teachers’ visions of ideal classroom practice; at any rate, systematically creating conditions for flow had become a respectable educational goal prior to positive education (see, e.g., Tomlinson, 1999). The school is not the best place, however, to see flow in action—not if one accepts the verdict of positive psychologists. Their disheartening claim is that flow is “rarely experienced by youth during any school activity”
Rather, schoolwork is typically found in the high-challenge, low-skill (anxiety) quadrant (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005), or even the low-challenge, high-skill (boredom) quadrant, where able students fritter away time (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Notably, although flow in schoolwork typically creates situations conducive to learning, flow is not a necessary condition of educational achievement. Danish students, for instance, reported above-average levels of flow in a comparative study of engagement levels in Danish, Finnish, and Japanese classrooms. The author attributed this finding to an emphasis on autonomy, initiative, and independence in Danish schools. Finnish students, however, achieve more educationally than Danish students do (Andersen, 2005).

The empirical evidence for the flow thesis has been garnered, inter alia, through the use of an experience sampling method, in which respondents carry a paging device that signals them at random moments. Each time they are signaled, they complete a brief questionnaire about their activities, addressing levels of challenge and needed skill and the affective and motivational qualities of their experiences. A study of 526 U.S. high school students demonstrated the relative rarity of flow experiences at school and provided support for the thesis that flow experiences are most likely to occur when instruction is perceived as challenging and relevant. Such experiences turned out to be correlated with feelings of autonomy, belongingness, competence, and self-worth. Although there are examples of discrepancies between the flow levels of teachers and students (e.g., mathematics teachers are often in flow, whereas their students are flow-less), flow experiences can, and frequently do, traverse from enthusiastic teachers to their students (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

What, then, can one do to increase classroom flow? Suggestions from positive psychologists abound. One can allow students to play to their signature strengths when designing their own assignments (Baylis, 2004), and thus increase the likelihood of intrinsic motivation. The entire school system could even be designed to be more similar to a preschool, where students are allowed to engage in “serious play” (Terjesen et al., 2004). Or one could enhance the relevance of such extracurricular activities as sports and arts, which are known to stimulate higher flow levels than ordinary classroom work does (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Evaluations other than grades—as practiced in Danish schools—seem to increase flow (Andersen, 2005). In general, greater emphasis must be placed on learning by doing, Deweyan style, as more gratification and less proneness to mind-wandering tends to be obtained through physical activities than mere thinking (Watson, 2005).

Pleasant emotions. Turning now from flow to positive emotions simpliciter, recall that positive psychologists believe that it is generally a good thing to feel such emotions—at least when they are not plainly inappropriate or morally wrong. Positive psychologists have provided evidence that positive emotions promote well-being. In one study, the incidence of positive emotional terms in young nuns’ notebooks predicted their longevity, and women who were smiling in their college yearbook photos were considerably better adjusted and happier 30 years later than their nonsmiling peers (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 107). From an educational perspective, positive emotions are said to have more benefits than simply helping a person feel good. It has been argued that such emotions broaden a person’s thought-action repertoire (attention, working memory, verbal fluency, openness to information) and that such a broadened repertoire builds enduring personal resources. The list of potential benefits is almost endless, ranging from fewer intellectual biases, more effective learning strategies and creative/holistic thinking, more helpful behavior, raised self-confidence, and better work attitude to less physical pain, improved health (through boosting the immune system), and longevity. This is the broaden-and-build thesis, proposed by positive psychologist Barbara L. Fredrickson. The benefits of positive emotions gradually transform people, forming an upward spiral of increased activity and engagement, which is conducive to learning and to happiness. An ideal ratio of positive experiences has even been calculated precisely as 2.9 to every one negative experience (Fredrickson, 2005; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; cf. Peterson, 2006, p. 58; Seligman, 2002, p. 38). Fredrickson (2009) recently wrote a book in support of this rather remarkable claim. The main implication for classroom practice is that “more well-being is synergistic with better learning” (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 294). Because positive emotions not only enhance present wellness but also dispel the effects of previous negative experiences, creating positive learning situations in the classroom can outdo the damage that bad teaching may have done to students in the past.

What is the empirical evidence behind this thesis? Fredrickson and her colleagues have tested it experimentally. Most of their experiments induce positive or negative feelings in subjects (e.g., by showing them sad or happy film clips) and subsequently measuring their performance or function in some area (e.g., their creativity or imagination) or asking them to complete questionnaires about their well-being. The findings tend to be the same: Those who have had the happy experiences exhibit a broadened thought-action repertoire and experience greater well-being (Fredrickson, 2005). Although Fredrickson has not implemented school-based interventions, positive psychologists are optimistic that her research findings provide a rationale and foundation for such interventions (see, e.g., Peterson, 2006, p. 60). According to Seligman, the first lesson to be learned for educators is that up until at least the age of 7, the main task of positive child-rearing should be to increase positive emotion through the unconditional deliverance of affection, love, and ebullience. After age 7, the creation of positive affect continues to play a fundamental role in the classroom, because it leads to exploration, mastery experiences, and students’
discovery of their signature strengths—in addition to all the other broaden-and-build effects noted earlier (Seligman, 2002, pp. 219, 231–232). How is such positive affect created? By helping students to notice their positive experiences, introducing activities that they enjoy, telling them positive stories, using boosters to change the mood in the class, encouraging students to go into their “stretch zone” but helping them when they are in their “panic zone”—and, of course, by fostering “flow” (Eades, 2008). Positive psychologists have also suggested a more general method for inducing positive emotion in oneself or others: bootstrapping it by willfully smiling or pretending to be happy and hoping that fiction creates reality (Baylis, 2004, p. 212; Peterson, 2006, p. 42).

Evaluation of Educational Interventions

In this section, I evaluate some of the findings discussed in the previous two subsections concerning flow and pleasant emotions.

Flow. Starting with flow, notice first that educational psychologists have commonly studied the level of engagement among teachers and their students in classroom activities without conceptualizing engagement as “flow.” Consider, for example, the study of classroom engagement by Dolezel, Welsh, Pressley, and Vincent (2003). The researchers observed and interviewed teachers, classifying them into three levels of engagement: low, moderate, and high. To count as high in engagement, a teacher’s on-task behavior had to be consistently high and a high proportion of tasks given to students had to be appropriately challenging. The authors then created a grounded theory about the teachers’ behaviors that exemplified engagement and how those behaviors subsequently promoted student engagement as well. Although the authors did cite Csikszentmihalyi in their bibliography, it is unclear what the concept of flow adds to their observations or their theorizing. Is the ordinary-language concept of “engagement” not sufficient to make sense of what goes in the classrooms described in this and other similar studies? Would classroom talk about engaged teachers and students differ if it was couched in terms of “flow” rather than simply “engagement,” “involvement,” or “spontaneity”?

Theories linking intrinsic motivation and learning have already been developed in Heider’s (1958) attribution theory, Bandura’s (1997) work on self-efficacy, and Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory. Yet it could be argued that Csikszentmihalyi’s flow-concept is more specific than any competing conceptualizations on how a positive but un-self-conscious emotional affect is created through—and subsequently helps sustain—a challenging learning experience. But even if “flow” were to add something new to the conceptualization of engaged, intrinsically motivated learning, one must not forget that the concept is much older than the movement of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi wrote his first book on the subject in 1990), and it has been applied widely by theorists and practitioners who have no positive psychological aspirations. Educational interventions based on flow cannot, therefore, be counted as new and unique to positive psychology. It could be contended that it must, nevertheless, be a point in favor of positive psychology that it has created a coherent framework that now houses the concept. After all, concepts function better within families than they do as freestanding orphans.

One thing at least is certain about flow. As Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) freely admitted, the concept is amoral: “It is possible for people to seek flow in activities that are neutral or destructive to the self and/or the culture” (p. 101)—witness a Bonnie-and-Clyde-like rampage as an example of its worst possible excesses. This is the reason why flow belongs to Seligman’s happiness-pathway of the “engaged life” rather than that of the “meaningful” or “full life.” Recall, however, that Seligman was eventually unable to prioritize the meaningful life as a better life for everyone; some people may not have more happiness in them than is attainable through a Bonnie-and-Clyde style. Positive psychologists’ frequent overtures to Aristotle’s (1985) happiness theory notwithstanding, this is definitely not what Aristotle had in mind when he wrote about actively exercising our favored faculties upon the objects we like most as a constitutive part of human happiness (p. 227).

Broaden-and-build thesis. Before turning to the broaden-and-build thesis, a quick observation is in order about one of the methods recommended by positive psychologists for inducing positive emotion in oneself or others—“bootstrapping” it by pretending to be happy and hoping that fiction creates reality. Despite this recommendation, there is some ambivalence within the positive psychology camp toward the value of positive illusions (see further in Kristjánsson, 2010a). How far should the tendency to feel good about oneself be promoted, independent of the truth about one’s virtues, efforts, and achievements? Seligman (2002) has remained faithful to his belief that positive emotion separated from the exercise of moral character fosters inauthenticity, which hinders the attainment of the meaningful life—and that some tasks in life require negative thinking (pp. 8, 39). Others, such as Peterson (2006), have seemed more cavalier about the use of positive illusions: of making it by faking it (p. 42). They are not alone in this, of course: There is much research within other paradigms of motivation and self-regulated learning that supports positive self-talk irrespective of its moral or factual foundation (cf. Pintrich, 2004). However, for those who believe, like philosopher of education Nel Noddings (2003), that education for happiness must include education for unhappiness as well—teaching children to empathize with and share the unhappiness of others (p. 36)—it is somewhat disconcerting to notice how some positive psychologists seem to consider beatific feelings to be a magic elixir that brings release from and transcendence of the human condition.
Despite some of the strong claims of the broaden-and-build thesis, Fredrickson (2005) acknowledged that the thesis is young and that additional tests are needed before it moves from a provocative proposal to a well-supported theory (p. 130). Let me start by expressing a couple of misgivings about the thesis. The first is that it relies heavily on self-reports used to check if the tested intervention (say, a film clip) has actually produced the expected emotion in the subject and to ascertain subjects’ level of well-being. The possible perils of self-reports are, however, well known and well documented (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

The second misgiving is that the broaden-and-build thesis is sometimes said to be about the effect of positive affect and sometimes of positive emotions, as if they are one and the same. Philosophers sometimes grouse, à la Wittgenstein, that in psychological theorizing, language often goes on holiday, and I submit that in this case there is some truth to it. The term “positive affect” is, I propose, best understood as an umbrella term for “positive mood” and “positive emotion.” Moods are objectless states, but emotions have intentional objects: They are about something. Whereas one can in a good mood simpliciter, one cannot experience the positive emotion of, say, pride without being proud about some perceived accomplishment for which one deems oneself to be responsible. Moreover, moods tend be dispositional (or traitlike)—witness the Big Five personality trait of Neuroticism and its opposite of Emotional Calmness—whereas emotions often occur episodically without being manifestations of a stable trait (Kristjánsson, 2002, Chapter 1).

The problem for the broaden-and-build thesis—at least as a basis for educational interventions—is this: If the positive affect that the thesis deems to be the efficient variable is positive mood, then it needs to take account of the fact that there is a significant genetic component to personality traits (McCrae, 2009), making efforts at positive-mood production akin to efforts at self-change that are notoriously difficult to administer (cf. Kristjánsson, 2010b, Chapter 10). On the other hand, if “positive affect” refers to particular (time-and-place specific) “positive emotions”—past-oriented emotions such as pride, present-oriented emotions such as joy, or future-oriented emotions such as hope—the creation of positive affect becomes significantly easier insofar as episodic affect is presumably more easily regulable than dispositional affect. On the other hand, this understanding of the term “affect” may threaten to relegate the fundamental tenets of the thesis from statements of (informative) empirical correlations to (trivial) conceptual truths (see Snæbjörnsdóttir, 2010; cf. Smedslund, 1991). For example, it is true a priori rather than as an empirical fact that a person who experiences hope thinks and even acts (insofar as emotions include a behavioral component) differently from a person who experiences hopelessness—that the hopeful person is the more optimistic, zestful, energetic, and creative of the two. This is because hopeful people not only feel different from hopelessness but entertain, by necessity, different cognitions about themselves and the world. And that is not an empirical discovery about the correlates of hope versus hopelessness, but an a priori truth about the concepts in question. There is reason, however, to be skeptical about how useful such a priori truths are as a foundation for instructional programs.

It is worth noting at this juncture that the broaden-and-build thesis is the only aspect of positive education that is undeniably unique to the program. Thus, the final evaluation of positive education depends largely on the validity of the broaden-and-build thesis. To evaluate it properly from an educational perspective, some comparisons are in order, as this thesis is by no means the only recent one addressing the educational salience of emotions. Before the turn of the century, although interest had already been aroused about the socio-moral implications of emotions and emotion education (Goleman, 1995), few empirical studies had been conducted apart from research into test anxiety (see Zeidner, 1998) and emotions as critical outcomes of attributional processes (in Weiner’s, 1985, attributional theory). This began to change, however, as more educational psychologists realized that a fuller understanding of students’ (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002) and teachers’ (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003) emotions within the school context was essential in order to explain issues of motivation, self-regulation, and well-being related to educational outcomes. Student motivation and emotion have turned out to be “integrated and simultaneous,” and the expression, identification, and understanding of emotions is now widely being seen as central to students’ and teachers’ effective transactions (Meyer & Turner, 2006).

General models of educational emotions have also been developed. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) developed a conceptual model linking affect in classroom settings to achievement goal theory, a prominent social cognitive theory of motivation based on a distinction between students’ mastery goal orientation, focused on learning or understanding, and performance goal orientation, focused on demonstrating ability or competence. Their model posits that affect and goals are reciprocally related to each other and, more specifically, that perceived classroom mastery is linked (both as a cause and effect) to positive emotion, whereas failure to live up to perceived classroom performance causes negative emotion. Meyer and Turner (2006) explored findings about classroom emotions in the light of various motivational theories and concluded that engaging students in learning requires “consistently positive emotional experiences” (p. 377). What is called positive classroom environment reflects, for example, in part the re-creation of such positive experiences. Meyer and Turner also agreed with Linnenbrink and Pintrich on how a classroom goal structure may be emotionally scaffolded. Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry (2002) studied particularly what they call “academic emotions”—emotions directly linked to academic learning—dividing them into positive ones, such as enjoyment, hope, and pride, versus
negative ones, such as boredom, anxiety, and shame/guilt. Although foregrounding the value of positive emotions, these authors emphasized that negative emotions can also play a “positive” role in the educational process. Such emotions can induce strong motivation to cope with negative events; shame in particular may induce student motivation to avoid failures by investing effort (cf. Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002).

If one compares those recent accounts of emotions in education with positive psychology’s broaden-and-build thesis, the former seem to yield a much richer picture. Although the emphasis in those accounts, as in the broaden-and-build thesis, is on the educational value of positive emotions, an increasing number of research findings have indicated that negative emotions such as shame can also broaden and build students’ personal resources by increasing effort and persistence in the pursuit of goals (Turner et al., 2002). Even the concept of positive emotion, as linked to educational outcomes, turns out to be considerably more complex than suggested by positive psychology. Students can, for example, be low in joy but high in pride, or vice versa (Meyer & Turner, 2006). A helpful distinction has been proposed between positive “activating” emotions, such as hope and pride, and positive “deactivating” emotions, such as relief and relaxation after success (Pekrun et al., 2002). Moreover, attention has been given to students’ meta-emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002): their emotions about emotions (cf. Kristjánsson, 2010c), a topic largely neglected in positive psychology’s emotion theory.

When compared to these recent nuanced accounts, positive psychology’s broaden-and-build thesis seems to fall short. Four caveats must be entered about that conclusion, however. First, positive psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Fredrickson are frequently cited favorably in this burgeoning field on educationally salient emotions. Second, although great strides are being made in current educational psychology in accommodating negative emotions as potentially valuable, the emphasis still remains firmly—just as in the broaden-and-build thesis—on positive affect. Third, it could be argued that the comparison of recent emotion theories in educational psychology with that of positive psychology’s broaden-and-build thesis is unfair because the scope of the latter is much wider than of the former. The educational psychologists are interested in emotions in the context of student classroom motivation and self-regulation with respect to educational achievement. Although this is also important for positive psychologists, their theory on the value of positive emotions is not about the school in particular but about the good life of the individual student as a whole. The good life is a happy life; they claim, and the happy life is—other things being equal—a life filled with positive emotion. Fourth, there seems to be growing awareness in the very latest literature on positive psychology that the benefits of certain negative emotions need to be acknowledged and that further research is required on how they contribute to a well-rounded life (Tamir & Gross, 2011).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As previously noted, there is nothing new about naming happiness as the fundamental aim of education (see, e.g., Noddings, 2003). But although educational philosophers such as Noddings have urged greater consideration of happiness as an educational aim, it is not so clear that educational psychologists have so far taken up the research task of investigating how to achieve such an aim. The significance of what positive psychologists call “positive education” is to embrace this aim head-on and to propose direct methods by which “skills for happiness” can be taught (Noble & McGrath, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). They believe, in a nutshell, that happiness can serve as an evaluative screen through which to judge everything that is done in school. Notice that subjective accounts of happiness have a difficult time explaining the role of happiness in education. Repeated studies show, for instance, that educational achievement is a low impact factor on subjective well-being (Michalos, 2008). It is precisely because of positive psychologists’ (partial) retrieval of objective criteria for happiness that their claims about the happiness-inducing effect of education deserve to be taken seriously. In the Happiness section, I suggested a modification of their happiness theory that would turn it into a purely objective account. Such a modification could eliminate some of the troublesome ambiguities at the heart of the theory and make it more amenable to practical application.

It remains to answer the questions with which this article started: Does positive psychology offer anything (a) valuable or (b) new in the field of educational psychology? Positive psychologists make one very general claim: that educational psychology needs to focus more on students’ strengths than on students’ weaknesses. As previously discussed, this claim may not be fair to existing psychologies of education. In their bid to launch positive education, however, positive psychologists have made a number of more specific claims about what they consider to be a “spider’s web” of interrelated issues (Morris, 2009, Appendix). They have maintained, for instance, that resiliency training can prevent student depression, that moral virtues and strengths (in particular, students’ “signature strengths”) hold a key to student educational achievement and well-being, that classroom teaching needs to foster more experiences of “flow,” and that positive affect broadens and builds students’ learning and coping repertoires. My exploration of the empirical evidence behind these claims has uncovered some encouraging findings, but some mixed, tentative, and negative ones as well. Methods such as cognitive behavioral therapy and mindful meditation that had a long history before the advent of positive psychology tend to do best in effectiveness tests. The only educational intervention that is undeniably unique to the positive education program—the promotion of positive affect in the classroom via the broaden-and-build thesis—may lose some of its appeal if it turns out that fundamental statements in the thesis are of a conceptual rather than an empirical nature.
My comparison at the end of the preceding section of positive psychology’s emotion theory with other recent approaches in educational psychology also seemed to indicate that more nuanced accounts of student emotions are already available. On the other hand, this comparison also served to underline the fact that positive psychology focuses not only on the impact of positive emotions on educational achievement or even educational well-being but also on their more general role in the good—the happy—life. If we lose sight of that central magnet in the theory—the overarching happiness hypothesis—there is danger that all the individual atoms will fall back into their respective heaps as residues from other theories.

One of the challenges in trying to assess positive education as a whole is that the different interventions proposed have rarely been used or assessed in combination as part of a whole-school program. It is simply not known yet if the whole is synergistically stronger than the individual parts. That may change now that positive psychologists have found a whole school to work with (the Geelong Grammar School). If the results there are as positive as they predict, one will be in a much better position to say something conclusive about how the ideas of positive education can be brought to bear on the relations between psychology and learning, how the goals of education should change, and how the agenda of mainstream educational psychology research might productively shift as a consequence. An article in a journal such as this one typically prods people to go in a new direction, providing evidence that the direction in question is a promising one and that not enough people are going there yet. At the moment, I can say only that many people seem to be heading already in the direction of positive education but that not enough is yet known to ascertain if the good in it is new or the new in it is good. At the same time, only a pouty spoilsport would reject in advance the hope that something new and good will eventually come of it—that the fledgling ideas seen so far in positive education will turn into a fully fledged effective theory.

Perhaps academics are stuck with too-rigid conceptualizations of newness and originality. What counts as new in a given context is always a philosophical question, and who is to say that a newly bottled old wine (or a combination of old wines in a new bottle) will not have a different-enough original taste to count as a new wine? It might be a relief if one could honestly concede that the time of movements, manifestoes, and best packages in education is over and that one should simply concentrate on the individual interventions that work best. By adopting that perspective, the question of what is essentially new in positive education would fall by the wayside as irrelevant. In any case, there is clearly a lot of enthusiasm in the air about letting positive psychology “go to school,” and one would certainly hope that some of that enthusiasm could enter the bloodstream of educators and quicken its pulse.

Someone once said that it is an immigrant’s prerogative to love his or her new country with a lack of cynicism that would be impossible for a native. Positive psychologists realize that they are frequently covering old terrain and coming up with solutions that natives find “corny” (Peterson, 2006, p. 29). I see this as their advantage rather than their disadvantage. If they do produce some educational interventions that make the school a happier place to work in—even if those interventions are recycled and retooled, or nothing but old wine in new bottles—then their mission has not been in vain.

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