Positive Education at Geelong Grammar:
the story so far and a response to criticism

JOHN HENDRY *taught at the school for thirty-six years and was particularly concerned with student welfare. He was one of those who planned and introduced Positive Education there, from which it has spread to other schools. He is now a leader in the work of Relationships Victoria.*

Positive Education is the adaptation of the tenets of positive psychology to education, particularly primary and secondary schooling. Kay Redfield Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine at John Hopkins University and Honorary Professor of English at St. Andrews in Scotland, has suggested that positive education has called psychology back to the wide-ranging and profound interests of David Hume and William James. This movement has promoted a greater interest in and understanding of passion, imagination, and the nature of human greatness, as well as attending to those inhibitions that deny many the chance of living a rewarding and fulfilling life. Jamison has also reported that in the last two decades the positive psychologists have brought new life and better science to the study of psychology. The study of positive emotion, happiness, excellent and optimal human functioning is now well established.

She credits Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi with steering the profession back towards aspects of human nature which enhance life and productivity, capacities that might one day prevent mental illness, not simply contend with it once it occurs. "Our message", these two wrote in *The American Psychologist*, "is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play." Professor Jamison considered their statement as "an eloquent call to the field".

Geelong Grammar School was concerned about the "social indicators" in Australia, for adolescents in particular. Mental health challenges were on the rise and many were in a fog of mental ill-health reaching from being anxious to self-harm, from being less resilient to losing faith in themselves and, for increasingly many, to suicide. The methods used to address these challenges were failing. The Black Dog Institute and Beyond Blue were in existence and Headspace was embryonic but growing. Geelong Grammar looked world-wide for approaches to address this concern with "student wellbeing" and to ensure that young people could do better than just coping. It was agreed to investigate positive psychology.

Martin Seligman was brought to the School to address staff, the School Council, and other interested parties, some of whom were from Australian universities. All this was the beginning of a process of developing a Student Wellbeing Centre at the School, The Handbury Centre, which was a new site for both the senior gymnasium and the School Medical Centre. Significant funds were raised and the idea was to create a centre focused on what Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi had requested of the field of psychology, not only to deal with "misery", as Seligman put it, but to strengthen the lives and confidence of all. The School contracted with Penn University to begin a serious adaptation of positive psychology to education. Some similar initiatives had begun in the United Kingdom, America and Australia in 2004. Seligman brought his family on sabbatical for six months and enrolled his children in the School. He also brought a team of academics and trainers to begin by training the entire staff, and some special guests, more than 150 in number, for nine days in January 2008. This was a voluntary training session for staff, but all attended. All "bought into" what was seen by all as a most responsible education and life-enhancing initiative. Within this arrangement Seligman had selected two "master teachers", Randy Ernst and Mark Linkins, who spent six months each living at the School and working closely with all staff. The first definition of Positive Education was determined under Randy Ernst's watch. In the latter half of 2008 Mark Linkins led further adaptation and development. Visiting Scholars identified by Seligman came and stayed, some for a week, others much longer, and these were the "pinch hitters" who had worked and continue to work with the School generally within positive psychology. The contribution of these academics was significant and the sense that they and Positive Education "belonged" at the School was profound and remains so to this day some twelve years down the track.

The School began to "teach" Positive Education and to develop Teacher Courses for it. The Principal, Stephen Meek, declared that this was something the School would make available to all schools. The Geelong Grammar School Positive Education Institute was established to oversee this and has continued to do so for over a decade. Thousands of teachers have been trained within Australia at the School and within schools around Australia and throughout the world. Training has reached Europe, Canada, Hong Kong, mainland China, Singapore, New Zealand, the UK, Thailand, Dubai and of course the USA. Contributions have reached UNESCO and other international bodies associated with education. This is ongoing although Covid-19 has put a brake on it. On-line training has begun. PESA, a national association of schools in Australia, has been established.

A definition of Positive Education has been an ongoing adventure and it remains so, but the emphasis is on health and wellbeing and enabling students to gain greater life satisfaction through being more able to manage the ups and downs that life presents as they move through school. The overall object is, of course, to enable all to achieve more, to contribute more, and live meaningful lives. The take-up of Positive Education, and the investment in it, has been quite astounding throughout the world and research endeavours in this field are growing exponentially. Education courses at universities throughout the world have addressed some of the Positive Education initiatives and many universities now have courses in student wellbeing. Worldwide data suggest depression is the leading cause of disability and that over 120 million people worldwide suffer from it. Almost 9 million people die each year by suicide and well over 20 million attempt it annually. 7% of people worldwide suffer from anxiety, and children in primary and secondary school are presenting with levels of anxiety which are disturbing. The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened these mental health issues and already there are calls for more investment in mental health for children and adults. Suicide is the leading cause of death for 15-34-year-old Australians (ABS 2013), almost 75% of mental health conditions start before the age of 25 (Kessler *et al*. 2007), and almost 40% of 15-17-year-old children say they are extremely or very concerned about coping with stress (Mission Australia 2013). Royal Commissions into abuse and into mental health have found that initiatives focusing on creating more meaningful lives and more humane and healthy relationships are essential.

Positive Education and allied initiatives are beginning to assist education and foster achievement. Various models have been produced but the best known is the Seligman PERMA+ model. It combines Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement, and the plus sign refers to Positive Health. My interest has been especially in the area of relationships, for we live our lives within a galaxy of them. It is the evolutionary nature of humans to be social, and so to give and to seek approval and support. The quality of our relationships largely determines our state of mental and physical health. Loneliness precedes and accompanies isolation, depression, self-harm, and an ongoing sense of insecurity, and these may lead to suicide. I pushed powerfully for relationships to to be a serious aspect of the model when Seligman was at Geelong Grammar. A year later he returned to Australia to conduct further training and to begin influencing and training staff of the Commonwealth Department of Education and his model had progressed from PEM to PERM. He had listened not only to me but to his great friend Chris Petersen, who had the mantra "Other people matter." My mantra is "Relationships matter." By contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his play *No Exit*, has "Hell is other People." The Seligman model grew later to PERMA, for achievement was added. This was to lead to recognition of conscientiousness as an important ingredient in achievement; it has been studied by Professor Angela Duckworth. The name *Grit* was selected as a more vivid title for a book. The model grew to PERMA+, to include health as I have said.

There is at Geelong Grammar School an approach to Positive Education which introduces students at all levels to some important processes towards health and wellbeing and greater contribution. The object within the school is to "teach it, live it and embed it". This means that a culture of care, a "resilient culture", is communicated, for this will ensure that students are guided towards healthier lives within a culture where good relationships are promoted.

Mindfulness has been included, which fosters calm awareness of thoughts and emotions and becoming more aware of the present. Empathy and compassion are studied to promote the recognition of the emotions of others and caring for others as well as oneself. At the School I emphasized and wrote into the School Policies both kindness and forgiveness, and these are lived within the culture. Self-awareness is critical and here understanding one's own strengths, talents, limitations, and goals are examined. Communication skills matter, too, within relationships and active listening and constructive responding, with the intention to honour

another's position, are taught. The nature of a good relationship is examined and all five fundamental elements, trust, forgiveness, integrity, hope, and compassion, are taught. It is pointed out that flourishing depends more on giving than on taking. Giving adds meaning to lives. Creative and critical thinking is taught. The positive role of boredom is explored as are all the forms of play. Critical thinking draws on logic and other branches of philosophy, and the Golden Rule and the Hippocratic Oath are studied. Decision-making is studied, and the neuroscience of it examined, as are such things as the creation of habits. Mindsets are also looked at closely, and the forms of praise examined and the impact these have on learning and achievement. Also studied are motivation and intention, problem-solving and resilience, and learning from successes, mistakes and failure.

Many students have enjoyed these studies, and others have struggled, but the anecdotal and now examined outcomes indicate that all do benefit in all aspects of their lives. The Positive Education courses now offered throughout the world are making a difference. Many courses and approaches are now being implemented and all are helping children and young people to be better informed about themselves, others, and their relationships with them. The end game is to help students to understand and develop the characteristics of a happy and fruitful life. To that positive psychology, and particularly PERMA+, has made a large contribution.

I have given most of my space to a chronological account of how positive education was developed at the school where I served for thirty-six years. As one of the developers and formulators (a member of a team), I must be cautious about making any criticisms, although, as with any program, one does well to warn about dangers or difficulties. However, as in any field, one should welcome and engage with criticism, especially when it is sympathetic and constructive. John Howes wrote in that mode in his editorial letter in this magazine (the issue named 2017 and 2018). He made or implied five criticisms that I here address.

The first (pp. 1 and 2) was that there was too little attention in positive psychology to "a wide range of moral, mental and psychological qualities ... valuable in themselves". As I have said, Chris Peterson and I both urged upon Martin Seligman and colleagues of his and of mine in the School the fundamental importance of **relationships**. Hence the inclusion of the R in 'PERMA+'. In that context, I have long given special attention to kindness and forgiveness (or forgiving-

ness). I do not question the importance of the qualities John specifies, and I know that many people have been and are working to give greater attention to what John suggests.

The second (p.2) is that positive psychology sets itself up as **the** way to well-being, rather than recognizing also the enrichment of lives that can come from such fields as moral philosophy and biography. It is true that all of us, including moral philosophers as John would agree, are prone to **over**-emphasize the value of what **we** have found valuable, particularly if it is our own "patch". We mostly do all try honestly to improve the lot of others, and often this is not appreciated or even tolerated in our time, as in the case of Baruch Spinoza (see Wikipedia, 1.4). Most try to contribute, and the establishment of Positive Education is an example.

Thirdly (also on p.2), John aligns himself with Lord Layard's comment "Positive psychology can come over as very individualistic", rather than immediately concerned with what John calls "devotion and service". That can indeed be a danger, unless we understand both (a) the term 'relationships' as inviting us to consider the kinds of relationships (even if mainly through donations and/or the giving of time) we can practicably and ought to form with some needy people in this country and/or elsewhere, and (b) the centrality of genuinely altruistic motivation. John has drawn my attention to Kant's denial of "genuinely moral worth" to the actions of those whose motivation is simply that "they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work" (H.J.Paton's edition, called *The Moral Law*, of Kant's *Groundwork* ..., near the lower marginal number 10). Kant would, I think rightly, have been little impressed by pp. 20 and 21 of Seligman's *Flourish*, where he says "we scientists have found that doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise we have tested". I agree that there is this danger of being **unduly** concerned with one's own well-being, as occurs sometimes in marriages that are unhappy for both, even when each brings the other gifts. However, being well and contented does help a person to meet another's need for assistance.

"We scientists ...": John doubts (p.3) the universality of the need for **measurement** in positive psychology or positive education. Here I agree with him. Consider the virtue of patience (the warm-hearted kind, not the grim!), often a vital aspect of the kindness I care so much about, e.g, in parents, teachers, among fellow-students, and those who care for the aged

and infirm. Its depth and motivation is not to be judged by a questionnaire of the kind so prominent in *Flourish*. Measurement of these elements of relationships is not really possible.

Fifthly, John rightly resists, in the paragraph beginning with 'Both' (p.1), the presenting of schools generally as having lacked a focus on "nurturing the whole child". He quotes Jacolyn Norrish to refute that so far as Geelong Grammar's tradition is concerned. I am sure John is onto something here. We need to discover and study good practices and emphases of various times, places and kinds. John has provided me with examples. He had at the University of Melbourne an older fellow-student and friend who had been in the sixth form (year 12) at Geelong Grammar in about 1942, and who gratefully remembered the weekly class that was conducted with that form by J.R.Darling, the Head, and called just HM. Darling wanted a wide range of questions presented and discussed by the boys, and participated accordingly. In nineteenth-century England, the famous Bishop Westcott looked back to his Head of fifty years before, James Prince Lee, and said "He claimed us from the first as his fellow workers. He made us feel that in all learning we must be active and not receptive only."

There is the danger, as with all new "orthodoxies", or (wretched word in this case) "industries", that those who teach positive education, supervise research in it, or license practitioners of it, may not encourage critical and constructive work that draws on many traditions or examples of theory and practice before and outside it. Geelong Grammar School has continued its approach to guiding the students (now girls as well as boys) in their development of the whole person. In Year 10 the students all attend lessons once a week on Values and Ethics, and participate in a project on "giving to make the world a better place". In Year 11 a two-day workshop is conducted on resilience, and in Year 12 weekly assemblies are given to this whole-person process.

We all in education are genuinely working to make the world a better place, and I assure John and readers that I warmly recognize that the contributions of many learned and responsible people are needed for a fuller understanding of what the education of the young can be. I thank him for his insights and for his important observations.

Memory, then, and will-power are two of the qualities that make a good teacher. The third is kindness. It is very difficult to teach anything without kindness. … the pupils should feel that the teacher wants to help them, wants them to improve, is sorry for their mistakes and pleased by their successes and sympathetic with their inadequacies. Learning anything worth while is difficult. Some people find it painful. Everyone finds it tiring. Few things will diminish the difficulty, the pain and the fatigue like the kindness of a good teacher.

This kindness must be genuine. People of all ages, from careless children up to hard-working graduate students, easily and quickly detect the teacher who dislikes them …. It is useless to feign a liking for them if you do not really feel it.

… the kindness must be there. It may be the kindness of an elder brother or sister, even of a parent. It can well be the kindness of a fellow-student.

Excerpted from Gilbert Highet's *The Art of Teaching* (Methuen 1951), p.63f.

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