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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN SCHOOL – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The present article aims to present the progress of the study and application of positive psychology in the school context. It is described how the interest of applied positive psychology in educational contexts has emerged and how develop the research related to the models of application of the positive education. Then there are presented the concept of positive school and the characteristics of positive school environment and is discussed the focus on school satisfaction and well-being in positive school. Positive schools support, enhance and promote positive mental health and well-being that are considered as more important as academic outcomes. Assessing students' emotions and attitudes and well-being provides useful information that can be used in positive health strategies of promotion and intervention in children and youth. School-based targeted programs and interventions are more often required in many schools for their benefits for positive mental health, social and emotional skills, and well-being.

Keywords: Positive psychology; positive education; positive school; well-being; positive mental health; school satisfaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the most recent approaches in psychology, positive psychology is science of positive aspects of human life, such as happiness, well-being and flourishing. Snyder & Lopez (2009) define positive psychology as "the scientific and applied approach to uncovering people's strengths and promoting their positive functioning" (p. 17).

From its emerging, positive psychology has extended the perspective toward an examination of the positive human functioning. While psychology traditionally focused on mental illness and human weaknesses, positive psychology has shifted in emphasis from preoccupation only with repairing the deficiencies to also building positive qualities, and from treating of disorders to the effort of highlighting individual and collective positive experiences, strengths and virtues (Noble & McGrath, 2008; Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Evolution of the positive psychology from the disease model to the health model is the result of the necessity to balance the approaches about flourishing life and positive health

rather than human deficiencies (Seligman, 2011). The main focus of the positive psychology progress is how to facilitate flourishing lives that promote individual and organisational well-being (Noble & Mc Grath, 2008, p. 119).

Positive psychology has developed in two major interdependent directions: focusing on positive health (Seligman, 2008) and achieving positive education in various social and institutional contexts of development: family, school, and community (Negovan, 2013, p. 35). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggested there are three pillars of positive psychology: positive emotions, positive individual characteristics, and positive institutions.

Positive psychology has an explicit concern for building individual strengths and life skills and improving well-being in young people, direction where schools have an important role. Ensuring support for positive mental health prevention and promotion in children and youth has been achieving through designing and implementing of educational programs centered on positive feelings, qualities and skills so that children and youth become happy and responsible adults as members of healthy communities (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). School can provide a supportive environment of applying the positive psychology core concepts and principles to develop students into healthier individuals who positively contribute to the society.

Positive psychology interventions in schools aim to implement undertakings of increase life quality and well-being and promote self-development in pupils, teachers, parents, educators. These interventions carry on through training programs of positive feelings, personality traits and characteristics, skills and competencies for successful adaptation (Baker et al., 2003). Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) defined positive psychology interventions (PPI's) as programs, practises, treatment methods or activities "aimed at cultivating positive feelings, positive behaviors, or positive cognitions" (p. 467). Waters (2011) points out that the application of the positive psychology in school aims the following directions: 1. including positive psychology topics into traditional academic disciplines; 2. using a school-wide approach of positive education; 3. implementing a strategic framework of guiding positive psychology applications in schools; 4. interventions on the traditional educational systems (p. 84). The first direction supposes teaching-learning of the positive psychology concepts, models and skills. Including positive psychology topics into school curriculum helps students to identify their developmental assets and find ways to use their skills and strengths more effectively in their lives. The second direction implies an extensive approach by designing and implementing of the positive education programs in the whole school with all its educational actors (students, teachers, staff of the school). The third direction refers to the fact that just using scientific models can be developed efficient strategies of positive education to build positive school environment. Finally, the fourth direction implies the support of the entire educational community to needs to create a positive school culture. The four directions are necessary factors to implement positive education in schools.

2. POSITIVE EDUCATION: CONCEPT AND MODELS

Positive psychology theory and research has been applied across many domains. Education is the domain where positive psychology has rapidly gained ground. During the last decades, scholars and practitioners have systematically made efforts to promote and apply core concepts and principles of the positive psychology in the general contexts of education and in the particular context of school.

Positive education is a recently developed paradigm that emerged as an applied positive psychology positive in educational contexts. Seligman (2011) defined positive education as traditional education focused on academic skill development, completed by approaches that increase well-being and promote positive mental health. Positive education can also be understood as education for both

traditional skills and for happiness (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, & Linkins, 2009), which merges core concepts and principles of positive psychology with best-practice teaching and with educational theories in the school settings. Positive education aims to enhance optimal functioning, well-being, and flourishing in children and youth.

Research indicated that, in the last years, took place an increase in the number of cases of depression and other mental or behavioral disorders in young people in many countries. These findings led to the necessity to apply the positive psychology principles in school contexts. Positive education supports schools and helps students to discover their resources and find ways to use their skills (cognitive, emotional, social) more effectively in all aspects of their lives. The increasing number of studies aim at understanding the pathways of optimal development in children and adolescents indicates that the positive education has been continuously developing especially within education and school contexts (Gilman, Huebner & Furlong, 2014).

There are many models for research and practical applications of positive psychology, but the well-known is PERMA, a theoretical model proposed by M. Seligman (2011), one of the founders of positive psychology. The framework model consists of five components: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Positive emotion is the component strongly connected with happiness and well-being. with regards to the past, present and future. A person who is able to focus on positive emotions with regards to the past, present, and future has a positive view of life and the ability to be optimistic with many health benefits. It is important to discriminate between pleasure and positive emotion which is connected to satisfying needs of survival and enjoyment that comes from intellectual stimulation, work satisfaction and creativity. Engagement is the second component associated with learning, work and other activities, stimulates self-development, personal strengths and skills and generates produces enjoyment and happiness. An optimal type of engagement is flow or total engagement when person is completely involved and absorbed into the activity. The third building block is represented by the relationships. Building positive and strong relationships with other people generates feelings of social connection, love, joy, empathy and intimacy, support person in difficult times and increases emotional and physical interaction and well-being. Meaning refers to the perception of a purposeful life and achieving goals that transcend the self. This component gives people a reason for their life and produces feelings of happiness, life satisfaction and fulfilment. An important distinction is between purpose concerning to reach objectives and meaning in life, with regard to the greater purpose of life. The last component – accomplishment/achievement - refers to setting goals and putting necessary efforts to achieve them. Having accomplishments in life motivates us and generates feelings of satisfaction and self-fulfillment, a sense of competence, mastery and success and stimulates personality flourishing. Each of five components contributes to well-being and happiness. Seligman (2011) believes that his theoretical model can help people to increase not just happiness but reach a life of fulfillment, meaning and flourishing that is the new goal of positive psychology.

The PERMA model of human flourishing has taken over and adapted especially in practical applications of the positive psychology in schools. The model has also been applied in many schools from different countries in the developing of educational programs centred on helping students to increase their cognitive and emotional skills, strengths and well-being and to develop children and youth into healthier individuals who contribute positively to the society.

An example of practical model based on positive education principles is GSS (Geelong Grammar School) model. The successful program is a long-term whole-school approach that was implemented in an Australian school and managed by M. Seligman and his coworkers (2009). Interventions within the GGS model focused on six domains of well-being (positive emotions, positive engagement, positive

accomplishment, positive purpose, positive relationships, and positive health). Interventions were implemented on three levels: explicit teaching of positive psychology concepts and principles into academic curriculum (*Teach it*), implicit teaching through embed positive psychology knowledge and skills into curriculum and extra-curriculum activities (*Embed it*), and school-wide practices consist in training programs aim to support staff well-being, help them to develop their Positive Education knowledge and live the skills taught and act as authentic role models for students (*Live it*) (Norrish, *Williams*, O'Connor & Robinson, 2013). These interventions were completed with intervention focused on character strengths. GSS model is appreciated as a worthwhile approach of positive education in school which includes the students and the institution to promote flourishing.

3. NEED OF POSITIVE SCHOOLS

School is one of the most relevant context with an important role in youth education and socialization where undertakings of wide scope related to increase the quality of life and optimal development can be implemented (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). In the field of positive psychology in education, the paradigm of *positive school* is becoming more widely accepted. Positive schools have been defined as ones in which students experience predominantly high levels of subjective well-being in the form of positive emotions and positive attitudes towards school (Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & McKnight, 2004). In many studies the concept of *positive schooling* is used to emphasize the importance of the entire community in teaching children (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2010) and with reference to the positive school experiences (Gilman, Huebner & Buckman, 2007).

An interesting and useful approach of the positive schooling has been provided by Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti (2010). Positive schooling is visually represented as a schoolhouse with six components build upon one another. The foundation consists of care, trust and respect for diversity that are important values in building positive school environments. In positive schools, teachers provide supportive role-models for students, build caring and trusting relationships with students, understand and respect their diversity emphasizing similarities and also valuing differences between students. The first level contains students' plans and motivation and the second floor is formed of learning goals. The plans, motivation and goals are interrelated components necessary for teaching-learning activity. Teachers from positive schools apply various techniques of motivation and set concrete goals to stimulate student learning engagement and increase the probability of achieving success. The third floor is represented by hope as an attitude which students can experience in their continuous process of learning. Thus positive psychology stimulates a sense of hope in the students who endeavor to learn and develop themselves all life along. The roof consists of the contributions produced by school graduates who give back to the society what they have learnt. In positive schooling students who gained knowledge become teachers who continue to pass on to other what they learned. Through this way they have the potential to change and improve society.

Positive or "good" schools are instructional environments that are experienced as positive by students and where students report especially positive emotions (Gilman, Huebner & Buckman, 2008, p. 87). Baker and co-workers (2003) proposed a theoretical developmental-ecological perspective related to the fact that schools function as psychologically healthy environments for children's development. Within these perspectives, children actively contribute to their own development by constructing meaning about themselves, others, and school as result of interaction with school settings. Schools that offer opportunities for students to satisfy their developmental needs and capacities are likely to be perceived as positive psychological environments and exert a positive influence on children's engagement and

participation in school. The good fit between the students' developmental needs and the characteristics of the school environment generates the positive school adjustment (Baker et al., 2003).

Positive or "good" school has a positive climate configured by the interaction of all factors from educational environment (psychosocial, organizational, academic, cultural) that offers a safe and caring environment for all participants, opportunities of active engagement in school activities and positive feed-back in interpersonal relationships (O'Brien, 2008, p. 134-135). A secure and supportive school climate is characterized by maintaining positive relationships with teachers and peers, and by the involvement and participating of the community in school life. Research identified the characteristics of positive school environments concerning the differences in students' personal strengths and interactions among participants. Positive schools sustain and develop students' skills, interests and needs, which are more likely to attend and achieve at school activities if they feel accepted, valued, and respected. Also, positive climate schools facilitate and promote positive relationships between and among students, teachers, and parents, structure successful opportunities for all students and offer curricular and extra-curricular activities that give students supplementary motivation to engage. Key attributes of positive school environments are represented by the positive relationships between school satisfaction and academic outcomes, supportive relationships with parents, teachers, and peers, and various type of individualized instructional method and tasks. All these factors facilitate positive school perceptions (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly & Hall, 2009, p. 565).

4. WELL-BEING IN POSITIVE SCHOOLS

Research evidences major health issues facing children and adolescents include emotional health, stress, anxiety and depression. Recent studies suggest the rate of the negative problems has significantly increased in the last years. In addition, academic demands can produce higher levels of stress for certain students that can negatively influence their mental health.

Thus, researchers debated whether, taking in consideration all these aspects, well-being should be taught in schools. Schools are favorable environments for enhance well-being of the young people the more so as increase in well-being are more likely to produce advance in learning performances, life satisfaction and more creative thinking (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). According to Suldo, Thalji & Ferron (2011), school must have the specific goal to monitor the whole psychological functioning of their students, both their positive and negative traits and well-being (p. 28). As an important indicator of positive education and school adaptation, school satisfaction refers to student's global evaluations of his or her school experiences as a whole (Gilman, Huebner & Buckman, 2008, p. 88). Research clearly demonstrated the relationship between increasing school satisfaction and academic performances: higher level of school satisfaction is associated with higher level of school engagement and academic outcomes (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly & Hall, 2009) and with fewer problem behaviors in adolescents. Also, school liking is an important determinant of children's classroom participation and achievement (Ladd, Buhs & Seid, 2000). Research suggested an excessive focus on academic achievement has rather negative effects for student mental health. Therefore, is important to recognize not just the role of the school in assisting youth cognitive development but its increasing role in training social and emotional abilities in students. Optimal development and effective learning are underpinned both cognitive abilities and academic skills and emotional well-being and social capacities (Waters, 2011). School satisfaction and other affective and experiential factors are necessary for the formation of positive school environments (Gilman, Huebner & Buckman, 2008). Building appropriate learning experiences and supportive relationships, monitoring student active engagement as well as with enhancement of school satisfaction and subjective well-being were reported as the key attributes of

positive schools (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly & Hall, 2009). Research has shown that programs and interventions focused on promoting positive mental health in schools have had a number of positive impacts such as enhanced academic learning, improved staff and student well-being, developed social and emotional skills, improved school adjustment, fewer mental health problems and risky behaviors (Weare, 2015). In many countries, positive education about mental health and well-being is an integral part of the school curriculum.

5. CONCLUSION

The positive schools enhance school satisfaction and well-being that are as important as academic outcomes. The positive emotions and experiences (i.e., satisfaction with school experiences) are non-cognitive variables which indicate students' mental health in positive schools. In this regard, the need of building positive schools which promote and optimize the attributes of positive health of students but also of teachers gains more and more attention. Assessing students' positive emotions and attitudes, namely, school satisfaction, well-being and positive attitudes toward learning and school provides useful information that can be used in positive health promotion and intervention strategies in students.

Moreover, the school can promote emotional and social well-being not only for students, but also for of all those who learn and work in school. This direction of positive psychology intervention in school is addressed to adults who are responsible of children and adolescents' education. Teachers, staff, educators and parents need to be familiar with the positive psychology concepts and skills they teach so they can offer to their children and students positive models of behaviors (Snyder & Lopez, 2009; Seligman, 2011). Thus, positive psychology principles and models have been also included in training programs for teachers who learn to use systematically positive psychology concepts in their teaching activity.

School-based targeted programs and interventions (including curriculum) are more often required in many educational institutions for their benefits for positive mental health, social and emotional skills, character strengths, well-being and learning achievements.

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