

# Positive education and the new prosperity: Australia's edge

*Martin EP Seligman*

**In two words or less, what do you most want for your children?**

If you are like the hundreds of Australian parents I've asked, you responded, "happiness, confidence, contentment, balance, good stuff, kindness, health, satisfaction... and the like". In short, well-being.

**In two words or less, what do schools teach?**

If you are like other Australians, you responded, "achievement, thinking skills, success, conformity, literacy, math, discipline... and the like". In short, accomplishment.

Notice that there is no overlap between the two lists.

The schooling of children has, for more than century, been about accomplishment, the avenue into the world of adult work. I am all for accomplishment, success, literacy, and discipline, but imagine if schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of well being and the skills of achievement. Imagine positive education.

## Should well-being be taught in school?

Australia, like every wealthy nation on the planet, is in the middle of an epidemic of depression. Depression is about ten times more common now than it was 50 years ago. It now ravages teenage: 50 years ago the average age of first onset was about 30. Now the first onset is below age 15. Suicide, particularly among young men in Australia, is alarmingly common.

This is a paradox, particularly for those of you who believe that well-being is environmental. You have to be blinded by ideology not to see that almost everything is better now than it was 50 years ago: there is about three times more actual purchasing power, houses are much bigger, there are many more cars, and clothes are more attractive. Progress has not been limited to the material: there is more education, more music, more women's rights, less racism, less pollution, fewer tyrants, more entertainment, more books, and fewer soldiers dying on the battlefield.

Everything is better, that is, everything except human morale. There is much more depression, much younger, and average individual and average national happiness, which has been measured competently for half a century, has gone up very little, if at all. The average Australian is no more satisfied with life than he was before Australia's 15 unbroken years of increasing prosperity.



*Geelong Grammar has introduced Positive Education*

Why this is is a matter of contention. It is certainly not biological or genetic. Nor is it ecological (the Old Order Amish who live 30 miles down the road from me in Philadelphia have only one-tenth our rate of depression, even though they breathe the same air, drink the same water, and make the food we eat). It has something to do with modernity and perhaps with what we call 'prosperity'.

## What is 'happiness'?

'Happiness' is too worn and too weary a term to be of much scientific use, and my discipline, positive psychology, divides it into three very different realms, each of which is measurable and most importantly, each of which is skill-based and can be taught.

The first is hedonic: positive emotion. A life led around having as much of this good stuff as possible, is the 'Pleasant Life'.

The second, much closer to what Thomas Jefferson and Aristotle were after, is the state of flow, and a life led around it is the 'Engaged Life'. Flow consists in a loss of self-consciousness, time stopping for you, being 'one with the music'. Importantly, it seems to be the opposite of positive emotion: when one is totally absorbed, no thoughts or feelings are present – even though one says *afterward* 'that was fun'. And while there are shortcuts to positive emotion – you

can take drugs, masturbate, watch television, or go shopping – there are no shortcuts to flow. Flow only occurs when you deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the challenges that come your way.

The third realm that positive psychology studies is the one with the best intellectual provenance, the 'Meaningful Life'. Flow and positive emotion can be had in individual pursuits, but not meaning or purpose. Meaning consists in knowing what your highest strengths are, and then using them to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self.

Positive psychology, I want to emphasise, is an empirical research endeavor and not mere grandmotherly common sense. Among its surprising recent findings:

- ◆ Optimistic people are much less likely to die of heart attacks than pessimists, controlling for all known physical risk factors.
- ◆ Women who display genuine (Duchenne) smiles to the photographer at age 18 go on to have fewer divorces and more marital satisfaction than those who display fake smiles.
- ◆ Externalities (e.g., weather, money, health, marriage, religion) totalled together account for no more than 15% of the variance in life satisfaction.
- ◆ The pursuit of meaning and engagement are much more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure.

- ◆ Economically flourishing corporate teams have a ratio of at least 2.9 to 1 of positive statements to negative statements in business meetings, whereas stagnating teams have a much lower ratio; flourishing marriages, however, require a ratio of at least 5:1.
- ◆ Self-discipline is twice as good a predictor of high school grades as IQ.
- ◆ Happy teenagers go on to earn very substantially more income 15 years later than less happy teenagers, equating for income, grades, and other obvious factors.
- ◆ How you celebrate good events that happen to your spouse is a better predictor of future love and commitment than how you respond to bad events.
- ◆ People experience more 'flow' at work than at home.

So we have learned a fair amount about positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. These states are valuable in their own right and they fight the epidemic of depression. So I conclude that they *should* be taught in school. But *can* they?

## Can well-being be taught in school?

I spent much of my academic career working on misery: depression, suicide, trauma, anger, and anxiety. I was particularly interested in how to relieve these states and whenever I could I used the gold standard for deciding if a treatment, such as cognitive therapy or Prozac, actually works: random assignment placebo controlled testing is that gold standard.

When I turned to positive psychology 10 years ago, I wondered what treatments actually make people lastingly happier. From the Buddha to modern pop psychology there have been more than a hundred suggestions about how to do this, but most I suspected were placebos. It occurred to me that the very same gold standard could be applied to the question of what makes people lastingly happier.

## www.authentic happiness.org

One thousand new people register at my free website [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) every day and take the validated questionnaires about their positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. (Where, for example, do you rank on the strength of kindness relative to Australian women?)

I would occasionally put up an 'exercises' link, and people who went there were given one exercise to do for a week and then probed once a month for happiness and depression. From these studies, involving more than a thousand people from all over the world, we got a good idea of what worked and what did not work to raise happiness and lower depression nontransiently. About a dozen exercises have proven, by the gold standard, to work.

Two examples, each of which compared to placebo, raise happiness and lower depression for at least six months:

### Three good things:

Every night for one week, set aside 10 minutes before you go to bed. Use that time to write down three things that went really well on that day and why they went well. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance ('My husband picked up my favorite ice cream for dessert on the way home from work today') or relatively large in importance ('My sister just gave birth to a healthy baby boy'). Next to each positive event in your list, answer the question, 'Why did this good thing happen?'

### Using signature strengths in a new way:

Honesty. Loyalty. Perseverance. Creativity. Kindness. Wisdom. Courage. Fairness. These and about 16 other character strengths are valued in almost every culture in the world. We believe that people can get more satisfaction out of life if they learn to identify which of these character strengths they possess in abundance and then use them as much as possible whether working, loving, or playing. So take the *VIA Signature Strengths* test at [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) and during the next week try to use your signature strengths more often.

In parallel with testing of individual happiness-raising and depression-lowering exercises on the web, we have spent more than 10 years testing these in the flesh with school children. We teach teachers to first use the exercises in their own lives and then to teach them to middle school children.

In 13 replications around the world, researchers find that these resilience exercises halve the rate of depression as the children go through puberty and they lower the rate of conduct problems as well.

So I conclude that well-being *should be taught* and *can* be taught in school.

## Australia's edge

If anything comes of the notion of Positive Education – education for both well-being and for accomplishment – it will rightly be said that it began in Australia. The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania has been training teachers in these techniques for a decade. But we never before had an entire school – from the classrooms to the playing fields to the houses to the counselling centre – to infuse.

A year ago, one of Australia's great schools, Geelong Grammar, invited us to do exactly this. So my wife, Mandy, four of our seven children, and I have been living at Geelong Grammar School since January.

We brought with us Dr Karen Reivich, author of the *Resilience Factor*, and 15 of my faculty for an intensive two-week training of 100 of Geelong Grammar's staff – who gave up their summer holiday to study with us.

We taught them the principles of positive

psychology, of resilience, and how to use the validated interventions in their own lives and the lives of their students.

Because the Geelong Grammar staff has many master teachers, we did not presume to set out rigid curricula for them. Rather it became their job to create courses that bring positive psychology to the teaching of history or literature, to the cricket pitch, and to pastoral counselling.

Stand-alone courses for Year 10 and for Timbertops (Year 9) have begun. Over the course of 2008, another dozen of the world's leading researchers in positive psychology will visit the school to teach faculty and students.

2009 will see the teaching of positive psychology along the full spectrum of Geelong Grammar's activities. Our hope is that this will be the seed crystal of Positive Education worldwide, and we aim in January 2009 to train a large cohort of selected Australian state and private school teachers.

## Why now?

When nations are at war, poor, in famine, or in civil turmoil, it is natural that their institutions should be about defense and damage, about minimising the disabling conditions of life. When nations are wealthy, at peace, and in relative harmony, however, they, like Florence of the 15th century, turn to what makes life worth living, to building the enabling conditions of life.

What is all Australia's wealth for? Surely not just to produce more wealth. Gross domestic product (GDP) was, 100 years ago, a good first approximation to how well a nation was doing. Now, however, every time Australia builds a prison, every time there is a divorce or a suicide, the GDP goes up.

The aim of wealth should be to produce more well-being. General well-being – how much positive emotion, how much engagement at work, how much meaning in life our citizens have – is validly quantifiable and it complements GDP. Public policy can be aimed at increasing general well-being and the successes or failures of policy can be measured against this standard.

Prosperity-as-usual has been equated with wealth. The time has come for a new prosperity, a prosperity that combines well-being with wealth. Learning to value this new prosperity must start early – in the formative years of schooling – and it is this new prosperity, kindled by positive education that Australia can now choose.



Martin Seligman is Director of the Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Pennsylvania and a former President of the American Psychological Association