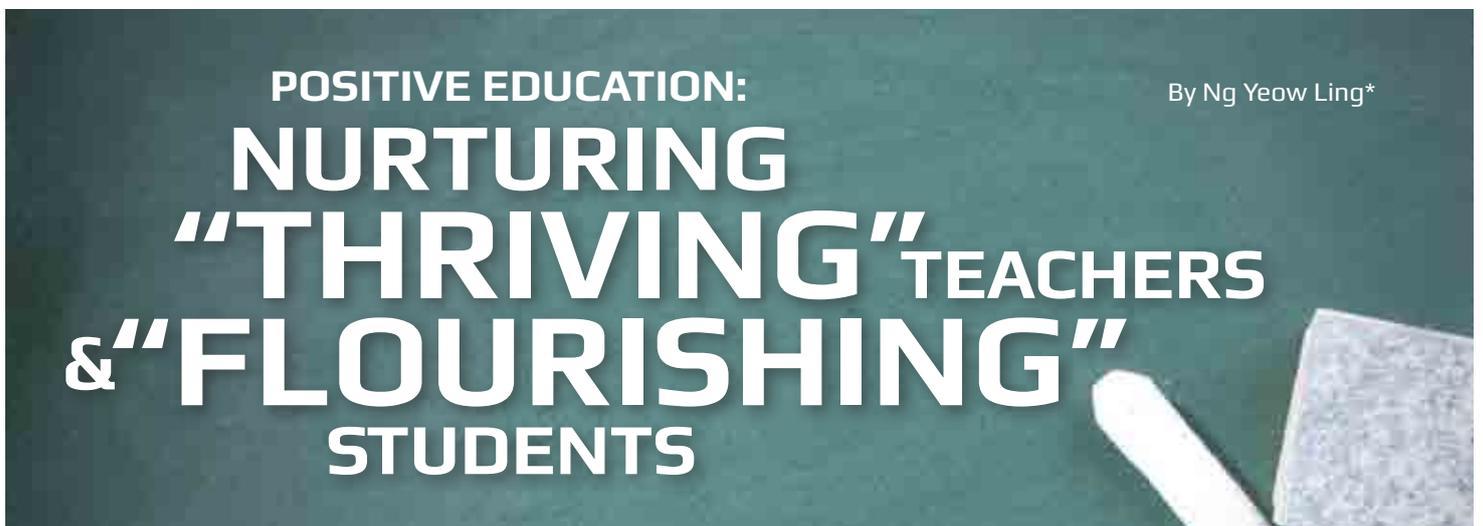


# POSITIVE EDUCATION: NURTURING "THRIVING" TEACHERS & "FLOURISHING" STUDENTS



## Introduction

Positive psychology is an emerging applied science that is beginning to have a significant impact on schools and classroom interventions. Martin Seligman (2002), father of positive psychology and his team of researchers, have proposed a three-pronged definition of positive psychology as "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits and enabling institutions". More recently, Paul Wong of Trent University, in his 2011 paper entitled *"Positive Psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life"* has further highlighted the four pillars of positive psychology as the study of "virtue", "meaning", "resilience" and "well-being", given that empirically they incorporate many areas of mainstream research which recognizes the moral imperative, the centrality of meaning, the intrinsic human capacity for resilience and the

universal human yearning for happiness and a better future. It has been found that the science of positive psychology can be employed to bolster good teaching practice, and in so doing transform schools into enabling institutions that cultivate capacities such as resilience and well-being. This new field is known as Positive Education.

## What is Positive Education?

Positive Education, simply put, is the incorporation of the science of positive psychology into the life and work of schools. It is aimed first at benefitting teachers personally, and then benefits them again by making it easier to get students to engage with and persist in the work they need to master learning. (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009) Positive Education inevitably works to create a school culture that supports the caring, trusting

relationships that distinguish excellent schools from their mediocre peers. Although this field is relatively new, it spans across many areas of study. In the first comprehensive text entitled 'Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools' (2009), there are 34 articles by reputable individuals in the field covering everything from promoting positive assets and positive mental health in children to promoting contextual resources (schools, family, and peers) to specific school-based applications. The applications to schools of many findings from positive psychology include mindfulness, flourishing, subjective well-being, hope, optimism, character strengths, gratitude, self-efficacy, self-concept, emotion regulation, flow, empathy, health and wellness, etc.

## Why Positive Education?

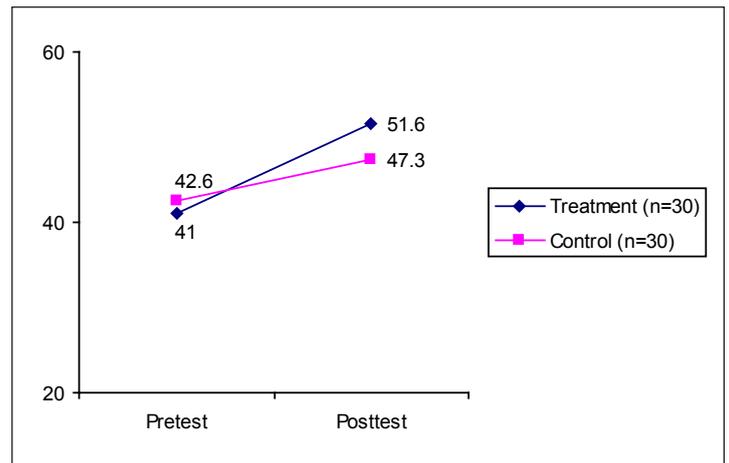
In March 2010, the Ministry of Education announced the implementation of a new framework for schools to enhance the development of 21st century competencies (21CC) in our students. This will underpin the holistic education that our schools provide to better prepare our students to thrive in a fast-changing and highly-connected world. This framework spells out that in order to better position our students to take advantage of opportunities in a globalised world, our students need to possess life-ready competencies like creativity, innovation, cross-cultural understanding and resilience. With the launch of the Character and Citizenship Education framework for schools in November last year, it is noteworthy that fostering resilience is now given a renewed focus and is now one of the eight learning outcomes delineated for the design and delivery of the CCE curriculum. In this article, I would now like to review work in three areas which have shown high impact: **Resilience, Gratitude and Flow**.

### A. Developing a Resilient Mindset

Resilience has been the subject of study in both the psychology and education fields. Resilience generally involves the study of individuals who succeed despite encountering significant adversity. The promotion of resilience is therefore an important, if not central, aspect of schooling and a key enabler of school success.

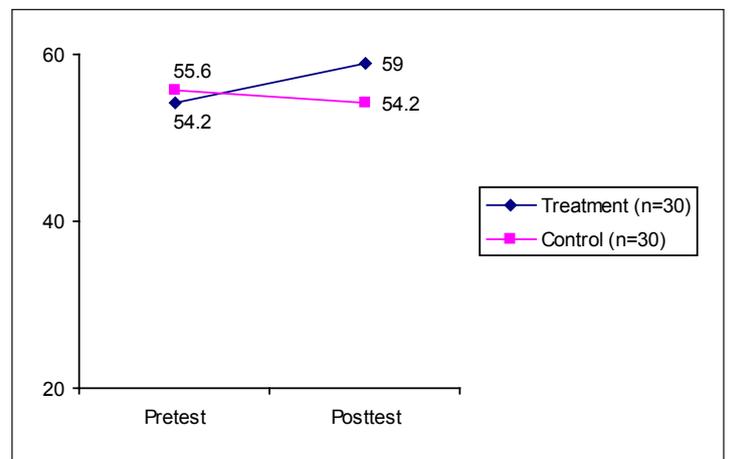
On the student front, Penn Resiliency Programme (PRP) is one of the most widely researched programmes which promote resilience by teaching students to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter. In our Singapore study (2009), 152 Primary 5 students were involved in this study on the effectiveness of resilience development. Based on their scores in Resilience Factor Inventory, 60 pupils who were the bottom scorers were identified for the study, of which 30 were selected to be participants of the resilience development programme (PRP), and the remaining 30, matched for gender and resilience scores, formed the control group with no intervention programme provided. Another 124 Primary 5 students were involved for a 2010 repeat study on the effectiveness of resilience development. Similarly, 30 were selected to be participants of the resilience development programme, and the remaining 30 formed the comparable control group, receiving no intervention. Our studies have found that students with an optimistic thinking style would have overall significantly higher academic attainments as compared to students with a pessimistic thinking style. Findings also provide evidence for efficacy of resilience enhancement to boost resilience levels among students.

### Gains in Resilience Score



Gains in Resilience Scores for Treatment and Control Groups for 2009 Study

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### B. Nurturing a Gratitude

People are grateful if they are aware of and thankful for the good things that happen to them and if they express thanks to those responsible. Gratitude has been considered a powerful ingredient of health and well-being for individuals and society. Considered as an important virtue for thriving, gratitude figures as a character trait of transcendence because of its potential to provide one with a sense of meaning and connection to entities that are greater than the self. In this regard, teachers can encourage appreciative responding in students by pointing out and reinforcing kind acts in the classroom, and teacher and staff could model reciprocity and thankfulness in coordinated activities or play with students – all these things parents can do at home, too.

As part of our school Kindness Movement launched last year, a road show was organised to provide students with a chance to get a taste of the daily challenges faced by the hearing-impaired, the physically challenged, the elderly and the visually handicapped so they can better appreciate what they have. The students were involved in activities such as learning sign language, trying to read through opaque paper, separating red and green beans with their fingers taped, using a walking stick to navigate through a maze—blindfolded, and painting without the use of their hands. Many of the students found themselves feeling the frustrations of the less-abled for the first time in their lives. By stepping into the shoes of



the less fortunate and to interact with those who are handicapped, we hope that these students can become civic-minded individuals.

### C. Cultivating “Flow” In School

‘Flow’ describes the subjective buoyancy of experience when skilful and successful action seems effortless, even when a great deal of physical or mental energy is exerted. We believe that for our school community to respond to the 21st century educational challenges and bring about effective teaching and learning for our next generation, that our educators first need to be equipped with a new ‘mind-ware’ to embrace new training and developments so they can leverage on advances in technology, innovation and pedagogical competencies to better prepare their learners for the new world, and to create optimal learning environments for ‘flow’ in learning to be experienced.

From 2009-2010, we collaborated with MindChamps on a year-long professional development journey for all staff to develop the ‘champion mindset’ with evidence-based programme, drawing on learning principles and practice from neuroscience, arts, education and psychology. At the same time, the school has also co-designed specific programmes with educational consultants at MindChamps for wider and direct reach with parents and pupils, including parents’ talk on their roles in parenting with the champion mindset,

preparatory programme for new pupils joining the school at Primary 1, examinations preparatory workshop for graduating Primary 6 pupils. Using the flow model, we have discovered that creating engaged learners and optimal learning environments requires attention to a variety of contextual, instructional, developmental and interpersonal factors which include the broad educational outcomes we look at in school, in order for learning to be both rigorous and enjoyable.

### Concluding Remark

In this article, the application of positive psychology in school-based interventions with the aim to engender a culture which promotes ‘thriving’ teachers and ‘flourishing’ students is presented and discussed within the context of a new understanding of the pathway to resilience, gratitude and flow. The focus of this article is therefore to contribute to new understandings of the theory and research of positive psychology within the context of learning, as well as to consider how evidence-based interventions can be applied in our local schools with appropriate levels of treatment integrity and intensity, with the potential to enhance levels of academic, emotional and behavioural functioning for students involved.

\* The writer is Principal of North View Primary School in Singapore.