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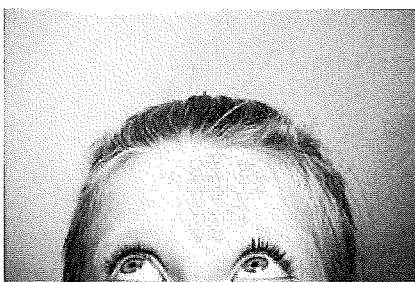


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## Promoting positivity in the classroom

By Professor Timothy Sharp | 15th August, 2013

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### Students are more likely to achieve their educational goals if they are happy. By Professor Timothy Sharp

Teachers often assume that their students will be happy, engaged, and well behaved in school after they've achieved some of their academic goals. While this is not an unreasonable assumption it is not always helpful. In fact, such an approach may well contribute to a range of problems including negative, self-defeating emotions such as frustration, boredom and disengagement.

As an alternative, rather than waiting until success is achieved, the skills of happiness and positivity should be taught first and foremost. By promoting the "primacy of positivity" teachers can help students achieve their goals. The primacy of positivity is an approach that allows students to become happy first, and as a result increase their chances of achieving their goals, not the other way around.

### Positivity in Education

Definitions of the goals of education can vary from "academic excellence" to "vocational preparedness" or even to the more esoteric "preparing for a meaningful and happy life". Evidence suggests the achievement of any of these educational goals will be made much easier if students are helped to experience positive emotions, such as happiness and engagement, first. These positive experiences actively engage and inspire the student, making learning interesting, rewarding and desirable.

Such positive experiences increase motivation and innovation, which stimulate creativity and problem solving and drives more helpful and constructive behaviours. Research suggests positive emotions enhance creativity, innovation and problem solving as well as improve teamwork, collaboration and relationships.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the area of positive student-teacher relationships. We all have our favourite teachers – ones we remember decades after they faded from our lives, and whose influences help define whom we are today. These relationships are almost invariably the most positive ones – based on warmth, trust, empathy and encouragement.

We intuitively know that the teachers who genuinely care about us, and who are empathetic and warm towards us, are the ones who influence us most – for the better. And those influential teachers did not wait until we were successful at school before they showed us their positivity – they were positive first, as they instinctively knew that their students would flourish in a culture of warmth, acceptance and encouragement.

And this has been repeatedly confirmed scientifically. A variety of research findings show that positive student-teacher relationships are strongly associated with positive student outcomes. When teachers are non-directing, warm, empathic, encouraging and genuine, their students' positive emotions towards their teacher soar, and they do better at school. And again, the teachers' positivity precedes the students' improved performance – strongly suggesting that positivity is causative.

There's no escaping the conclusion that enhancing positivity in students enhances their learning. The primacy of positivity in classrooms pays enormous dividends for students – academically, socially, emotionally – and leads to a positive spiral: positivity promotes improved outcomes, improved outcomes boost students' confidence and self-esteem,



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which then emboldens the student to attempt and achieve more – creating an ever-upward spiral fuelled by positivity. These findings beg the question – why wait to introduce positivity in the classroom?

#### **Ways teachers can create and enhance positivity**

- Develop a positive relationship with each student regardless of the student's behaviour (past or present).
- Engage students with something – *anything* – that is relevant, interesting and compelling.
- Actively and explicitly focus on positive experiences in the student's life, present and past.
- Quickly work towards helping the student identify his or her strengths. Specifically look for expressions of these strengths in past experiences and discuss how best to utilise these in future situations.
- Build a positive student-teacher relationship by finding common areas of interest or leisure activities.
- Have fun and use humour appropriately (education is far too important to take too seriously!)
- Make students feel special and do what you can to make them believe that the process of teaching is and will be a positive one; and note that this is as important in the playground, as it is in the classroom.
- Provide accurate, specific and detailed feedback to the student about the task they are undertaking, their approach to that task, and their confidence levels and strengths. Avoid providing empty praise about the student's presumed traits – such as "you are so smart" or "you are a natural".
- Provide plenty of positive reinforcement each time your student achieves something of significance, regardless of the size, or even when positive experiences from the past are recalled or mentioned.
- Cultivate hope and optimism at every opportunity by reminding the student of previous successes and achievements and by appropriately noting how these experiences can be used to build more positivity in the future.

#### **Peer Support Program enhances empathy in the classroom.**

Until recently, psychology and psychological researchers have traditionally focused on negative emotions. As a result, much is known about the impact these emotions have on our behaviour and mental state. When we experience negative emotions (such as fear or anxiety) we close up. We tend to withdraw and not cope as well.

In contrast, positive emotions lead to improved performance and more effective coping and resilience. Peer Support Australia ([www.peersupport.edu.au](http://www.peersupport.edu.au)), an organisation of which I am ambassador, provide peer-led programs in primary and secondary schools that are designed to enhance the mental, emotional and social well-being of young people.

For students, benefits of the program include the chance to practise leadership skills, build confidence and act as positive role models. But teachers, schools and the community at large also benefit from the program as it helps build more positive relationships, empathy and better communication between older and younger students, improved empathy in the classroom and better learning outcomes. One of the benefits noted by the teachers in the program is that it not only helps create a better school culture overall but can lead to less time spent on managing problem behaviour in the classroom and playground.

There are many studies that show happiness is associated with a number of positive outcomes surrounding health, relationships, innovation and creativity. Positive emotions help us enjoy the good times but they also help us cope with the tough times and allow us to persevere to achieve meaningful goals.

As a result, positive emotions are not simply a phenomenon we should enjoy after we have achieved something of significance, but they are also tools we can use to increase our chances of achieving significant outcomes.

Teachers have an incredible opportunity to influence the happiness and positivity of students. If happiness and positivity are created first, then the chances of achieving desirable goals are significantly enhanced. Through this theory, the wonders of positive emotions can be experienced before, during and after success, rather than (as we often imagine) just after.

*Professor Timothy Sharp is Peer Support Australia ambassador and founder of The Happiness Institute.*

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