

Positive Education

If Stephen Hawking, the brilliant astrophysicist and author of the best-selling *A Short History of Time*, had been born 10,000 years earlier, he would likely have made no



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significant contribution to his community. The disease that destroyed his muscles struck in his early 20's, before he had even finished his doctorate. But, supported by the medical and technological base available in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, he has made fantastic contributions to our understanding of the universe.

Only in the last two generations has such a result become possible, and then only in the most-developed nations on earth. But, in those nations, a mind such as Stephen Hawking's, when given the opportunity to absorb the knowledge available at the finest educational institutions, becomes a resource rare and valuable – a resource able to reshape and extend significant areas of our knowledge and open new pathways for the future. Such minds have created a new world – a world where knowledge and the ability to apply it count for far more than ever before. Schools are not being asked to turn students into Stephen Hawking, but they are being asked to produce students capable of living a good life, one in which they find purpose, meaning, and happiness, in the world that Stephen Hawking and so many other brilliant, creative, hard-working and caring individuals are making possible.

Positive Psychology

Over the past two decades, a number of brilliant, dedicated researchers have turned their attention to our inner universe, and especially to the patterns of thinking, feeling, and relating that create human success. These researchers in the field now known as positive psychology have discovered some of the fundamental processes that enable human success, and they have further developed ways to help each of us better understand and adopt these patterns of thinking, feeling, and relating. Positive Education is the incorporation of the science of positive psychology into the life and work of schools. While it may sound daunting to educators to hear of something else that schools should be doing, further investigation suggests that Positive Education first benefits 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 academic material. Finally, Positive Education inevitably works to create a school culture that supports the caring, trusting relationships that distinguish excellent schools from their poor and mediocre peers.

What about standardized testing ?

We live in an age of accountability for public school systems – accountability based on student performance on standardized tests. Many decry this situation and claim that it is damaging students. To date, however, their protestations have fallen on deaf ears at both the state and federal levels. Although many of the accountability plans have proven flawed due to poorly designed tests, scoring errors, or improper interpretation and use of data, no state has abandoned accountability demands. Rather, flaws have led to re-designed, technically superior systems. The systems have changed--often delaying the imposition of sanctions on schools--but each flawed system has been followed by a new-and-improved version. And, in truth, the systems are getting better, and so are schools.

We are asking public schools today to do what has never been done anywhere in the world: educate all students to a high level. This mission is not arbitrary; it is necessary. In a world of ever-increasing scientific and technological sophistication, the educational levels necessary to make a significant economic contribution also continue to rise. Today, to add value to a process or system sufficient to warrant payment of a living wage, a strong back is not only insufficient, it is often irrelevant.

Thus, the accountability emphasis is unlikely to wane, though hopefully the technologies underlying it will continue to improve, both for standardized testing and analysis of that data. Also hopefully, though it is perhaps more doubtful, political “leadership” will learn to restrain its “the beatings will continue until morale improves” approach. Regardless, however, educators and educational leaders hold the same sacred mission that teachers and wise elders have always held: to assist the next generation as they seek to learn the knowledge and skills they will need to achieve acceptance, respect, and success in shaping a good life in the world in which they live. To achieve these goals, today’s students will need intellectual resources superior to those of any generation that has ever lived. However, intellectual resources will not be enough; they will also need substantial resources of optimism, collaboration, creativity, emotional intelligence, motivation, and relational skills.

More than just our students need these resources. As discussed previously, teachers, principals, and other educators in the early years of the 21st century also face challenges, opportunities, and expectations that prior generations could not have imagined and would not have believed. Technical skills of the profession are a necessary but not sufficient resource for success in today’s environment. Teachers need expertise in pedagogical strategies and classroom management. Principals require instructional leadership and data analysis skills. Superintendents will fail without political savvy,

budgetary deftness, and management sophistication. These things alone, however, are insufficient.

Success today, for students and educators, requires

- clear-eyed optimism,
- deep wells of emotional energy and motivation,
- springy resilience,
- sturdy hope,
- strong relationships,
- clearly understood values,
- refined purpose, and
- challenging, motivating goals.

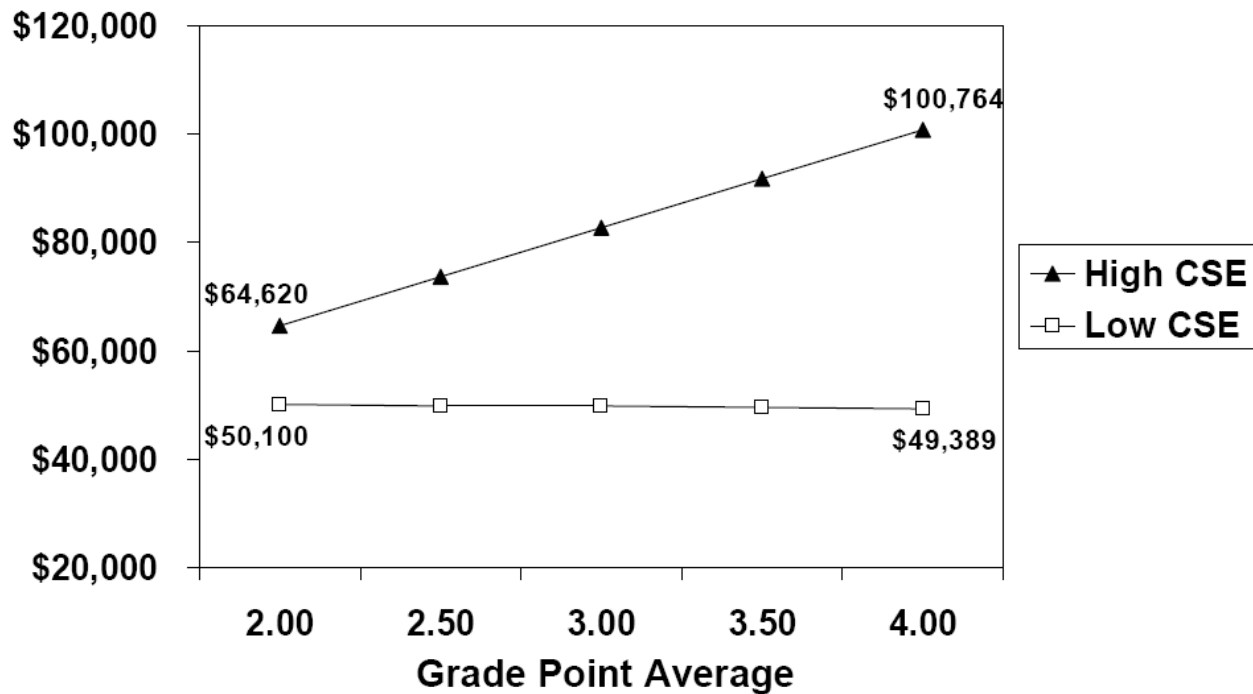
Fortunately, researchers in positive psychology, the science of human success, have spent the past couple of decades probing the components and mechanisms of each of these elements of success. The list above is not “soft.” Researchers have developed validated measures and empirical evidence for each item. Just as reparative psychology has made great strides in assessing and remedying psychological dysfunction, positive psychology has begun to discover how to braid the strands of success. Let us look at some data.

A Specific Case: One Construct, One Study

At Florida State University, Tim Judge and his colleagues have mined a vast set of national data to assess the impact of a set of positive psychology constructs on success (Judge & Hurst, 2007). The results are startling: many of the advantages that most of us normally assume to provide a strong foundation for future success are ineffectual in the absence of the cognitive and emotional patterns of human success. The researchers looked at data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth that began in 1979 with 12,686 participants who were 14-22 years old. Those participants took a number of questionnaires, and from this data, Judge and his colleagues were able to pull the answers to a set of questions that allowed them to assess the participants on a construct called “core self evaluation” – a combination of generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control. They then correlated these scores with information about annual income at age 50. (Admittedly, annual income is not the sole or even the best

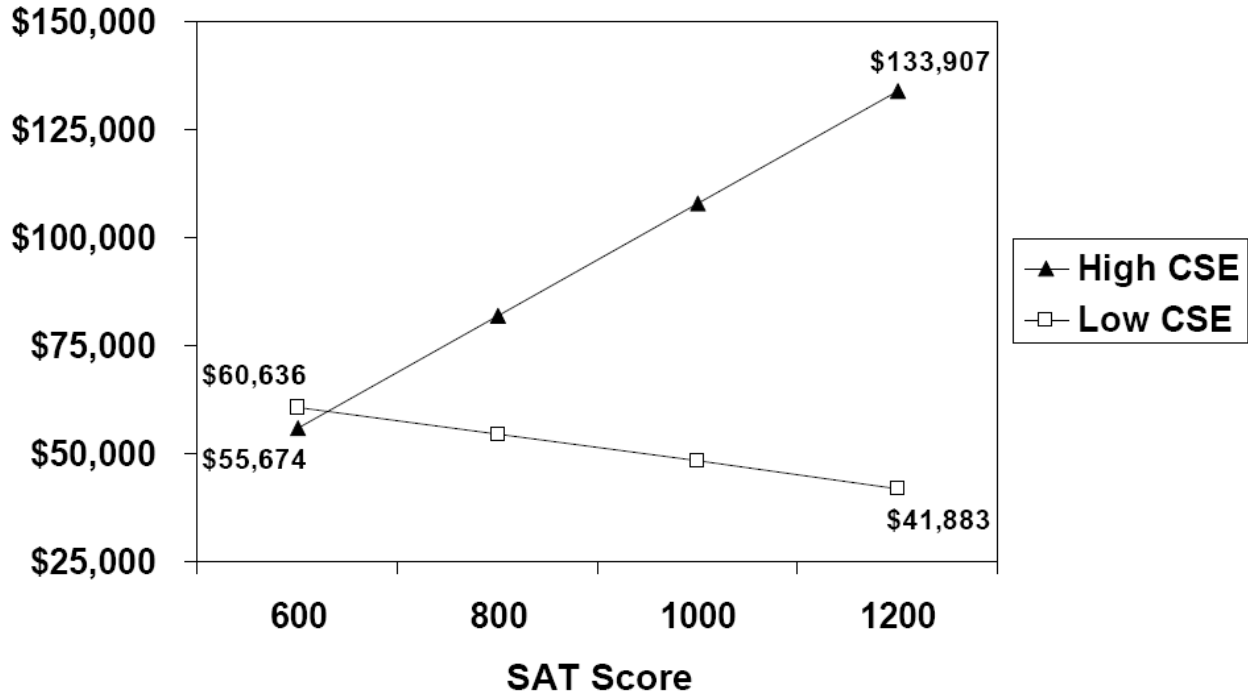
measure of the good life, but the impact of positive habits of cognition, emotion, behavior and relatedness seems clear.) Here are some of the findings:

Predicted Income

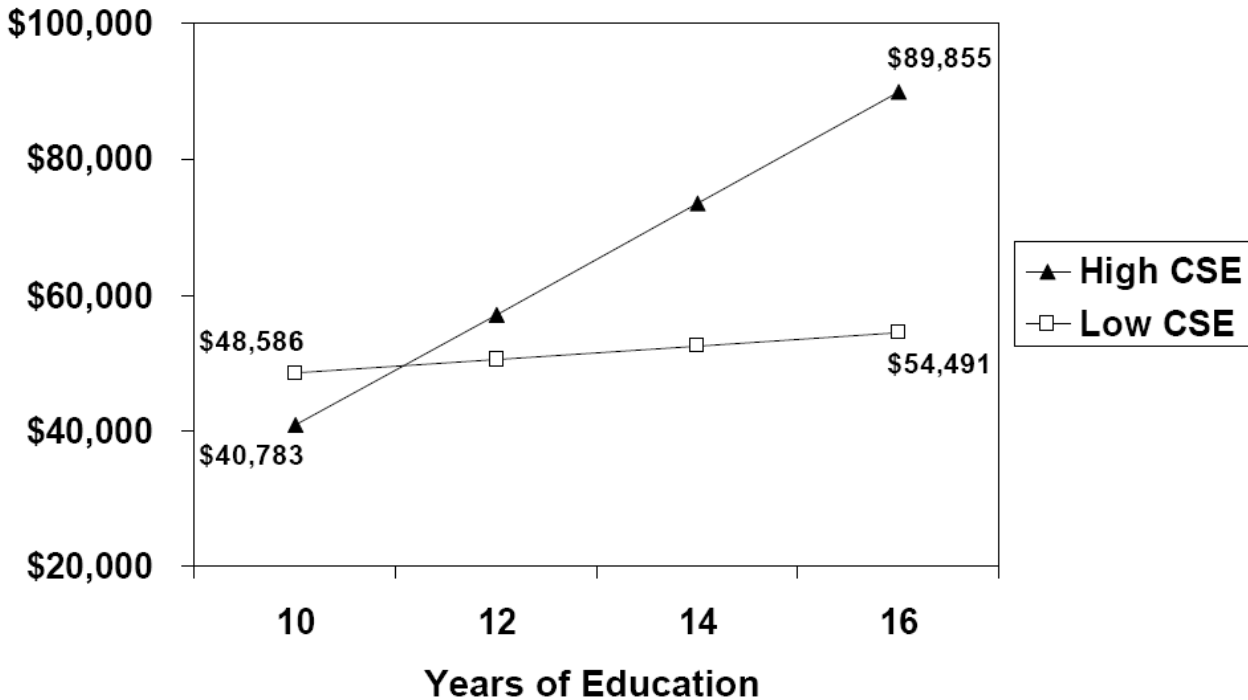


As you can see, students with a low core self-evaluation and higher GPAs actually earned LESS at age 50! This finding also showed up when other early-life advantages were analyzed. Here is information for SAT scores and years of education:

Predicted Income



Predicted Income



Beyond Money

Sages and saints have long warned against placing too much emphasis on material wealth. Today, scientists join the chorus, but with some numbers to back them up. Money, beyond enough to meet basic needs, adds a little to happiness, and less and less per dollar as annual income goes up. Here's an example. Suppose two individuals give the following heart-felt, sincere summations of their lives:

1st Individual: "I wouldn't say my days are black, but they are certainly gray. I don't look forward to my work and I do not like the people I work with. My marriage is a disappointment and a source of stress. Mostly I just try to ignore stuff and get through the day. Alcohol helps some, but I know I can't let it take over. I don't sleep well, and in the morning it all starts again."

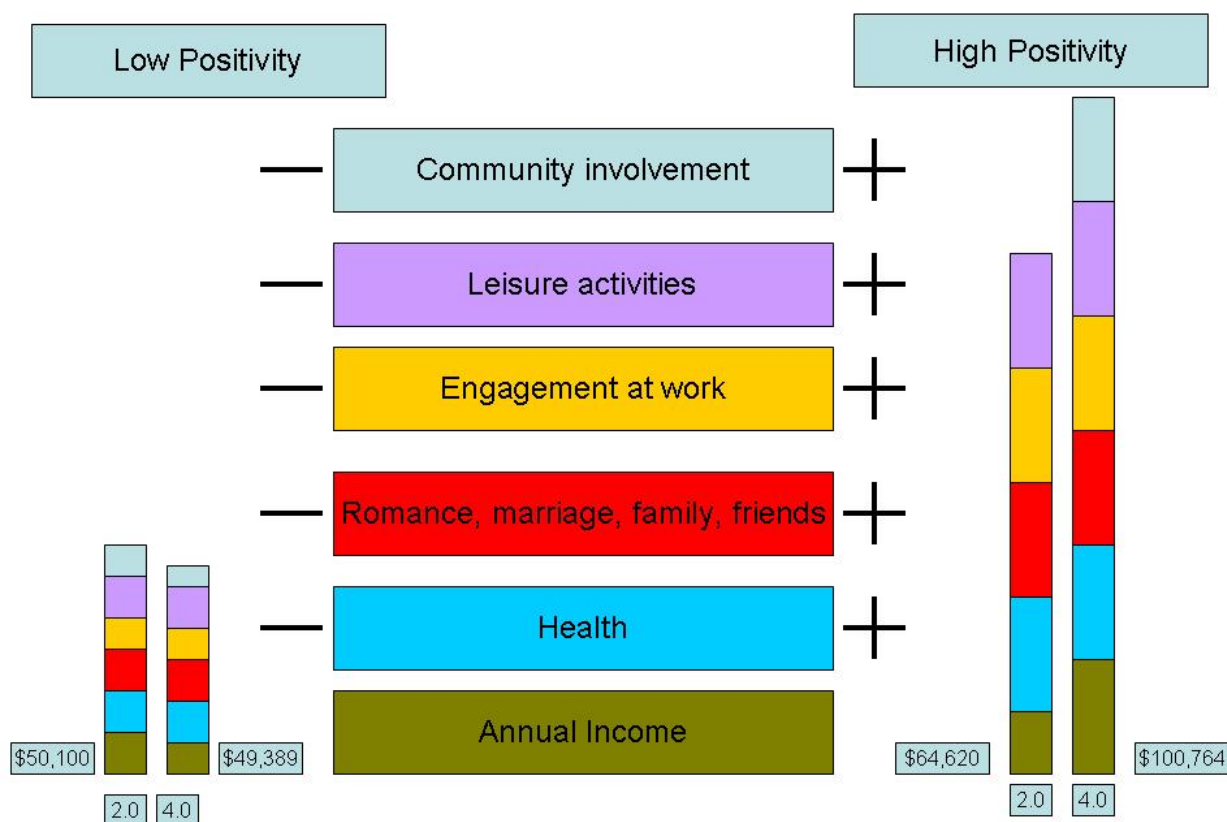
2nd Individual: "My life is full of good stuff. I enjoy my work and can easily lose track of time when I am there. I have co-workers who are among my best friends and the energy and camaraderie at work is great. My spouse and I really know and care about each other and we enjoy working toward common goals. I feel really connected to my community through a number of organizations, and I think I'm making a difference. I'm very grateful for all the good things in my life."

Which individual is rich? Assume that the second individual makes \$50,000 per year. How much would the first individual have to make before you would say he was the richer of the two?

Researchers who have looked carefully at the sources of happiness are unanimous: there's no silver bullet, and money is clearly not enough. We need enough money to comfortably cover necessities, but beyond that the contributions of income to well-being flatten out significantly. Tal Ben-Shahar, the Harvard instructor who taught the university's single largest class ever with over 800 students in his positive psychology course, and author of *Happier*, calls happiness the "ultimate currency" and defines it as the overall experience of pleasure (present benefit) and meaning (future benefit) (Ben-Shahar, 2008). Martin Seligman, who brought positive psychology to the foreground of both the scientific and popular worlds, talks of "authentic happiness" made up of pleasurable experiences, deep engagement with our activities ("flow"), and the meaning found in a connection with something larger or greater than self (M. E. P. Seligman, 2002). Father and son positive psychologists Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener in their book *Happiness*,

suggest that the psychological wealth balance sheet includes monetary resources along with physical health, friendships, intimate relationships, work we enjoy and find meaningful (a “calling”), satisfying leisure activities, and involvement with the larger world around us (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

To better understand what this multi-faceted view of happiness means in terms of the ultimate effects of a positive education, we can again consider the research of Tim Judge and his associates. Remember that Dr. Judge’s research involved core self-evaluations, which for these purposes can be thought of as general “positivity.” He showed that participants with high positivity made more money than those with low positivity for a given high school GPA, and the impact increased with GPA. So, participants with a 2.0 high school GPA made about \$50,100 annually at age 50 if they had low positivity, but \$64,620 if they were highly positive. With a 4.0 GPA, low positive participants earned \$49,389, while high positives averaged \$100,764. But, taking into account more components of psychological wealth, the effect is magnified as shown here:



The cognitive, emotional, and relational habits and behaviors of optimism, resilience, a strengths orientation, strong relationships, clear values, defined purpose and specific goals not only increase income, they also appear to improve our chances for good health, happy families, close friends, engaging work, satisfying leisure, and meaningful involvement in our communities. High positivity is a plus in all these areas; low positivity is a minus.

Susan Segerstrom gives a great example of this phenomenon (Segerstrom, 2007). Dr. Segerstrom is an optimism researcher at the University of Kentucky. Her dissertation research, and continuing research since, was with law students. She went back to her dissertation research subjects 10 years later to assess how their optimism had changed and how those changes correlated with other areas of their lives. She found that the group had gotten slightly more optimistic (about 5%) and of those who had changed 10% in either direction, the ratio was 3:1 in favor of optimism. Here is her description of a lawyer whose optimism increased significantly over the 10 years:

“[S]he had a wide social network and activities, including coworkers, family, friends, church, volunteering, and a club, and she rated her satisfaction with her relationships at the top of the scale. In terms of status resources, she had an excellent position within the legal field, as well as two other entrepreneurial endeavors on the side. The only area in which she was in the bottom half of the law student group: income. She made less than half as much as the top-earning lawyer in the group. On the other hand, she worked 40 hours a week, which was also below average for this group, and she was clearly using the rest of the time to build other kinds of resources that, not incidentally, add more to life than money does.”
(Segerstrom, 2006)

Core Elements of Positive Education

The consultants at Flourishing Schools have worked with teachers, administrators, superintendents, and faculty to put the science of positive psychology to work for educators and students. In that work, we have developed three core areas that offer value for teachers and schools looking to move forward.

Strengths: Strengths offer the first pathway toward greater engagement, greater achievement, and greater well-being. Just naming the strengths of a teacher or a student is an uplifting experience. Focusing on strengths helps colleagues of many years find new ways to relate to each other in positive, productive ways. Flourishing Schools programs utilize two strengths frameworks. First, we draw from the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths developed by Peterson, et al., and explained in *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These 24 “strengths of being” have been valued by cultures

around the world for 3,000 years. We help teachers connect with their individual strengths, then look at how those strengths interact in teams. We also help teachers explore how they can better connect with students by recognizing and relating to their strengths. Finally, these strengths of being provide wonderful ways to connect with academic content areas such as literature and history, and we have worked with faculty as they developed lessons utilizing a strengths-based approach.

We find strengths work to be most effective, however, when participants can also draw from a second strengths framework. For this, we turn to the strengths-at-work set of 34 “themes” of strength developed by the Gallup Organization (T. Rath, 2007). We help educators see both the overlap and the divergence in their strengths profile and think through how these strengths have played out in their lives. Then we look at how to craft their work to bring out the best in themselves and their colleagues.

Resilience: More than just the ability to bounce back from adversity, resilience is also the capacity to bounce forward in the presence of opportunity. As the research of Tim Judge discussed above shows, students need more than good grades, high college entrance exam scores, or even a college education to succeed. They need core qualities of positivity. We first help educators learn the skills of resilience for themselves. Our work draws from the research of Martin Seligman and his team at the University of Pennsylvania (Gillham et al., 2007; Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Seligman, 1991; Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, & Gillham, 1995) to help educators develop clear-eyed optimism and springy resilience. Our workshops and systemic follow-up provide real opportunities to practice the skills that make for both bounce-back and bounce-forward resilience.

In this area, we also work with educators to understand and apply the research into “Mindsets” of Carol Dweck (C. S. Dweck, 2000; C. S. Dweck, 2006). Dr. Dweck’s research program was inspired by Dr. Seligman’s early work on explanatory style. It looks at how the “theories”, a/k/a/ “mindsets”, that each of us has about what it means to be “smart”, or “good at relationships”, or “talented” affect our performance. Basically, one can have a “growth” or a “fixed” theory about what it means to be smart. If “growth”, then smart is something you do, the result of effort, strategy, and knowledge, all of which can be increased continuously. If “fixed”, then intelligence is something you have in a specific amount, a part of you that you cannot see or assess. Those with a growth mindset are constantly looking for challenges to make them smarter; fixed folks are constantly watching for (and trying to avoid) signals they are not that smart. Positive mindsets engage when they hit difficulties, while those with a fixed mindset quit and pretend they never tried. About 40-45% of most populations are in the “fixed” range of the continuum, 40-45% growth, and 10-15% indeterminate. Mindsets are relatively easy to change through types of praise (process vs. person), stories that emphasize overcoming difficulties

and initial failures even for great thinkers, learning about neuroplasticity, and explicit instruction concerning the research.

Hint 1: Think about the meaning of this research for professional development. If teachers are like most populations and 40-45% have a fixed mindset, that portion of the group will tune out at the first hint they need to improve their skills. Some of the rest of the group will be highly ambivalent about listening, engaging, and learning. Thus, any specific learning opportunity starts with a possibility of benefiting only the 25-40% of teachers most willing to change and grow, and some of those may well have already learned or mastered the material being taught or may be resistant for other reasons. So, at best, maybe 15% of the attendees will be in a position to gain from the program, and they will have to do so through a drumbeat of negativity from about 40% and boredom from another 25% or so. No wonder one-shot, skills-focused professional development is so ineffective.

Hint 2: Mindsets are fully active in most students by middle school. Those with fixed mindsets – 40-45% – are unlikely to show outstanding academic growth in a given year regardless of instructional strategies – they will learn what is easy and resist/ignore the rest! They may also present challenges to classroom management, especially when trying to show they are not interested and not trying with material they did not understand immediately.

Finally, our work in the area of resilience pulls from the research of the late Richard Snyder into Hope Theory (McDermott & Snyder, 1999; Snyder, 2002). With its easy-to-understand framework of goals, pathways, and willpower, Hope Theory connects to clear-eyed optimism in a way that promotes the behavioral tendencies of optimists, especially setting and pursuing challenging goals in many areas of life (Segerstrom, 2006).

Relationships: The third area of focus in our programs is relationships – between educators, between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents. We know that relationships can be critical for school performance. As shown in the research of Roger Goddard, trust is a predictor of faculty performance (Goddard, 2003; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009). However, just as our focus on strengths is not limited to “school”, and resilience is applicable both at school and away, so our work in the area of relationships provides understanding and tools that participants can use with family and friends as well as with one another, students, and parents. Of course, work in the areas of strengths and resilience will have already affected relationships. It is common for us to hear colleagues of many years talk about new insights and appreciation for each other after focusing on identifying and using strengths. Also, resilient, optimistic people are attractive – so once again the previous work is already building relationships. In working on resilience, we teach the relationship between our experiences, our thoughts about those experiences, and

our feelings and actions. This helps participants better understand the reactions of others as they increase their ability to think about emotions and their causes, a key component of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004) and thereby helps them protect and build relationships.

In addition, we also help participants understand and use knowledge and techniques specific to relationships, both between individuals and within groups. These include the best way to respond to an often unnoticed moment in relationships: when things go right (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004), the key role of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009), the tipping-point ratio needed in pairs or groups to sustain the relationship and help the group toward excellent performance (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) and the importance of many small connecting moments (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; T. Rath & Clifton, 2004).

Finally, we look at the synergy of relationships as they work together toward improvement, through the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005). Once again, relationships tie back into strengths and resilience as the Appreciative Inquiry process focuses on the group “at its best” and then finds ways to innovate toward more of the best in the future, which just happens to often solve previously intractable problems. Moreover, the flexibility of application that is inherent in AI allows participants to take it all the way down to interpersonal relationships and even to theories of intelligence (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006).

Conclusion

Schools today face unprecedented challenges. More of the same, even done more efficiently and effectively, will not meet the challenge. Schools are called to create human success at levels never before achieved. To meet this high and noble challenge, they will need the assistance of what positive psychology has discovered about strengths, resilience, and relationships.

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