

# Positive early childhood education: Expanding the reach of positive psychology into early childhood

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## Funding

None declared

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest in respect to their authorship or the publication of this paper.

## Acknowledgments

None declared

## Abstract

There are inherent links between early childhood educational theory and practice and the science of positive psychology. Opportunities exist for the implementation of positive psychology interventions and the harnessing of synergies between early childhood services and global pedagogies (such as the Reggio Emilia approach and Nature pedagogy), yet they currently lack articulation, connection and application. Early childhood history, theory and practice recognise child wellbeing as complementary to education and both educator and child wellbeing are critical for the delivery of quality early childhood education services. Globally there exists regulation, pedagogy, standards and learning and development frameworks that mandate a focus on wellbeing but provide the profession with little to no tools, training or interventions in the science of wellbeing. Future directions for research into the rich connectivity of positive psychology and early childhood education are called for. Identification, design and implementation of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) along with training of educators and educational leaders in the science of wellbeing (for themselves and their students) is timely and required.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education – positive psychology – positive education – wellbeing – PERMA

## Abstrait

*Il existe des liens inhérents entre la théorie et la pratique de l'éducation de la petite enfance et la science de la psychologie positive. Des opportunités existent pour la mise en œuvre d'interventions psychologiques positives et l'exploitation des synergies entre les services de la petite enfance et les pédagogies globales (comme l'approche de Reggio Emilia et la pédagogie de la nature), mais elles manquent actuellement d'articulation, de connexion et d'application. L'histoire, la théorie et la pratique de la petite enfance reconnaissent que le bien-être de l'enfant est complémentaire à l'éducation, et le bien-être de l'éducateur et de l'enfant est essentiel à la prestation de services d'éducation de la petite enfance de qualité. À l'échelle mondiale, il existe des cadres de réglementation, de pédagogie, de normalisation et d'apprentissage et de développement qui mettent l'accent sur le bien-être, mais qui offrent peu ou pas d'outils, de formation ou d'interventions dans le domaine du bien-être. Des orientations futures pour la recherche sur la connectivité riche de la psychologie positive et de l'éducation de la petite enfance sont nécessaires. L'identification, la conception et la mise en œuvre d'interventions de psychologie positive (IPP) ainsi que la formation des éducateurs et des leaders éducatifs dans la science du bien-être (pour eux-mêmes et pour leurs élèves) est opportune et nécessaire.*

**Mots clés:** Education de la petite enfance - psychologie positive - éducation positive - bien-être - PERMA

## Introduction

In the last twenty years, propelled by the movement of positive psychology, the study of wellbeing has deepened and broadened to an increasingly mature and complete science of human flourishing. During this time, early childhood education practices have undergone review in several countries. The National Quality Framework (NQF) and national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) have been established in Australian early childhood education and care settings with children's wellbeing as a key learning outcome. In the United Kingdom the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has been introduced to provide a framework for the delivery of high quality environments for pre-school settings. Similarly, the United States' National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) Joint Position Statement declared that early learning must consider wellbeing content and outcomes.

Despite these concurrent happenings and the researched value of positive psychology when applied to education, the uptake of wellbeing initiatives in early childhood education is slow. A recent PsychInfo literature search revealed no published studies using the terms "Positive Psychology" and "Early childhood" indicating little connective activity between these fields. Perhaps it is the relative 'youth' of the field of positive education, heralded only recently by Professor Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology, and colleagues in 2009 (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, & Linkins, 2009), that explains the lack of focus thus far on early childhood? Indeed, the arena of positive psychology itself is in its infancy compared to the domain of traditional psychology. Additionally, political, cultural and educational perceptions of 'real' education beginning only at school, and the years before being the realm of play only, may be a factor. This concept is slowly changing and young children are increasingly being viewed across the world as competent citizens. However the application of positive educational theories and interventions may be lagging due to the fact that the perspectives and 'voices' of young children and babies have historically been silenced (Giamminuti, 2013). Additionally, the two fields of positive psychology and early childhood hitherto operating independently, with little opportunity for cross disciplinary 'pollination,' may also explain the lack of connectivity to this point. Whatever the reasons, the opportunity exists immediately to close this gap and begin serious discussion and research into the scope and links of a multidisciplinary approach between early childhood education and positive psychology.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the links between the science of positive psychology and early childhood education in order to address this lag and begin multidisciplinary dialogue. While there are valid and developmentally appropriate ways in which strategies and research from positive psychology can be meaningfully applied in early childhood settings – for the benefit of children and educators – we would argue these are currently unrecognised and underutilised. The original mandate for positive psychology was to build a science and profession that allows individual, communities and societies to flourish; to help families raise flourishing children, support workplaces to facilitate strong employee satisfaction; and to see policies implemented that result in high civic engagement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The first two of these pillars are ripe for positive psychology interventions to be implemented in the tens of thousands of early childhood education and care services and across the globe. Despite the current lack of explicit linkage between early education and positive psychology, in research or literature, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's mandate applies. Early childhood services, children and educators are the communities and individuals where positive psychology theories and initiatives are of utmost relevance.

## Positive Education

Seligman and colleagues (Seligman et al., 2009) in their seminal article, defined positive education as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness" with a focus on the use of classroom interventions that teach resilience, positive emotions, engagement and meaning to school children (p. 293). It was acknowledged, however that "there is much more to positive education than simple stand-alone courses" with the suggestion of the need for embedding and living positive psychology by students, staff and whole school communities (p. 305).

Green, Oades and Robinson (2011) provided an alternative definition as simply 'applied' positive psychology in education. They argue that this definition allows for positive education to be viewed more broadly, expanding its scope and application beyond 'school' and placing it in a wider educational context that includes early childhood education and higher education - that is, education from the cradle to the grave.

Furthermore, Green (2014) suggests that positive education be defined as "the application of well-being science into an educational setting aimed at increasing the resilience and well-being of students, staff, and whole-school community." (p. 402). This definition is important as it highlights the need for positive education to

focus on staff wellbeing and whole-school community wellbeing, in addition to student (or child) wellbeing. Particularly in early childhood education settings, where the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of young children are inextricably linked to that of the educators, the importance of focusing on both 'student' and 'staff' wellbeing is critical.

### Positive Psychology

While positive psychology, the science underpinning positive education, is a relatively young field, it rests on a rich theoretical history. It is grounded in humanistic psychology which emerged in the 1950's, with psychologists such as Abraham Maslow who published on self-actualization (Maslow, 1954) and Carl Rogers who defined the 'fully-functioning individual' (Rogers, 1974). Whilst Maslow originally coined the term 'positive psychology' in 1954, it was Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who formally launched the scientific field of positive psychology and became the founding fathers through the millennial issue of *American Psychologist* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recognising that traditional psychology focused on the remedying of mental illness and weakness in people and, that by cultivating happiness and wellbeing, an individual could live a thriving and flourishing life, the scientific study of positive psychology was born. Aiming to expand the field of psychology from its focus on repairing the negatives in life to also promoting the positives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), positive psychology has been formally defined as the "study of the conditions and processes that lead to optimal human functioning" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103). It is, essentially, the science of human flourishing.

Whilst early versions referred to positive psychology as a science of happiness, more recently Seligman's Flourish (2011), adjusted this to conceptualise positive psychology as a broader science of wellbeing. It is important to recognise that whilst Seligman's model and approach to the study of flourishing is often referenced, humanistic psychology had, as noted above, commenced research into this area much earlier. Additionally, during the initial development of positive psychology there was a focus on hedonic wellbeing with the term "subjective wellbeing" (Diener, 2000) and happiness often used interchangeably. Much debate ensued, with arguments proposed for the need to have a broader conception of wellbeing that also included eudaimonic approaches, and identifying alternative measures of defining positive psychological functioning, such as the scales of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). The discussion continues and it is important to note that science has since offered additional

models to discuss wellbeing, such as social wellbeing (Lopez, Pedrotti & Snyder, 2015) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, in terms of practical application, one of the most globally recognised is that of Seligman's wellbeing model, PERMA (Seligman, 2011). The PERMA model is a multidimensional approach to wellbeing that positions a range of positive psychological constructs within five pillars – Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.

Today, the science of positive psychology is a recognised branch of psychology that has experienced exponential growth. A "forest fire" (Wong, 2011, p. 69) that has generated research, writing, debate, institutes and professional conversation and conferences worldwide with a strong evidence base to support its application. This includes, but is not limited to, two meta-analyses where positive psychological interventions (PPIs) were shown to increase both subjective and psychological wellbeing as well as reducing symptoms of stress and depression (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Bolier et al., 2013). Positive psychology applications are also wide reaching in small and large organisations, schools, health, ageing and public policy, with the aim of supporting people and organisations to improve wellbeing to a point of optimal human flourishing. Its reach and relevance has, through positive education in particular, begun to permeate early childhood education, notably in Australia (Green, Baker, Immuni & Woodhouse, 2016), where it has the potential to find a natural and beneficial fit.

### Early Childhood Education

A focus on wellbeing in early childhood is neither new nor revolutionary. Curriculum and practice in preschool education across Europe, the UK, America and Australia has traditionally taken a holistic approach, with social and emotional development at the centre of pedagogy. This holistic view dictates that teaching should be developmentally appropriate (Elkind, 2015) and adapted to young children's rapid maturation, abilities and interests. Founding 'fathers' of early childhood education, Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, and fundamental theorists such as Piaget, Freud and Erikson, saw children, their development and education as a whole. This philosophy naturally places wellbeing at the core.

Additionally, while early childhood education has not overlooked the importance of cognitive development and academic progress, its view has historically maintained that all domains of the child – social, emotional, cognitive and physical – be considered together (Elkind, 2007; Singer et al., 2006). This concept of educating 'the whole child' (Huitt, 2011), requires early childhood educational

institutions to reach beyond academic outcomes and for educators to develop the social and emotional health and wellbeing of the child as key components of quality education. This fundamental belief unites early childhood education globally and also presents continual challenges to co-ordinate and achieve early childhood education practices that ensure children's holistic development (UNESCO, 2010).

Developing the whole child, with social and emotional domains as important as cognition, is an international focus. In Australia, an agreement was formed in 2009 between all state and territory governments to establish approved, national educational and developmental outcomes and practices to support and promote learning for young children. The resulting Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009), declares five key learning outcomes for all children, one of which is "Children have a strong sense of wellbeing" (p. 30). In the USA, the United States Department of Health and Human Services, provider of the Head Start program's Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five, includes in its 2015 revision a focus on key domains for long-term success, one of which is social and emotional development. The UK EYFS overarching principles declares that resilience should shape the early years and that building children's capacity to thrive must include the prime areas of personal, social emotional development. It is here we would argue that positive psychology can offer scientific grounding to both understanding of social and emotional functioning, what wellbeing is and how to best promote it for educators, children, families and communities that early childhood services operate within. With young children's wellbeing so clearly a part of these guiding and statutory frameworks, it is vital that early childhood educators are able to draw on the science of wellbeing within early childhood education programs around the world.

It would appear that internationally wellbeing is mentioned, monitored and assessed for children in learning frameworks and quality rating processes, thus contributing to positive psychology's pillar of 'individual' flourishing. However, the wellbeing of the whole organisation, educators and staff who are expected to meet regulatory and quality requirements, is frequently omitted. Those providing these vital early childhood education services and who form the 'community' pillar are mentioned only in their role of delivering quality education. In its 2017 publication on the Key Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care, *Starting Strong*, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), reports that it is now widely accepted that teachers and pedagogues within early childhood settings are one of the most important influential factors in children's development and learning (2017). Evidence in secondary schools indicates that the application of positive psychology is most effective when staff are given the opportunity to learn and 'live' the tenets of positive psychology before they teach and embed it (Norrish, Williams, O'Connor & Robinson, 2013). Despite these confirmations, the area of educator wellbeing is languishing in early childhood.

### **Applications of Positive Psychology in Early Childhood**

As previously noted, positive psychology is aimed at increasing the resilience and wellbeing of individuals (students, educators, staff) and communities (whole schools/services). Whilst a full review of the potential applications of positive psychology into early childhood education is a necessary and timely endeavour, rich with potential and synergy, it is beyond the immediate scope of this paper. The inclusion of PPIs, intentional activities aiming to increase wellbeing by cultivating positive emotions, cognitions and behaviours (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), in early childhood education programs is also a key area of potential and exploration. For the purposes of this paper, we aim to provide a broad overview making explicit the implicit connections between positive psychology and early childhood education as we believe this is the first 'broad-brush' review to do so. We will focus on two key areas being early childhood educator wellbeing and child wellbeing (as can be delivered through quality early childhood educational practice).

### **Early childhood educator wellbeing**

The importance of focusing on educator wellbeing is critical, particularly in early childhood education settings where the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of young children are inextricably linked to the capacity of educators. Despite the limited research and focus in the area of early childhood educator wellbeing, it is evident that a direct "connection occurs between early childhood educators' wellbeing and their capacity for providing high quality education and care" (Cumming, 2016). A 2015 study revealed 41.7% of Australian Family Day Care (FDC) workers report psychological distress due to the imbalance of effort applied to the profession versus the rewards gained (Corr et al., 2015). While FDC forms only a part of the fabric of early childhood education, these statistics are alarming.

In the Australian NQF, EYLF and KidsMatter (the national initiative between Early Childhood Australia, the Australian Psychological Society and beyondblue to support children's mental

health), attention is drawn to the importance of the wellbeing of children alone. Educators are mentioned only in these guiding documents and legislation in their role of delivering quality education. The NQF is a solid policy initiative by the Australian government to raise the level of service delivery and standing of the profession however very few, if any, strategies and initiatives are directed towards the mental health and wellbeing of educators themselves.

An examination of educator wellbeing in general reveals teachers are considered to be the most stressed profession in the world (Stoerber & Rennert, 2008) with increases in work demands, parental expectations, growing accountability and the complexities of meeting the diverse needs of students (Howard & Johnson, 2004). In addition, the psychological wellbeing in early childhood educators has specifically been shown to deteriorate after the first five years of service (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Factors contributing to this include time pressures, managing children's needs with personal needs, collaborating with parents and maintaining effective early childhood practices (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014).

Early childhood educators have long been undervalued by society and have experienced poor working conditions (Corr, et al., 2015) despite being recognised by families as playing a vital role in the development of their children. The intrinsic reward of the early childhood profession is high but the work is frequently demanding, challenging and can directly impact the health and wellbeing of educators (Corr et al., 2015). In a report covering its thirty five member countries, the OECD stated that one of the key challenges for improving the early childhood education and care sector is improving the working conditions and professional education of educators and staff (2017).

Teaching is an emotional vocation. Educators across all sectors are required to use their internal social and emotional resources to manage the daily demands of the profession in order to connect, engage and manage relationships with each other and students. Early childhood educators describe their role as "intensely personal" and "strongly systemic" (Nislin et al., 2016, p.27) requiring both social and emotional competence. As such, early childhood educators would benefit from a greater understanding and usage of their emotional capital to improve their wellbeing (Andrew, 2015). This presents a professional development opportunity that positive psychology and targeted PPI's could fill.

Cumming's (2016) review of the literature concerning the wellbeing of early educators reveals supportive collegial relationships are critical to improving mental health of both

professionals and organisations. Encouraging relationships with colleagues are directly related to job satisfaction, while difficult relationships contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Løvgren, 2016). When stress increases over time, so too does the risk of breakdown, resulting in educators becoming detached from their role and purpose and an "antagonistic working atmosphere" developing with colleagues (Cumming, 2016, p. 6). The effect of these stressors on educators is evident. Equally important but less visible, however, is the impact on children and child/educator relationships, interactions and wellbeing.

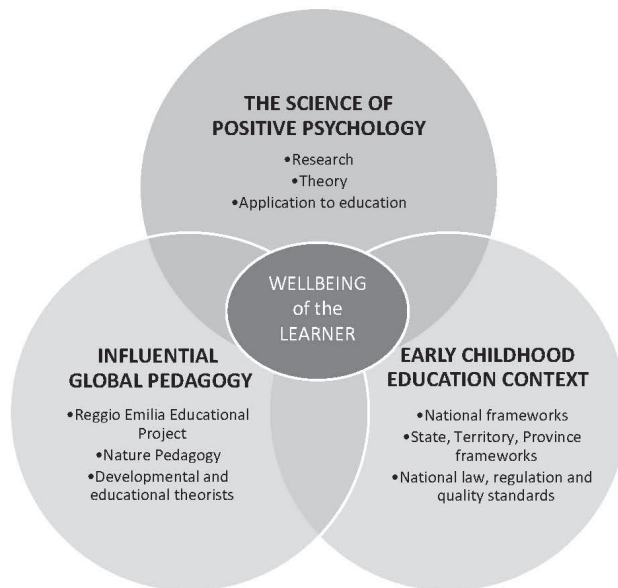
Outcomes such as burnout, emotional exhaustion and antagonism are clearly not conducive to an environment where educators or children can flourish. A review of the limited research in the area of early childhood educator wellbeing reveals that the major focus of study has been on identifying the causes of stress and poor mental health, as opposed to taking a positive psychological approach of distinguishing what contributes to early educator resilience and wellbeing. In order for early childhood educators to better understand and develop their own wellbeing, positive psychology applications would be highly relevant and valuable. Future research could be focused on identifying specific, effective PPIs for the early childhood profession. Increasing hedonic wellbeing (to identify sources of pleasure and ways to decrease 'pain') and eudaimonic perspectives (to develop educator's internal sources such as motivation, engagement and meaning) are equally essential (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014). Positive psychology offers a framework for promoting educator wellbeing that is easy to relate to, complements education, has no 'side effects' and can be independently administered (Vella-Brodrick, 2011).

Wellbeing, however, is not solely the responsibility of educators as individuals. It is a collective obligation of organisations and governments to provide effective professional development (Schreyer & Krause, 2016). A positive psychology approach that supports both employee wellbeing from an individual perspective and 'top down' from an organisational level could only be of benefit (Williams, Kern & Waters, 2016). By developing educator wellbeing, the early childhood profession could increase job satisfaction, reduce stress and burnout, better meet national standards and guidelines and increase the quality of care and education provided to children.

### Early Childhood Education Practice

Given educator stressors and responsibilities, there is broad scope for positive psychology in early childhood education practice and professional development. Despite this, references to the science of





**Figure 1: Wellbeing synergies – positive psychology and early childhood education**

positive psychology are not formally included in early education policy or frameworks, and impact on the profession is in nascent stages. Grass roots practices and PPIs are being applied in early childhood practices, however they are minimal and informal.

Avenues for PPI opportunities in early childhood education need to be identified both specifically and broadly. Specifically, individual services could conduct an audit of their early education practices against Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) and identify areas for improvement. Linkages of wellbeing science more broadly to the curriculum standards, outcomes or statutory frameworks of specific countries or states could also be made to increase competence, autonomy and relatedness, three essential psychological needs identified by a key theory of human flourishing known as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In broader terms, philosophical approaches and curriculums could be mapped to identify inherent connections to positive psychology. The wellbeing of the child is common to specific early childhood services, positive education, broad pedagogies and frameworks alike. These synergies can be represented via Figure 1.

Wellbeing synergies between early childhood education and positive psychology are abundant however they do not form the only reason for connectivity. With failures of early self-regulation considered to be a core feature of childhood psychological problems

and hindered development, in areas such as school transition, positive peer relationships and academic achievement (Calkins & Fox, 2002), the application of PPIs in early childhood could be considered not only natural but imperative.

#### **PERMA in early childhood: An applied perspective**

The PERMA wellbeing model is a sound example of inherent links between early childhood and positive psychology and where educator and child wellbeing can be simultaneously supported alongside specific curriculum frameworks. Play, as the globally recognised vehicle through which curiosity, learning and happiness can be fostered in early childhood, is a positive emotion pathway.

Parallels can be drawn between flow (engagement at its peak) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Early childhood professionals understand that the ZPD is a creative and dynamic zone whereby children learn through activities that are challenging but attainable (Hedges, 2012). Like flow, the ZPD develops psychological capabilities and is vital for successful social development and emotional wellbeing. The unique play-based delivery of early childhood curriculum facilitates the emergence of flow.

Christopher Peterson offered succinctly that are "other people matter mightily" (2013, p. 5). Early childhood theorists, research, publications and guiding statements unanimously provide evidence for the critical role that relationships play in all spheres of learning and development. Without the warmth and trust that an authentic relationship brings between teacher and student (of any age), receptiveness to learning and wellbeing cannot flourish. The Australian National Quality Standard (NQS), in setting a benchmark for high quality education and care in early childhood, nominates Relationships with Children as one of its seven key Quality Areas (ACECQA, 2016) and the UK EYFS submits positive relationships as a guiding principle. The Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University, in aiming to promote policy and decision making around the mental health of young children, offers research supporting the fact that "Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships ... both within and outside the family. Even the development of a child's brain architecture depends on the establishment of these relationships" (2010, p. 1). There is no doubt that children's wellbeing is reliant on relatedness. Relationships are perhaps one of the key symmetries between international early childhood pedagogy and positive psychology and where the greatest interventions can be designed and facilitated

for the wellbeing of children and educators.

In regards to meaning, many people may not consider a search for purpose relevant to the lives of young children. However, early childhood educators advocate that children are formulating the value and significance of themselves and their world from the moment they are born; seeking meaning in every interaction, experience and relationship. Childhood is indeed a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world (EYLF). Influential contemporary Italian early childhood educator, and Professor of Pedagogy, Carlina Rinaldi declares the inherent connections between childhood and the search for meaning: “We cannot live without meaning; it would preclude any sense of identity, any hope or any future. Children know this; they have the desire and the ability to search for the meaning of life and their own sense of self as soon as they are born.” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 2).

Equally, early childhood pedagogy supports accomplishment, achievement and high expectations for children. Children’s capacity for success and accomplishment is integral to the Australian EYLF and charges educators with facilitating this. Educators advocate for children; encourage their efforts; witness and share their victories as they draw, climb, build or converse; support them to take ownership of their achievements and feel pride in accomplishments. In recognising that children’s intrinsic motivation and learning environments are expansive in opportunity for meaningful accomplishment, educators in quality educational programs encourage persistence and striving, and acknowledge tenacity and grit. These daily occurrences, in early education contexts across the globe, are naturalistic PPIs, albeit not yet specifically labelled.

In addition to PERMA, other areas of research into optimal human functioning are relevant for application in early childhood education. Research on character strengths (Seligman, 2009), mindsets (Dweck, 2006), physical exercise (Hefferon & Mutrie, 2012), resilience (Lewis & Randolph, 2014) and gratitude can be as meaningfully applied to curriculum in the years prior to formal schooling as they can in secondary school (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Mindfulness also, which has increasing presence in educational settings, offers a breadth of researched benefits physically, psychologically and neurologically, and can equally be taught to children as adults (Lopez et al., 2015). Early childhood environments offer the perfect ground for facilitating the flexible state of mind present during mindfulness; being situated in the present, open to novelty and sensitive to context (Langer, 2009). It could be argued that young children are greater experts at mindfulness - accepting things as they are, being fully in the moment and observant of their emotions - than are adults.

Commonalities with wellbeing science (including PERMA) are also identifiable in the specific early childhood philosophies of the Reggio Emilia educational approach and nature pedagogy, both of which strongly influence Australian, American and European practice. Given their global reach, both nature pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach deserve specific examination.

### Nature Pedagogy

Nature pedagogy, or nature-based education, underpins many education methodologies internationally and is, simplistically explained, teaching in nature. Despite various labels and locations, from European Forest Schools, to USA Nature Preschools, and Australian Bush Kinders, the underlying philosophy is shared. Nature pedagogues teach and learn with children both in and about the natural world and, through direct, hands-on experience, aim to reconnect them with the physical world. American author, Richard Louv’s seminal work, *The Last Child in the Woods* (2005), linked a lack of opportunities in nature (‘nature deficit disorder’) to rising harmful trends for contemporary children, such as obesity, attention disorders and depression. Early childhood educators who have embedded nature pedagogy within their curriculum understand that there are few more powerful environments for engagement, developmentally appropriate accomplishment and searching for meaning than an area of untarnished bush, forest or woodland. The opportunities for deep relationship building, genuine positive emotion and the harnessing of strengths are plentiful when the distraction of urban and constructed environments are left behind in favour of nature’s rich surrounds.

Character strengths can be identified, utilised and developed in the unpredictable, irregular and ever-changing terrain of nature. Preschool children are equally as capable as older students in employing persistence, courage, prudence, self-regulation and the like when faced with a tree that demands scaling or a hill to be conquered. Trees, logs, dirt, water and mounds afford challenge, stimulation and the emergence of flow. Nature pedagogues the world over agree that, “In such landscapes, children can create meaning, develop a sense of place, connect with the natural world and feel empowered...” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development & Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2008, p. 45)

Early childhood educators who teach in nature in a variety of countries attest to the rich opportunity for savouring and resilience building in natural environments, and that, with “... its inexhaustible opportunities for engagement and exploration,

provides an endless space for children's play and reflection." (Wells, 2000, p. 791). For the wellbeing of children of all ages, explicit linking of nature pedagogy and positive psychology is called for in early childhood education.

### **Reggio Emilia Educational Philosophy**

The educational project of Reggio Emilia, Italy, also strongly aligns with wellbeing science and PERMA with relationships and meaning as key. Founder of the approach, Loris Malaguzzi, arguably one of the most influential educators of the 20th century, was a deeply intelligent and curious thinker for whom the rights, wellbeing and education of young children was a driving force (Cagliari, et al., 2016). The Reggio Emilia educational project has influenced global pedagogy for over fifty years and has spread further into Europe, Australia, the UK, US and Asia. Just as Peterson viewed relationships as central to wellbeing, Malaguzzi placed high value on the interdependence of people in order that they flourish. In acknowledging the inextricable nature of relationship and wellbeing, the connectedness of children to their world and their need for emotional ties, Malaguzzi poetically offered, "You never come in an isolated way; you always come with pieces of the world attached to you" (1994, p. 53). Both positive psychology and early childhood agree that wellbeing cannot be achieved in isolation; that attachment is crucial for thriving emotionally and cognitively.

The connections of meaning in positive psychology and in the Reggio Emilia approach are also worth noting. The potential and responsibility of early childhood educators to bring meaning to the lives of children and to illuminate their thinking to the world is an underlying principal of Reggio Emilia. The Reggio philosophy charges early childhood education the world over with bringing children out of invisibility and recognises their desire and need to know and be known (Giamminuti, 2013). There is such high, shared value placed on relationship and meaning in the field of early education, particularly Reggio Emilia, and positive psychology that explanations in this forum can only be cursory. While these links have yet to be investigated, they are indeed PPIs in action and deserve further articulation and discussion.

Links between the science of positive psychology and each previous section (Early Childhood Education, Application, Educator Wellbeing, Early Childhood Education Practice, PERMA, Nature Pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach), could each form a unique paper. Identification of PPIs, theoretical and practical connections with early childhood education could and should be further highlighted. While the scope of this paper does not allow

for expansion in these areas, future directions should include such research and examination. When such linkages have been made, the scope opens considerably for identifying and developing appropriate PPIs, providing educators with relevant professional development and further promoting children's wellbeing.

### **Future Directions for Research and Practice**

There exists international agreement and a clear mandate for the application of wellbeing strategies to early childhood, from birth to school and beyond. Neuroscientific research has confirmed early childhood as the prime window for growth and development and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognises this critical time:

"A consolidated body of research in recent years, in particular from neuroscience, shows that early childhood education and care (ECEC) provides crucial foundations for future learning by fostering the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are important for success later in life." (p. 5).

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child refers to children's social, spiritual and moral wellbeing and physical and mental health (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and nationally approved learning frameworks in Australia, the UK and USA include wellbeing as a desired outcome. The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of targeting wellbeing in early childhood for health, development and national productivity both now and in the future (Marbina et al, 2015). These positions and policies, along with the discussion in this paper, begs the question of future directions. Particularly, how does this mandate translate to practice? What do educators at the front line teaching young children really understand about what constitutes wellbeing? Do they have the training, skills and tools to reliably measure wellbeing, as well as to plan for and facilitate its development? What support is available to services, governing bodies and professionals?

While the desire to foster wellbeing in early childhood education frameworks is evident, it remains nebulous in application, assessment and measurement. Marbina et al's literature review (2015) provides a comprehensive appraisal of wellbeing assessment tools and identifies the importance of professionals having a shared understanding and language to discuss children's wellbeing. But how does this inform practice? What do educators know of these tools and how accessible are they? What wellbeing benefits can be measured in the classroom and how can this be done in a way that takes into consideration the ages and developmental stages of young learners? Do educators know how to ensure their own wellbeing with an awareness that



prioritising their own health translates to that of the children in their classrooms and in their care?

In regard to these and many other questions around future directions for practice, the inclusion of the concept of wellbeing in policy, frameworks, regulatory and guiding documents is vital. However, frameworks, theoretical mandates and assessment tools are not enough. Education and support of those in the profession is critical in pre-service years and in ongoing professional development. Educators in early childhood require practical strategies at their disposal to facilitate both their own and children's wellbeing. In addition, the concept of wellbeing must be understood as in addition to that of general health and safety. Knowledge beyond that of protective factors for children at risk, including Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's promotion of life's positives (2000), is imperative to be able to educate young children for their optimal functioning. Without direction, knowledge, tools and PPIs for educators, the benefits of positive early education remains incapable of graduating from the page to the child.

Research from the scientific field of positive psychology is ever increasing and educational practice is constantly undergoing research and re-examination, however these areas are currently operating independently. Future directions need to include enquiry across these two arenas for mutual benefit. The value of the early education profession applying the tools of positive education and understanding more about its inherent connectivity to early childhood cannot be understated. In addition, cross-disciplinary research, from the perspective of both children and educators, needs to be undertaken to ensure successful, practical application.

To direct research, many questions need to be posed. What specific elements of positive psychology are relevant and appropriate for early childhood curriculum? At what ages and stages of development? What applications are relevant for adults working with young children? How can theory be practically implemented in a busy and demanding service that educates children prior to school? What knowledge and skills should be prioritised for educators themselves?

Education is an ecological system; a community of learning (Giamminuti, 2013) as is the science of positive psychology. For future development, positive psychology and early childhood, educators and children, research and practice, must exist within a community of reciprocity and learning. A specific, long term, evidence-based approach to wellbeing in early childhood – linking theory, regulation, quality standards, educational frameworks, influential pedagogical practices, research and practitioner enquiry – is required. Current applications targeted towards positive psychology in primary and secondary schooling are inadequate, developmentally

inappropriate or lacking in the distinctive sphere of early childhood education. Research into the efficacy of positive psychology practices in early childhood services requires a profound awareness of the significance of context. Early childhood educators and researchers must work in tandem, or better still, be one and the same, to ensure research is driven by the unique needs of early childhood.

### Conclusion

The directive of positive psychology to facilitate flourishing individuals, communities and societies has a strong fit in early childhood education and care services internationally. The individuals (children and educators) and the communities (of children, educators, staff, families and providers) that utilise these essential services deserve and require a focus on their wellbeing for immediate and future health. The world over, babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers in early childhood services are Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's prospective third pillar; the society that will flourish or languish in the future.

Notwithstanding the legislative and learning framework support of wellbeing as a curriculum component, and the natural and historical 'fit' for positive psychology initiatives in early childhood curriculum, there is little awareness or uptake of strategies. Additionally, despite the critical developmental window and vulnerability of childhood, and teaching being an immensely stressful vocation, areas of educator and child wellbeing are under examined and under-serviced.

What has made early childhood education unique from primary and secondary levels throughout history – its core focus on addressing the developmental needs, interests and experiences of each child, taking into account their individual differences, 'wholeness' and concentrating on wellbeing – now gives a clear, approved directive that supports application of positive psychology initiatives. Through examination of global pedagogical influences, national, international and local practices illustrate clear links between early childhood education and positive psychology, particularly PERMA, yet these require further articulation and study.

Future directions include educator training in PPIs (including pre-service educator training and ongoing professional development) and increased connectivity between early childhood education and positive psychology. Provision of practical strategies, tools, skills and knowledge for those at the educational coal-face of early childhood is imperative. A call is made for early childhood professionals to research and draw links to bring focus to the critical educational, psychological and developmental window that is early childhood; to expand the reach of positive psychology into early education. ■

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## Citation

**Baker, L., Green, S., & Falecki, D. (2017).** 'Positive early childhood education: Expanding the reach of positive psychology into early childhood', *European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 1, 8, 1-12. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalwellbeingsservice.org/volumes/volume-1-2017/volume-1-article-8/>