**FEATURE PROFESSOR** *LEA WATERS*

SEARCH

# A meta-framework for bringing wellbeing into schools

Professor Lea Waters (Ph.D.) is the Founding Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology, Melbourne Graduate School of Education. She has held an academic position at the University of Melbourne for 24 years and is the author of the best-selling book *The Strength Switch* which has been translated into 10 languages. Lea is the 2017-2010 President of the International Positive Psychology Association. She argues that while Australia is a world leader in the field of Positive Education, the rapid growth of this field across all school sectors over recent years creates both opportunities and challenges.

**AGAINST** a backdrop of alarming youth mental illness[1] and declining PISA[2] results Australian schools are spearheading the way when it comes to their pro-activeness about student wellbeing and are world leaders in the new field of 'Positive Education'.

Positive Education is an applied field that weaves the science of positive psychology into educational practice with the aim of supporting student wellbeing and learning. It is a rapidly growing field that has gone global in its first decade. Indeed, a recent report by Professor Martin Seligman conducted for the World Happiness Council found that positive education is being applied in Australia, Bhutan, Canada, China, India, Israel, Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Mexico,

New Zealand, Peru, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

In Australia, Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick and Waters (2017)[3] found that mental health promotion was the second highest strategic area listed by secondary schools across the state, independent and Catholic systems – second to academic goals. Over 65% of schools across the national study had mental health promotion in their mission statements. These schools spoke about protecting and optimising mental health through a positive education approach that seeks to enhance strengths, capabilities, optimism and resilience.

The rapid growth of positive education creates both opportunities and challenges. On

the plus side, the expansion has produced a strong evidence-base of best practice promotion for student wellbeing[4]. Additionally, research shows that wellbeing programs enhance student learning. Meta-analysis evidence from the USA found that students do better by 11% in national testing when they go to schools that promote wellbeing[5]. In Australia, schools that have high quality implementation of wellbeing programs have students who are six months ahead of NAPLAN expected standards[6] and a National Study linking individual student mental health to NAPLAN scores showed that students with good mental health have a much greater likelihood of being placed in the above average rankings which is, sadly, in stark contrast to our students with poor mental health where a large percentage (almost 40%) are below national standards for maths, reading and writing[7].

However, alongside these benefits, there are challenges that arise when integrating such a rapidly growing body of work. Firstly, the vastness of the field is confronting for schools who are left not knowing which of the hundreds of different programs are the best fit for their school. Secondly, many schools report that their efforts to embed positive education, while well meaning, are fragmented and disjointed with 'pockets' of positive education scattered across the school but no consistent approach. Thirdly, schools struggle with developing a coherent scope and sequence. This can lead to ineffective outcomes from well-meaning beginnings[8]. Schools that start with a bang and invest money and resources into positive education can end up finding themselves without a clear road map and with the initial spark and momentum for the journey fading away over time.

### The need for a meta-framework that helps schools integrate and sustain Positive Education

Successfully building wellbeing in students is not simply a matter of delivering a positive education 'program'. Rather, positive education needs to start first at the level of strategy and then be embedded across interconnected systems throughout the whole school. A meta-framework gives schools a clear and purposeful direction through which to strategically embed whole-school wellbeing which goes beyond the more typical programmatic approach. Meta-frameworks, by definition, focus on the big picture and work with higher-order pathways that are made up of many smaller building blocks. Applying this logic to a positive education framework, schools can build higher- order dimensions of wellbeing such as emotional intelligence through the flexible delivery of a raft of smaller practices (e.g. gratitude practices, random acts of kindness, emotional thermometers) in interconnected ways.

When schools see positive education through the lens of a meta-framework they are able to 'join the dots' of the various positive education initiatives they have across the school and, thus, create a coherent approach that builds up a students' psychological competence over time. Through a meta-framework that educates students about how each positive education practice fits into the bigger picture of mental health students can see how mindsets are related to mindfulness, how strengths are connected to savouring, and how gratitude and grit are all part of the one overarching aim to develop their wellbeing tool kit. Additionally, meta-frameworks provide school leaders with the optimal balance of consistency-with-flexibility and

this allows them to customise their wellbeing strategies to best suit the needs of various student groups in ways that still provide a cohesive framework and approach across the school.

There are many benefits to adopting a meta-framework but school leaders must lend a critical mind to how positive education frameworks have been developed when choosing a framework. There are frameworks out there that have nice acronyms but are based on little more than a palatable sounding name. There are frameworks that have been developed within one school and then marketed as being generalisable. There are frameworks that are based on theory and these are good…in theory. There are frameworks that pull together various evidence-based ideas and these are probably the best of the bunch.

What schools really need is a freely available framework that has been developed using a rigorous data-driven method that systematically synthesises the large body of science and comes up with a manageable number of over-arching, high-impact pathways that schools can adopt in their own context.

### The SEARCH framework

With this in mind, I have been leading a multi-year, multi-study project aimed to develop a data-driven, meta-framework that is based on science from positive psychology and positive education. The SEARCH framework has been developed and published in academic journals, is freely available for you to use and has been adopted by schools in Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates. SEARCH covers six over-arching pathways to wellbeing:

· Strengths

· Emotional Management

· Attention and Awareness

· Relationships

· Coping

· Habits and Goals.

These pathways and some examples of approaches that have been tested through scientific research can be found in Table 1 below.

The SEARCH framework is the result of three key stages of science: 1) a large scale published bibliometric review of the field of positive psychology that analysed 18 years of psychological research from 18,400 studies to see what the science tells us about higher-order pathways to wellbeing[9] 2) an action research project involving ten schools to road test the data-driven, meta-framework[10] and 3) a systematic review of school intervention studies involving 35,888 students from Australia, NZ, Europe, the UK, Asia and North America demonstrating the effectiveness of the framework and each individual pathway on student wellbeing and student learning[11].

SEARCH provides a useful framework for schools wanting to design their own wellbeing curriculum – guiding lessons around the six pathways to wellbeing – and a framework to audit and evaluate the existing programs and practices that may already be in use at your school. Figure 1[12] shows how schools can use this framework to audit and structure the current positive education practices they are using and to create a deeper understanding of what over-arching pathways are being developed through your school's current wellbeing initiatives.

### SEARCH for staff

A key question for school leaders prompted by the SEARCH framework is "How can I intentionally create a culture

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that fosters strengths, emotional management, attention and awareness, relationships, coping and habits and goals for all the adult members of the school?"

Positive education should not only be about student wellbeing, it should also include whole-school approaches that build staff wellbeing. Staff can be offered professional development that helps them build their own levels of SEARCH, thus making positive education truly whole-school. School leaders and administrators can find strategic and consistent ways to infuse SEARCH into elements of the school that impact faculty and staff such as recruitment and selection, performance development, professional learning, employee wellbeing programs and staff/faculty room culture.

## Conclusion

In 2009, Professor Martin Seligman and his colleagues suggested "positive education will form the basis of a new prosperity" . Since that time, the field has grown in promising ways. However, this growth has put positive education at risk of lacking a cohesive direction and of failing to build the cumulative evidence needed to advance the field, which can lead to ineffective, or even harmful, outcomes for students.

A meta-framework can prevent these risks by providing higher-order parameters that help schools to embed positive education in a more consistent, integrated, and cohesive manner. The SEARCH framework, developed from a large-scale bibliometric analysis of the field, combined with action research and a systematic review paper is a freely available, data-driven meta-framework for your school to use. ∎

The Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne is situated in Parkville, Victoria. It is a global leader in teaching and education research, offering challenging courses, world-changing research and contemporary learning spaces.

[1] The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on The Second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2016) http://health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs-m-child2

[2] Karp, P. (2018), Pisa results: Australian Students' Science, Maths and Reading In Long-Term Decline, *The Guardian*, Dec 6 https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/dec/06/pisa-results-australian-students-science-maths-and-reading-in-long-term-decline
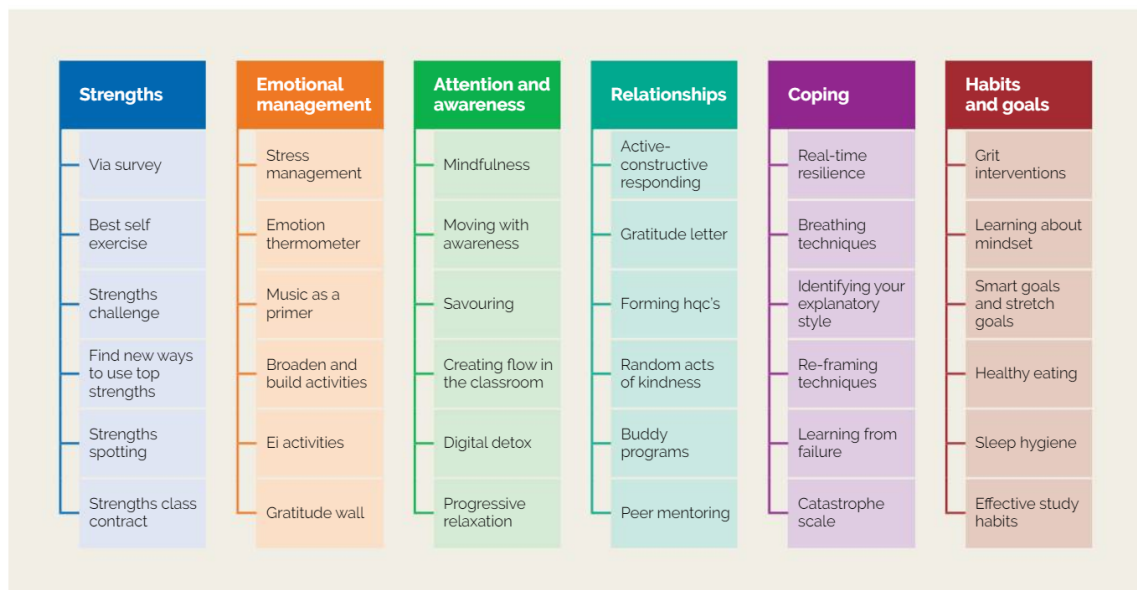
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[4] Owen, R., & Waters, L. (in press), What Does Positive Psychology tell us About Early Intervention with Children and Adolescents? A review of the impact of PPIs with young people, *Journal of Positive Psychology*

[5] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011), The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions, *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432

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**FIGURE 1** USING THE SEARCH FRAMEWORK TO AUDIT AND ORGANISE CURRENT POSITIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES

| Strengths | Emotional management | Attention and awareness | Relationships | Coping | Habits and goals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Via survey | Stress management | Mindfulness | Active-constructive responding | Real-time resilience | Grit interventions |
| Best self exercise | Emotion thermometer | Moving with awareness | Gratitude letter | Breathing techniques | Learning about mindset |
| Strengths challenge | Music as a primer | Savouring | Forming hqc's | Identifying your explanatory style | Smart goals and stretch goals |
| Find new ways to use top strengths | Broaden and build activities | Creating flow in the classroom | Random acts of kindness | Re-framing techniques | Healthy eating |
| Strengths spotting | Ei activities | Digital detox | Buddy programs | Learning from failure | Sleep hygiene |
| Strengths class contract | Gratitude wall | Progressive relaxation | Peer mentoring | Catastrophe scale | Effective study habits |

**TABLE 1** SEARCH FRAMEWORK AND EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE EDUCATION APPROACHES RESEARCHED IN SCIENCE

| SEARCH Pathways | Description of Pathway | Examples of positive education approaches researched in science |
|---|---|---|
| **Strengths** | Pre-existing qualities that arise naturally, feel authentic, are intrinsically motivating to use, and energising. | **Strength awareness** These interventions help students to identify their strengths, typically through surveys. |
| | | **Strength use** These interventions help students set goals for how to put their strength into actions. |
| | | **Strength spotting** These interventions teach students how to see when their peers are using strengths. |
| **Emotional management** | The ability to identify, understand and manage one's emotions. | **EI** These interventions teach students how to perceive, understand, use and regulate emotions. |
| | | **Gratitude** Gratitude interventions help students to notice, appreciate and acknowledge the positive in their lives. |
| **Attention and awareness** | Attention is our ability to focus, either on inner aspects of self, such as emotions and physical sensations, or on external stimuli (e.g., the teacher's lesson in a classroom). Awareness refers to the ability to pay attention to a stimulus as it occurs. | **Meditation** Meditation is defined as the deliberate act of regulating attention through the observation of thoughts, emotions and body states. Meditation interventions in schools involve training a student's attention. |
| | | **Mindfulness** Mindfulness is a state of focused awareness on one's thoughts, feelings and body sensations. Mindful interventions in school help students to develop the skill of self-observation and to be dispassionate about the self in the present-moment. |
| **Relationships** | This pathway concerns the skills required to build and support supportive social relationships as well as capitalise on momentary social interactions. | **Mentoring** Mentoring is a process by which a more experienced person provides a less-experienced person with guidance, support and caring over an extended period of time. |
| | | **Peer support** Peer-peer support to enhance a sense of connectedness and belonging in the school. |
| **Coping** | Coping is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands. | **Resilience and coping** These interventions aim to help students develop the capacity for maintaining, recovering or improving mental health following life challenges. |
| **Habits and goals** | Habits are persistent patterns in decision making and action. Goals are formal aspirations, that articulate what people aim for and are willing to invest effort into. | **Goal interventions** These interventions teach students to set and strive for goals. |
| | | **Self-regulated learning (SRL) interventions** SRL interventions teach students the cyclical process of steps needed to persist through the learning process: self-evaluation, self-monitoring and goal setting along with strategy planning, implementation and monitoring. |

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[12] My gratitude to Laura Allison for her development of Figure 1.