Chapter 7
Character Education: A Role for Literature in Cultivating Character Strengths in Adolescence

Emily FitzSimons

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the possible application of character strengths in a school’s well-being program, not through discrete personal development subjects or pastoral time, but within the school’s existing literature program. This chapter provides an empirical imperative for schools’ attention to what is often, nebulously, referred to as “good character”. Rather than merely reflecting a kind of social affability or cultural preparation for life beyond school, character education can and should be re-drawn to focus on developing individual students’ awareness and use of their own character strengths. This chapter culminates in arguing for the need to bring such character education into the traditional curriculum; English literature is one potentially powerful avenue for the cultivation of character strengths. This chapter brings together the teaching of literature and the cultivation of character strengths.

According to Aristotle (2000) happiness or well-being (eudaimonia) is a product of living and acting in accordance with a virtuous life. Rather than the popular hedonistic philosophies on happiness of his day, Aristotle argued for the pursuit of excellence in virtue (2000). Being true to the inner self, or daimon, entails identifying and cultivating one’s virtues and then, importantly, living in accordance with them (Peterson et al. 2007). Great achievements and positive feelings, according to Aristotle, are ephemeral and empty in the absence of the highest good and our greatest quality of the soul: virtue (2000). Rather than being lofty, intangible concepts, virtues actually drive our character, concretely manifested in our behaviour and actions. In education, we strive to prepare young people for adult life. It is not surprising, then, that notions of “character” feature heavily. We tell students that activities, however difficult, are “character-building”. Schools talk of producing men and women “of good character”. Perhaps, in the wake of the burgeoning field


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of positive psychology, we might finally have a way to operationalize, quantify and develop “character” within a workable framework. The recent work on character strengths (for example, Peterson and Seligman 2004; Biswas-Diener 2006; Buschor et al. 2013; Dahlsgaard et al. 2005; Park 2004a), now well-published and internationally recognized, is our starting point.

**What Could Character Education Look Like?**

Schools are changing. Educational institutions are being challenged by the need to prepare students for an increasingly globalised, technological and skills-driven world. As a result, the very fabric of many school environments and their curricula is changing. At the same time, though, many are drawing attention to the psychological distress facing our youth (for example Waters 2011; Seligman et al. 2009). There is, then, a call for a focus on psychological well-being alongside the traditional academic education. It suggests that parents and communities are looking to schools to provide something more than past generations. There is a growing appreciation of the need to teach “good character”. We need only look at the websites of high schools around the world to see the prevalence of words like “values”, “character” and, more recently, “well-being”. As early as 1924, educational literature acknowledged that, “school achievement involves other factors than those measured by means of the intelligence test ... [such as] character traits” (Poffenberger and Carpenter 1924, p. 67). Though, where the character education of centuries past seemed to focus on good manners, social outreach and leadership, what we might mean by “character” in education is now expanding. Character education might be defined, variously, as a form of moral education that aims to teach young people about virtues (Park 2004a) and develop socio-moral competencies, whereby students can act as moral agents in the world (Berkowitz and Bier 2004). There is much more to this agenda than has perhaps been realised and, as such, this sort of education has, traditionally, be more of a practice than a science (Berkowitz and Bier 2004). Producing young men and women of “good character” has seemed a nebulous goal, measured often in the calibre of student behaviour at the school, or students’ affability and community spirit upon graduating. The rapid growth in positive psychology and its research on character strengths as pathways to values means that educators now have an empirical platform on which to build, measure and promote their programs. As a result, our understanding and cultivation of “character” in education can and is taking on a new look. Fostering an individual’s sense of self, cultivating character strengths and promoting resilience are among the developing aims of positive education.

It is important to highlight that character education in no way diminishes or supersedes the traditional goals of education, such as the accumulation of knowledge and development of practical and intellectual skills. On the contrary, the benefits of character education are not only seen in the psychological well-being of citizens but, substantially, in academic outcomes too. That is, the development of character
serves not only itself, but contributes to a variety of vocational and achievement outcomes. At the intersection of two different but interrelated agendas—promoting well-being and enhancing academic outcomes—lies the potential of character education. Character strengths are a significant enabling factor of flourishing at school. It is not all about psychological well-being; indeed, the use of character strengths has been linked to academic success (Weber and Ruch 2012); positive emotions that facilitate creativity (Fredrickson 2009); academic self-efficacy (Weber and Ruch 2012); a love of learning (Knoop 2011); and positive classroom behaviour (Weber and Ruch 2012).

A recent study by Weber and Ruch (2012) found that love of learning, zest, gratitude, perseverance and creativity were associated with school-related satisfaction among children. More specifically, hope, love of learning, perseverance and prudence were positively associated with academic self-efficacy; and hope, self-regulation, perspective and teamwork distinguished between those students who demonstrated improved, as opposed to decreased, grades during the school year (Weber and Ruch 2012). Additionally, another study found that temperament and perseverance predict academic achievement (Peterson and Park 2009). Success at work is also predicted by character strengths. For example;

- The strength of love predicts performance among West Point military cadets (Peterson and Park 2009);
- Teaching effectiveness is predicted by the teacher’s levels of zest, humour and social intelligence (Peterson and Park 2009);
- People who use their strengths are more likely to achieve their set goals (Linley et al. 2010);
- And the strengths of zest, persistence, hope and curiosity play a key role in healthy and ambitious work behaviour (Gander et al. 2012).

It is clear from the science that education on character strengths and their development should be an integral part of a student’s academic program, rather than being in competition with it. What is now, therefore, termed positive education is defined as education for both traditional skills and, alongside that, for happiness (Seligman et al. 2009).

To achieve these aims, though, positive education does require a re-aligning of educational theory, pedagogy and practice. Changing an entire institution or system is hardly an expeditious process but some schools, like St Peter’s College, Adelaide, have begun. Beyond much-needed changes within school psychology and a zealous determination to change our classrooms for the better, the world of education is unsure on how best to bring together the theory, research and assessment tools at our disposal. Positive psychology research is spawning interventions but there are now some challenges in aligning the research and practice (Biswas-Diener et al. 2011). In some ways the relationship between positive psychology and education is at something of an impasse. Firstly, many of the existing programs, such the seminal Penn Resiliency Program (see Gillham et al. 2007) or the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Program (see Seligman et al. 2009 for an overview), are very effective, but usually as a result of having been delivered by their psychologist authors, or
at least by field staff who have had extensive training. For example, staff at both Geelong Grammar School and St Peter’s College, Adelaide in Australia were well trained by specialists from the University of Pennsylvania, using a train-the-trainer model. Such institutions are now blessed with highly-trained staff and on-going access to leaders in the scientific field, so they are well placed to deliver positive education. Clearly though, the demand for school-based programs will very soon out-strip the availability of the trained personnel and costly rights-protected curricula. Bringing the positive education movement to scale, then, is a key goal. Many schools do not have the human or financial resources to access, or even replicate for themselves, the effective programs. So a first challenge is to empower and equip regular classroom teachers in schools.

In the process of doing this, a second challenge is for positive psychology to maintain its status and integrity as a science. If many in the applied fields struggle to access or use the science then they rely on other, less scientifically rigorous means. Over time, this will dilute the rigor of positive psychology and spawn a new generation of published materials purporting to be “a positive psychology approach” to teaching and learning, for example. So how can we unite the much-needed research in positive psychology and the classroom-based practice?

A third challenge relates to the daily implementation of programs in schools. Many schools and regions can cite examples of other programs introduced over the years, often driven by governments or local imperatives. New-fangled approaches to literacy and numeracy, emotional competencies, healthy eating, digital literacy and multicultural awareness are some examples. Schools know that we cannot teach any of these in isolation from other learning. Literacy and numeracy, for example, is the job of all teachers, not merely the English or Mathematics staff. Multiculturalism transforms every classroom, not only the History or Citizenship syllabi. So, too, with positive psychology and character education. How can we take the principles of positive education, such as character strengths, and promote robust, inter-disciplinary learning and practice across all facets of school life for students? Thus, there are a number of challenges lying before positive psychology and educational systems. There are no simple answers, but plenty of potential strategies. What follows is one such strategy.

The field of positive psychology is starting to show us that character can, in fact, be taught. So what sorts of programs might schools implement? A canvassing of recent research and practice can assist in generating guidelines for the shaping of effective school-based interventions on character. Below is a summary of some of the features of existing positive education programs and recommendations from researchers (see Table 7.1 for a concise overview, clustered by theme):

- Interventions can be incorporated into routine educational practices taught by school personnel (Durlak et al. 2011).
- Indeed, programs implemented by regular classroom teachers may be more effective due to the existing relationships they have with the students (Waters et al. 2011).
- The earlier the interventions the better the longer-term gains (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
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<tr>
<th>Study or title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character strengths among youth</td>
<td>Steen et al. 2003</td>
<td>Failure to work within the school context may result in attention being drawn to conflicting moral messages and values</td>
<td>Specific to school context</td>
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<td>Character strengths and positive youth development</td>
<td>Park 2004a</td>
<td>Consider cultural factors, such as religion, school context and age of the students, when promoting character strengths</td>
<td>Specific to school context</td>
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<td>The role of subjective well-being in positive youth development</td>
<td>Park 2004b</td>
<td>Supportive parenting and high-quality connections with significant others may enrich the development of strengths in the program</td>
<td>Community engagement</td>
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<td>Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions</td>
<td>Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009</td>
<td>Longer-term interventions are more likely to produce greater gains</td>
<td>Program timing</td>
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<td>Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification</td>
<td>Peterson and Seligman 2004</td>
<td>The earlier the interventions the better the longer-term gains</td>
<td>Program timing</td>
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<td>Research-based character education</td>
<td>Berkowitz and Bier 2004</td>
<td>Well-integrated programs, taught across several areas at school are more effective than isolated lessons</td>
<td>Program structure</td>
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<td>A dynamic approach to psychological strength development and intervention</td>
<td>Biswas-Diener et al. 2011</td>
<td>A scaffolded approach, allowing for skill development rather than mere awareness of strengths, is likely to be highly effective</td>
<td>Program structure</td>
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<td>Strengths gym: The impact of a character strengths-based intervention on the life satisfaction and well-being of adolescents</td>
<td>Proctor et al. 2011</td>
<td>There are benefits of multiple exercises across time</td>
<td>Pedagogy &amp; program structure</td>
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<td>Strengths gym: The impact of a character strengths-based intervention on the life satisfaction and well-being of adolescents</td>
<td>Proctor et al. 2011</td>
<td>Benefits to having students working collaboratively on character strengths</td>
<td>Pedagogy &amp; program structure</td>
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<td>The positive youth development perspective: Theoretical and empirical bases of a strengths-based approaches to adolescent development</td>
<td>Lerner 2009</td>
<td>Alignment with the existing interest of youth in strengths and capitalising on existing strengths profiles among adolescence, is likely to effectively promote positive youth development</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
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<td>Strengths of character in schools</td>
<td>Park and Peterson 2009</td>
<td>Capitalising on the strengths youth already possess is desirable; to this end, individualised programs may be better than generic ones</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
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Table 7.1 (continued)

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<td>Strengths of character in schools</td>
<td>Park and Peterson 2009</td>
<td>Programs should teach specific activities of strengths, then encourage daily use</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
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<td>Does the positive psychology movement have legs for children in schools?</td>
<td>Scott-Huebner and Hills 2011</td>
<td>It is important to offer daily opportunities for students to practise behaviours and newly-acquired skills within the school environment</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
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<td>Character strengths among youth</td>
<td>Steen et al. 2003</td>
<td>Life experience is a powerful teacher in character strengths as youth learn through doing, viewing and modelling</td>
<td>Program content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character strengths and positive youth development</td>
<td>Park 2004a</td>
<td>Positive role models play an important role in the development of character strengths</td>
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<td>The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions</td>
<td>Durlak et al. 2011</td>
<td>Interventions can be incorporated into routine educational practices and delivered by classroom teachers</td>
<td>Role of the classroom teacher</td>
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<td>A review of school-based positive psychology interventions</td>
<td>Waters 2011</td>
<td>Programs implemented by regular classroom teachers may be more effective due to the existing teacher-student relationships</td>
<td>Role of the classroom teacher</td>
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- There are benefits of a shot-gun approach, that is, multiple exercises across time (Proctor et al. 2011).
- Having students working together on character strengths enables them to learn that others have different, but equally valued, strengths (Proctor et al. 2011).
- Longer interventions, rather than a one-off program, or a “flavour of the week” approach, are likely to produce greater gains (Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Steen et al. 2003).
- A sequenced, step-by-step approach allowing for adequate skill development, rather than mere awareness of strengths, is likely to be highly effective (Durlak et al. 2011; Biswas-Diener et al. 2011).
- It is important to consider cultural factors, such as religion, school context and age of the students, when promoting character strengths, addressing both internal and external factors (Park 2004a, b; Peterson and Seligman 2004).
- Failure to work within the school context may result in attention being drawn to conflicting moral messages and values (Steen et al. 2003).
- Life experience is a powerful teacher in character strengths as youth learn through doing, viewing and modelling (Steen et al. 2003).
- Positive role models play an important role in the development of character strengths, rather than prescriptive programs on what students should and should
not do (Park 2004a; Park and Peterson 2009; Proctor et al. 2011; Steen et al. 2003).

- If schools, families and communities can align themselves with the existing interest in strengths and seek to capitalise on existing strengths profiles among adolescence, we are more likely to effectively promote positive youth development (Lerner 2009; Knoop 2011).

- Trying to capitalise on the strengths youth already possess is desirable (Park and Peterson 2009); to this end, individualised programs may be better than generic ones (Park and Peterson 2009).

- Well-integrated programs, taught across several areas at school and even reinforced at home, are more effective than isolated lessons (Berkowitz and Bier 2004; Noble and McGrath 2005; Peterson and Seligman 2004).

- Programs should teach specific activities of strengths, then encourage daily use (Park and Peterson 2009).

- It is important to offer daily opportunities for students to practise behaviours and newly-acquired skills within the school environment (Clonan et al. 2004; Scott-Huebner and Hills 2011).

- Supportive parenting and high-quality connections with significant others, as a result of their correlation with life satisfaction (Park 2004b), may enrich the development of strengths in the program.

Many of the above recommendations point to the real potential of the classroom. Schools and the world of positive psychology now have an unprecedented opportunity to bring character strengths into schools through the regular classroom, even in schools with little access to expensive curricula and positive psychology experts. In fact, there is something to be said for the strengths of regular teachers. Classroom teachers are undoubtedly experts in their field. For example, they are highly skilled at engaging with young people, experienced at generating units of work to inspire, and at have a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips on pedagogy, assessment, classroom design and community engagement. I would argue that they are the as-yet unrealised champions of positive education. Years of attending educational conferences and teacher workshops, both in Australia and internationally, reveals that, perhaps more than anything else, teachers are hungry for new ideas, better ways to help their students and innovative resources. If you have ever seen the book stalls in foyers at teacher conferences being picked over, like a restaurant buffet, then you start to appreciate the un-tapped potential here. Teachers of both primary and secondary students are always searching for new, easily-implemented materials. Now, in the wake of rising attention on positive psychology, any teacher materials that purport to use positive psychology concepts will be in high demand. As such, we need to be careful. And clever. If readily available resources existed that bring together the science of positive psychology and traditional curriculum areas in which teachers are already authoritative, then we could capitalise on the skills of the classroom experts and apply the science at the same time. Teachers would not only be empowered they would be equipped to take the science of well-being into their classrooms. Thus, if positive psychology is to be rapidly scaled, whilst
still maintaining its empirical and theoretical integrity, then there is a need for the publishing of accessible and dynamic teaching materials. Empirically-based curriculum materials on character strengths, in the hands of the classroom experts, can lead well-integrated, practical, culturally-sensitive, long-term programs for schools.

Positive Psychology and Literature

Why literature? English literature is one curriculum area that, by virtue of its creative, personal, discussion-rich pedagogy and its curricular focus on the lives and emotions of others, is a natural fit with positive psychology. Let us begin by exploring what literature has to offer to the study and cultivation of well-being, before returning to character strengths particularly. By way of introduction, the insights proffered by literature help form a picture of the meaningful life and what it means to flourish. Literature is very much concerned with the human condition and the great writers, from William Shakespeare, through Charles Dickens to George Orwell, Arthur Miller and Margaret Atwood show concern for fellow humans, in whatever circumstances they find themselves. In fact, literature has the power to make us reflect on ourselves through the lives of others. Involvement in and sympathy for literary characters renders greater understanding of the human condition. We come to see, in the end, how circumstances shape lives (Nussbaum 1998).

Firstly, literature assists us to understand the concept of eudaimonia: well-being through living in accordance with virtue. Martha Nussbaum argues that “... the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art” (1990, p. 148). She is suggesting that human lives and works of literature are not so different from each other. Both are the product of crafting virtuous character. So, what does the flourishing life look like? How can we achieve it? Literature enables us to explore some answers. This is one reason we ought to embrace what is being called the eudaimonic turn in the humanities (Pawelski and Moores 2013). By applying a well-being lens to our study of literature, we might see something entirely new. For example, “happiness” may of course come from a positive experience of affirmation or transcendence, such as through loving relationships. There are many works of literature about that. But equally, it could be argued that stories of loss connect us to the good things in life more so than the happy ones. They focus our attention on what is truly valuable; after all, our consciousness of well-being is often at its height when it is threatened (Potkay 2013a; Pawelski and Moores 2013). To this end, the eudaimonic turn in literature allows us to see that happiness may be something transformative that occurs through suffering and adversity (Pawelski and Moores 2013; Kephart 2013). As a literary illustration, consider one of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies, King Lear (1607). In a scene of reconciliation, the ailing King Lear is reunited with his daughter, Cordelia, in the emotional climax to the drama. As the tragic hero though, Lear suffers greatly, losing Cordelia only two scenes later. Literature vitally demonstrates to us the centrality of human agency throughout life’s narrative and that human beings contribute to their own well-being.
(Kephart 2013; Nussbaum 1998). Shakespeare’s humanist themes set fatalism, in the characters of Gloucester and Edgar, against those who believe in authoring their own destiny, like Edmund and Kent. The final scene is one of redemption where the fallen monarch realises, albeit superficially, the ways in which he has authored his own suffering and ultimate demise. As he clutches Cordelia’s lifeless body, Lear experiences a kind of epiphany or re-birth, making him what Kephart (2013) might call “twice born” (p. 230). The recurring imagery associated with the breath, being rescued from the grave and birds flying are used by Shakespeare to convey this re-birth, whilst at the same time capturing the love between Lear and his daughter. There is a deeper awareness of and regret for Lear’s own mistakes such as in banishing those who loved him most, namely Kent and Cordelia. However, in the spirit of the Greek tragedy that Shakespeare adapted so well, there is little suggestion that the King truly acknowledges his own character flaws of vanity and rashness. In all of this, as in many other great works of literature, the drama suggests that the eudaimonic life may be filled with positive emotions but, even more importantly, is one of self-awareness, human agency, and ultimately, transformation.

Excitingly, a eudaimonic turn in the humanities means that even dark and heavy tragedies can have their place in the annals of “positive literature”. An existing problem with privileging dark narratives, which we so often do in studying literature, is that they do not always fully represent the human experience as simultaneously challenging and positive. Too much artistic tragedy gives us an imbalanced view of life (Pawelski and Moores 2013). Whilst this may be true, and a new interpretive lens will help to re-balance the focus, stories of loss can, indeed, hold great delight and relevance for the study of human well-being and virtues. Works can be very much about virtue and strength in humanity even whilst employing more scathing techniques, as do satirists like Jonathan Swift and Ben Johnson (Potkay 2013a) or presenting a bleak landscape, apparently void of hope such as Holocaust fiction or the works of Cormac McCarthy. Even if literary characters seem far too sentimental, too barren, or too evil to be realistic, they still serve as a “placeholder” for what a life bereft of well-being might look like (Pawelski 2013). Not all texts offer a positive redemption, either. Many portray characters as victims who suffer greatly and whose suffering has little meaning (Pawelski and Moores 2013), like the death of Cordelia at the end of King Lear. Such conclusions do not leave readers feeling inspired but are disturbing because they, “shake our naïve belief in the essential benevolence of the universe” (Pawelski and Moores 2013, p. 43). It is in these times, paradoxically, that literature still contributes to our well-being by working on our moral and cognitive imagination. How can we derive happiness from loss? One suggestion is that through the higher faculties of human reason and imagination readers create a harmony; a right mind, says Adam Potkay (2013a), can create apparent order from chaos. At the end of King Lear, then, readers are encouraged to see a divine harmony that underlines the apparent disorder. Lear’s decline befits that of a tragic hero. Although suffering is awful, the order of the realm is finally restored in Edgar and Albany’s rule. We judge there to be coherence and harmony where there would otherwise be none. In this way literature, whether dark
or cheerful, can play a vital role in cultivating powers of imagination, capacities of judgment and sensitivity (Nussbaum 1998).

Literature does not just explore different paths to happiness, but it offers guidance on what a meaningful life might be and how we attain it (Potkay 2013a). For example, stories challenge conventional human wisdom and values (Nussbaum 1998) by showing the consequences of decisions, such as spending a life pursuing power and public recognition. To cite the Shakespearean tragedy once more, King Lear’s pride consumes him, so much so that he is figuratively blind to the motivations of those around him. This is powerfully explored via the motif of eyesight throughout the play. The drama questions the human value placed on duty. Although a society such as Shakespeare’s hailed duty as important, he asks of them, should that “duty” prevent us speaking honestly to a leader for fear of reprisals? Is our “duty” given unconditionally, regardless of how we are treated? These are the kinds of challenges literature may throw up against human values and, in so doing, help us to explore how one finds meaning in life. Our meaningful life may lie, then, in the answers to some of the questions literature asks (Pawelski 2013).

A method of epistemological importance in literature is the interaction of form and meaning. Meaning is construed through the marrying of form, the readers’ experience and the content of a text; this is something the study of English literature holds dear and something teachers of high school English impart to their students. It explains, to a great extent, the penchant for the analytical approach to literary techniques in so many high schools’ literature curricula. It is here, under the eudaimonic lens, that such an approach to the literature can remain central and, in so doing, maintain the academic rigor and outcomes-focused approach in senior classroom. Rather than suggest that the world of examinations and assessments are incompatible with positive education, here is just one way for the two to work to each other’s advantage. For example, King Lear is structured in Acts 3 and 4 to alternate between, on the one hand, Lear and his loyal supporters as they wander the barren heath and, on the other hand, the manipulative, brutal behaviour of Regan and Goneril within the castle walls. The juxtaposition highlights an irony. Those living within supposedly civilized walls are more bestial and depraved than those living like animals in the wilderness. Those living exposed to the open air are, ironically, the more civilized humans as the action progresses. The message here is that, despite all the trappings of civilization and regal power, immoral humans are little more than wild beasts. The symbolism of clothing throughout the play reinforces the theme. Thus, dramatic structure, staging and symbolism combine to reveal a truth of human behaviour. Such a technique-focused response would delight examiners.

Literature serves as a useful tool in positive education by helping to give meaning, texture and application to the nomenclature and constructs of the scientific field. The science of well-being defines constructs such as life satisfaction, joy or hope, often fairly thinly, in order to accurately measure those constructs. The humanities, particularly literature, can assist with the development of more robust constructs, where science needs to carefully simplify. Literature can help us to both unpack and then build on constructs to aid in their cultivation. For example, is the
kind of "joy" measured in a psychology survey representative of the fullness of joy that we understand it to be (Pawelski 2013). Literature, rather than measuring its narrow existence, asks other things of "joy" to help develop the construct. For example, what do we mean by joy? Is the kind of joy explored in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby similar or different from Barbara Fredrickson's construct (Potkay 2013a)? When Shakespeare repeats "joy" to refer to familial relationships in King Lear (I, i) he does so ironically. For Shakespeare's time "joy" was a heavenly gift, bestowed upon those who served dutifully and loved accordingly. Thus, when Lear and Regan declare their joyous love, it is undercut by their vanity and duplicitous behaviour. Joy in the twenty-first century is not, according to Adam Potkay, teleological; joys are of the here and now, not yoked to some heavenly master or narrative of progress or growth (2013b). So, literature allows us to see all manner of different joys: in the planet, in eroticism, in faith, joy in ethical deeds, and so forth. Thus the humanities like literature enable us to explore the fluidity, complexity and dynamism of a term like joy.

Can literature aid in the cultivation of well-being and character, hence playing an important role in positive education? Literature's function, it should be said, is more akin to a "green pill" (Pawelski and Moores 2013). That is, rather than something which directly alleviates suffering, in the medicinal sense, literature works by promoting what is good (Potkay 2013a). Literature offers a range of cognitive and emotive benefits to readers. To this end, literature can and should be a linchpin of a well-integrated positive education program. Firstly, immersing oneself in a good story opens us up to the diverse world of positive emotions. There is so much to admire in noble characters, stories of unlikely triumph or heart-warming relationships. We know that an increase in positive affect contributes to our creativity through opening our hearts and minds, allows us to build new skills, expands our range of vision, alters how we connect with others and connects us to our full humanity (Fredrickson 2009). Secondly, literature provides us with valuable perspective, giving us distance from local issues and our own lives to educate us on moral or global concerns and, in doing so, inspires a mind in harmony with wider man (Potkay 2013a). If positive education is to be rooted in the promoting of, among other things, good character, then this education on moral concerns and citizenship is an important element. Martha Nussbaum (1998) argues that the arts play a vital role in cultivating an imagination that is essential to citizenship. She says that stories promote judgment and sensitivity and so, in a curriculum for world citizenship, literature's ability to represent the lives and cultures of many different people makes it an important part of any education (1998). Literary interpretation shows readers that experience and culture shape many aspects of what lies "under the skin" in humankind. It does this by expanding our sympathies for others in a way that real life cannot cultivate sufficiently (Nussbaum 1998). Finally, literature functions as a promoter of the good through its calming effect on our mind. John Stuart Mill writes in his autobiography (1909–1914) about poetry as "medicine" for his mind (paragraph 12). He writes of Wordsworth's poems: "in them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings ... And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence."
(paragraph 12). So, at least according to Mill, literature both connects us to other humans and is a balm for our own mind and spirit.

Character Strengths Through Literature

Let us return for a moment to the impetus for this chapter. For the future application of the science of positive psychology, and for the integrity and effectiveness of positive education, it is important that accessible and empirically-sound curricula now make it into every classroom. Given that English literature is so wonderfully placed to enrich our understanding and cultivation of well-being, the English classroom seems a natural starting point for positive education in the curriculum. Taught in every school around the world by skilled and passionate teachers, literature as a subject transcends culture and socio-economic backgrounds. All high school students study narratives, poetry and films at some stage in their schooling. The goal now is to publish a book of curriculum materials for high school English teachers, focusing on the pivotal role of character strengths in well-being.

I believe there is a strong need, too, to tackle the more senior years in literature study. Well-being through literature does not need to exclusively target younger children and early adolescence. Firstly, in Australia and many other countries there is a mountain of existing material for middle school classrooms, under the assumption that it is in these years that the fun can be had. The perceptions, often, is that once students move into the more senior years, the agenda changes from integrated, thematic, creative units, to more sophisticated, rigorous literary study, perhaps in preparation for examinations and final assessments. Secondly, the later adolescent years come with their own social and emotional challenges but also great cognitive benefits. A curriculum that marries their changing pastoral needs with increasing cognitive maturity is a new way to conceive of character education. I would argue that, both pastorally and intellectually, some of the best work on character strengths can be done in the upper high school years. As such, a rich focus on well-being in literature need not come at the expense of academic rigor, deep ethical and emotional competencies or analytical essay writing.

Suggested Activities for the English Classroom

Among the innovative programs, the English Faculty at St Peter’s College, Adelaide has done preliminary work fusing character strengths and literature (Barbieri et al. 2012). Presenting their findings at the 2012 Australian Positive Psychology and Well-being Conference, the Faculty found that explicit teaching on character strengths, using the VIA, strengths survey greatly enhanced the ability of students in both Year 8 and Year 11 to sympathise with and analyse the construction of character. Students were taught an introduction to character strengths, completed the VIA
to receive their own strengths profile, familiarised themselves with the language and structure of the strengths model and then approach a variety of literary analysis tasks. More specifically, the sessions enhanced the students' vocabulary for discussing literary characters in works such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the film *Edward Scissorhands* and Doris Lessing's short story, *Flight*. Student writing consequently showed greater depth of understanding of motivation in human behaviour which, in turn, produced more robust and analytical responses on the construction of character (Barbieri et al. 2012).

Even in the absence of completing the VIA themselves, students can easily embark upon strengths-spotting in literary and media texts. More than merely naming strengths in action, though, such an approach can lead to robust classroom discussion on questions. These include:

- Do character strengths, such as courage or kindness, manifest in different ways in different settings or cultures?
- Do some strengths develop with age? As such, do coming-of-age novels and adolescent fiction often have characters developing certain strengths on the path to maturity? A comparative text study could be interesting here.
- Can we have too much of a strength? If so, what might that look like and how might it cease to be helpful in excess?
- How do different strengths complement each other when individuals come together, such as in relationships or teams or communities?

To offer a more detailed example of how curriculum might unite positive psychology topics and the English classroom, the study of *one* particular strength or construct provides opportunity for bringing students to understand it and to cultivate it. Hope is one such strength that the science tells us can be built. Recent work on hope is arguing that the explicit teaching of hope should be considered a pivotal element in any intervention aimed at enhancing happiness and life satisfaction in youth (Toner et al. 2012). Further, there are both enabling and inhibiting factors when it comes to the development of hope (Peterson and Seligman 2004). For example goal setting is a key component of hope (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Snyder 1999; Green et al. 2007) and so teaching students about setting, clearly articulating and working towards goals, engenders hopeful thinking. Other examples of interventions shown to enhance hope include using narrative-based examples and paragons of hope (cited in Peterson and Seligman 2004) and cognitive-behavioural problem solving skills (Reivich and Shatte 2002; Snyder 1999, 2000). If classrooms were to use such research on hope from positive psychology, then we could shape programs of work that not only teach literary texts, but do so with a focus on: student reflection on hopeful people in their own lives; setting and monitoring of students' own goals; and an understanding the cognitive and emotional components of hope. Weaving together literary texts on hope or its absence (from *Death of a Salesman* to *Twelfth Night*, from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *Schindler's List*) and combining that study with interventions to boost hope can be a powerful combination.
Conclusions

Education's new focus on promoting psychological well-being alongside that of traditional academic learning is changing the face of schools. To bring to scale the work of positive psychology, promote well-integrated and robust learning in our students, and to better equip regular classroom teachers for the task, accessible programs are needed. Embedding principles of positive psychology, such as learning about and cultivating character strengths, in traditional curriculum areas is one promising solution. English literature is one curriculum area that naturally lends itself to the task of integrating positive psychology. Not only can we use the classroom to bolster the well-being of students, but positive psychology's theory and science provides a rich lens through which to study and to contribute to academic learning. It can enrich the process, leading to outcomes such as a greater appreciation of character, the relationship between form and meaning and a deep exploration of the nuances of theme.

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