



Effects of the Maytiv positive psychology school program on early adolescents' well-being, engagement, and achievement

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ABSTRACT

As positive psychology is a nascent area of research, there are very few empirical studies assessing the impact and sustained effects of positive psychology school interventions. The current study presents a 2-year longitudinal evaluation of the effects of a school-based positive psychology program on students' subjective well-being, school engagement, and academic achievements. The study investigated the effectiveness of the Maytiv school program using a positive psychology-based classroom-level intervention with 2517 seventh- to ninth-grade students in 70 classrooms, from six schools in the center of Israel. The classes were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions, which were comparable in terms of students' age, gender, and socio-economic status. Hierarchical linear regression analyses revealed positive intervention effects on positive emotions, peer relations, emotional engagement in school, cognitive engagement, and grade point average scores (Cohen's *ds* 0.16–0.71). In the control group, there were significant decreases in positive emotions and cognitive engagement, and no significant changes in peer relations, emotional engagement or school achievements. These findings demonstrate the significant socio-emotional and academic benefits of incorporating components of positive psychology into school curricula.

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1. Introduction

Positive psychology is a branch of research within the field of psychology that studies the conditions and experiences involved in human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It emerged in 1997 and has gained popularity and shown exponential growth in the realms of research, practice, and influence on individuals despite its brief existence. In the educational sphere, this interest has evolved into the domain of "Positive Education"—a growing area of inquiry in educational research that seeks to integrate positive psychology elements with educational practices to promote subjective well-being (SWB) and improve the mental health of school children (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). However, claims regarding the benefits of positive education exceed the existing evidence on the effectiveness of such programs (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), and critics have emphasized the need for more rigorous research and stronger empirical evidence of the feasibility and effectiveness of positive psychology school-based interventions (Kristjánsson, 2012). In addition, existing school-based programs such as character education and social emotional learning (SEL) share the goal of enhancing schoolchildren's well-being (Elias et al., 1997), thus leading to the question of how positive psychology differs from these foundational approaches and whether positive psychology education programs have an added value in the educational sphere.

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The current study sought to address several of these primary questions and to further the area of positive education by conducting a large-scale, randomized-controlled trial of a positive psychology school-based program (The Maytiv Program¹). This article reports on the program's longitudinal effects on SWB indices (life satisfaction, positive and negative emotions, and peer relations), school engagement (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement, and school attendance), and school achievement (grade point average [GPA] scores), in seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students in 70 classrooms from six middle schools in Israel.

The Maytiv program (the Hebrew term for “Doing Good”) was developed in an institution of higher education in Israel by a team of psychologists, was approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and has served over 5000 teachers and 50,000 children and adolescents in the Israeli educational system.

1.1. The PERMA model: subjective well-being in school

The positive psychology movement in the late 1990s developed from the desire to systematically study human happiness and as a response to the overwhelming tendency in the mental health field to focus on pathology rather than on health (King, 2003). Concepts such as SWB and happiness became a primary focus of research at that time, and a wealth of meaningful research investigating factors that contribute to people's optimal functioning ensued (Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004).

The notion of SWB has been frequently operationalized as the relative presence of positive emotions, the absence of negative emotions, and satisfaction with life (Myers & Diener, 1995). Unlike the ample research on the SWB of adults, the study of adolescents and children has lagged behind (Huebner, 1997), and only in recent years more specific models for adolescents' well-being have been developed and proposed (e.g., Casas et al., 2014; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Parker et al., 2015). Out of these, Martin Seligman, a key founder of the positive psychology movement, developed a model that highlights five enabling conditions for well-being in children and adults and demonstrated the model's applicability in school and classroom settings (Seligman, 2011). This model, which formed the theoretical foundation for developing the Maytiv program, is made up of five essential elements that enhance flourishing and long-term well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Positive relationships, Meaning, and Achievement that form the acronym “PERMA.”

1.1.1. Positive emotions

The first element of the PERMA model is positive emotions, which refer to hedonic feelings of happiness, such as pleasure, fun, and enjoyment. Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory states that positive emotions broaden and build human psychological resources, and enable elevated engagement and new opportunities for learning (Lewis, Huebner, Reschly, & Valois, 2009). There is a growing empirical confirmation for the associations among school students' positive emotions and their school engagement and satisfaction, motivation for learning, and academic efforts (Meyer & Turner, 2006; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). SEL interventions that deal, among other things, with awareness of positive emotions, have yielded school-related positive attitudes and behaviors (Elias et al., 1997; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). The emotional states of gratitude and appreciation have received considerable attention in the literature, and have been found to contribute to the cultivation of positive affect in classrooms. Studies have revealed that even simple gratitude exercises, instructing students to count blessings or focus on aspects in their lives for which they are grateful, can produce significant improvement in well-being and satisfaction with school experience compared to problem-focused or no treatment control groups (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

1.1.2. Engagement

The second contributor to well-being within the PERMA model is engagement, which is defined as a sense of full involvement and complete immersion in an activity, or what some recognize as the state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Seligman, 2011). In the educational sphere, the term ‘student engagement’ has been used to refer to students' feelings toward schooling, as reflected in their sense of belonging or attachment to school (emotional engagement); the extent they are invested in their learning (cognitive engagement); and their positive conduct and involvement in school (behavioral engagement) (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Despite the considerable research on the positive outcomes of school engagement, the information regarding factors that facilitate school engagement remains relatively limited (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). However, studies suggest that relevant and meaningful curricula that align with students' interests and goals are likely to promote students' school engagement and intrinsic motivation (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Studies have also indicated that the development of schoolchildren's socio-emotional skills has a significant impact on school bonding and adherence to school norms (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2009). Finally, classroom environments that enable experiences of ‘flow’ have been linked to attention, curiosity, interest, and other positive emotional experiences during learning (Krapp, 1999). Students experienced greater flow, motivation, and joy when they felt competent, active, and in control (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), and when they were given the opportunity to exhibit their abilities, for example, in small learning groups (Peterson & Miller, 2004).

1.1.3. Positive relationships

In the PERMA model, positive relationships refer to feeling supported by others, authentically connected to others, and secure in those connections (Seligman, 2011). Previous research has consistently shown that adolescents' sense of connectedness,

¹ For further information about the program and the Maytiv curriculum please contact the authors via email: positedu@idc.ac.il.

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