

Applications of Positive Psychology Toward Leadership in Early Childhood Education

by Brooke Skidmore

When you think of positive psychology, what comes to mind? Do you think of people with the demeanor of cheerful, uninhibited happiness? A fake it until it passes type of self-help? Or a kooky doctor, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and preaching about positive energy? Luckily for us, these are not correct portrayals of positive psychology. While some people may perceive positive psychology to be more about the abstract feelings and emotions with unsubstantiated Freud-like theories, positive psychology is actually rooted in statistical science, with validated research, tested and proven methods, and thoughtful consideration of human emotion, behavior and motivations.

Positive psychology is an understanding of well-being and an approach that involves enabling methods to increase well-being. While happiness is certainly a part of positive

psychology, it is not the end-all objective. Happiness is more about a mood we feel in the moment. For example, as the director of a child care center, I am happy when our center cook makes his delicious cinnamon rolls. The smell of sweet warm cinnamon fills the air and the gooey dough fills my empty stomach in the morning. However, this happiness is temporary and does not bring meaning to my life, and it certainly does not provide any sort of accomplishment; quite the opposite, in fact, if I eat too many, my happiness quickly turns to guilt. Happiness is often fleeting and superficial. As a term, happiness also lacks the ability to be accurately measured in scientific terms, which is why positive psychology has evolved from theories of happiness to theories of well-being. The theory of well-being is about increasing positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishments (Seligman, 2013).

Positive psychology not only has implications for personal wellness, but its methods and principles can also be applied to leadership and the improve-

ment of organizations. I cannot think of a field that can benefit more from utilizing positive psychology for advancement than early child care and education. ECE is a low-status, low-wage, high turnover and greatly under-appreciated field. Consequently, leadership in ECE has many challenges and obstacles to overcome. Common leadership skills such as communication, delegation and motivation are not enough for a field with low morale, low status and low confidence. The methods of positive psychology can greatly support effective leadership in ECE. However, for us to understand the applications of positive psychology toward leadership in early child care and education, we must first establish the validity of its methods and principles, and understand its history.

Martin Seligman is considered to be one of the most influential psychologists in theorizing positive psychology. In 1998, Seligman became the president of the American Psychological Association. As president, Seligman encouraged a different viewpoint of psychology. Instead of continuing with



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the historical methods of researching through a lens of what is wrong with mental health, he sought to understand what is right with mental health, and ultimately, how to flourish.

In the beginning of Seligman's career, he was part of a notorious research experiment that incidentally ended up being the catalyst for "learned helplessness." The experiments about learned helplessness had significant implications and questions toward human behavior: What causes some people to fail, while others prevail? How is helplessness learned? These questions stayed with Seligman until he was able to ask those same questions but in reverse: What makes a person prevail? What is learned hopefulness? How do we learn resilience?

Over the course of decades, Seligman was able to contribute substantially to the field of psychology through his pursuit of positive psychological principles. With the collaboration of other researchers, such as Angela Duckworth, Karen Reivich and Jane Gilliam, Seligman was able to provide substantiated research about learned optimism, resiliency and grit.

Learned optimism is one of the foundations that positive psychology originated from. The benefits of an optimistic personality compared to a pessimistic personality are compelling and far-reaching toward well-being. Optimistic people are healthier, have more friends and are generally happier. In addition, pessimistic people are more likely to develop depression. Seligman has proven in his research that methods of positive psychology therapy can be more effective in relieving depression than anti-depressant drugs.

Now that we have a better understanding of the validity and substance of positive psychology, we need to

understand its relevance to leadership in ECE. Unfortunately, some people still perceive ECE as glorified babysitting, and the addition of positive psychology would only mean more rainbows and butterflies as we babysit children. However, those of us working in the field know this is far from accurate. How we relate to, care for, and educate the children we serve have lifetime effects. In 2015, over 1,200 researchers created a consensus statement describing what quality early child care and education looks like and the benefits it provides.

"Based on developmental psychology, neuroscience, medicine and economics, quality ECE produces better education, health, economics and social outcomes for children, families and the nation"(NIEER, 2015). With this knowledge in mind, take a look at the reality of early child care and education in the United States.

- The United States is ranked fair to poor in ECE; as a nation we are at the bottom of developed countries for ECE (32 out of 39 developed countries in 2015).
- Child care workers' median wage in United States is \$15,473. The national average salary is \$50,213 (2016).
- There are 958,306 child care workers in ECE (2016). 91.9 percent are female, 8.1 percent are male. Men in early child care earn about 7 percent more than females.
- ECE has one of the highest turnover rates of the workforce at 30 percent; this is a large factor in decreasing quality of care.
- ECE is the college major that yields the lowest lifetime pay.
- The cost of early child care and education on families rivals the cost

of college or a monthly mortgage payment. The high cost to families is widening the inequality gap of education. The wealthy are receiving a higher-quality education, and lower-income families are receiving lesser-quality education.

These issues must be taken into account as we strive for quality leadership in ECE. These statistics necessitate the intervention of positive psychology in our field. We need to acknowledge those challenges and create positive methods to deal with them, even if we cannot resolve them. The high rate of burnout alone should be evidence enough for the case of positive psychology in ECE.

One of the first steps in positive psychology is to encourage a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset. Carol Dweck, one of the leading researchers of emotional development, notes, "Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts). This is because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning" (Dweck, 2016).

All of us utilize both growth and fixed mindsets. With that said, we can make an effort to choose a growth mindset. A mindset toward growth will embrace challenges, see effort as a path towards mastery, persist in the face of challenges, learn from criticisms, and find lessons and inspiration in the success of others. In contrast, an individual with a fixed mindset will avoid challenges, give up easily, see effort as fruitless or worse, ignore useful negative feedback, and feel threatened by the success of others (Dweck, 2008).

The applications of a growth mindset within leadership for ECE has multiple

facets. As leaders, we need to have a thorough and accurate understanding of our own values, behaviors and motivations. If we are to improve as leaders, we need to first understand where we are before we can determine where we are going. Emotional intelligence is necessary for evaluating our current mindsets and deciphering if we behave more with a growth or fixed mindset. One method of assessment is evaluating how we respond to issues, also known as our “explanatory style” (Seligman, 2006). Our explanatory style is the conversations that happen in our minds when explaining good or bad events. In order to understand how we respond, we need to assess three dominant styles: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization (Table 1).

How we think and explain things affects how we react and how we feel. The left column illustrates explanatory styles from a fixed mindset. Explanations on the right column are from a growth mindset perspective. In addition, the explanatory styles on the left are more pessimistic and those on the right are more optimistic styles. Moving toward a growth mindset requires that we remain cognizant of the conversations in our heads. If your self-talk is geared toward the fixed explanatory styles, then it takes practice to re-train the voice in your head to explain things differently.

The methods of learned optimism can help contribute to a growth mindset. One of the methods created by Seligman is the “what went well” (Seligman, 2006) technique. This is a daily practice of identifying three things that went well that day and why. Many of us are prone at night, as we lie in bed, to ruminate on the things that went wrong. The nightly practice of writing in a journal the three things that went well for that day, and why they went well, is a technique to

re-train your brain to think of the positive rather than focus on the negative.

For example, “I was able to help resolve a conflict between two teachers this afternoon. I was able to help resolve the issue between them because I took the time to listen to both of their perspectives. Everyone had a chance to share their feelings and we came up with a solution together. This process allowed both teachers to have a voice in the situation and to be part of the resolution.”

Or, “The classroom project went great today. The kids really enjoyed it. It went well because I took the time to thoroughly plan out the project and made sure that it was relevant to the children’s interests.” This “what went well” exercise can take as little as 10 minutes a day, and the results of a growth mindset can be substantiated within six months. As a bonus, this practice is also used by cognitive therapists for the alleviation of depres-

sion. As the director of a child care center, this method can be applied to reduce the risk of burn out commonly associated with the profession. As a leader in ECE, it can be used to encourage others in your organization to increase their overall wellness. For example, at a team meeting, provide all the teachers with their own personal journal and ask them at the end of the day to jot down three things that went well that day. This technique can help boost their job satisfaction and increase optimism as they work toward practicing a growth mindset.

Another proven method of positive psychology and one that helps to increase a growth mindset is the practice of gratitude. Seligman tested methods of gratitude usage and was able to scientifically increase well-being and lessen depression. The practice of a “gratitude visit” (Seligman, 2013) is to think of someone who was helpful or beneficial to you in the past. Write

Table 1
Fixed vs Growth Mindsets: Permanence, Pervasiveness and Personalization

The assessment of permanence is whether you believe a set-back or a positive event will be temporary or if it will persist.	
Permanent “The infant room teacher is always complaining.”	Temporary “The infant room teacher is having a difficult time this week.”
The assessment of pervasiveness is about explaining good or bad events as universal versus something that is specific to the situation.	
Universal “All licensors are difficult.”	Specific “The last two licensors we had were difficult to work with.”
The assessment of personalization examines if we explain things from an internal source or externalize the source.	
Internal “I am a terrible leader.”	External “I am struggling at leading because I did not receive proper training.”

a letter of gratitude that reflects upon this positive relationship. Be specific, thoughtful and purposeful with your words. Next, schedule a time to visit the person to deliver the letter of gratitude. This process allows your brain to concentrate on a positive event, a positive person, and demonstrate a thoughtful level of appreciation. As with the “what went well” method, this is a technique that should be practiced regularly in an effort to train your brain.

Not only can we apply the method of a gratitude visit to our personal well-being as leaders, but we can apply it to our early child care education organizations as well. Encourage the teachers and children that you serve to take the time out in their classrooms for gratitude. Talk to the children about the things they are thankful for. Draw pictures or write cards of gratitude to those that you have benefited from or appreciate. After a field trip, take the time to talk about what you appreciated on the trip and those that helped to make the trip happen. Write thoughtful cards to those people. As a leader, be sure to write letters of gratitude to those that you serve: teachers, children and their families. A leader needs to walk the talk of gratitude if there is to be any buy-in from those that you are encouraging to be grateful.

The character strengths of resilience and grit are also major components in positive psychology. As in life, the field of early child care and education is riddled with setbacks, obstacles and negativity, hence the high turnover rates, low-status and so on. A person’s ability to handle these stressors and challenges is crucial to their well-being. When you face adversity, are you able to recover in a positive way and persevere even in the face of failure? Or, does a setback do exactly that: set you back on a continued path of failure, complicitness and dissolution?

The proponents of a growth mindset are correlated to the factors of resilience. Your explanatory style and how you perceive bad events is factored into your ability to persevere in difficult situations. Resiliency, optimism and gratitude can be learned, and therefore should be practiced. We need to begin with an accurate self-assessment, and have a deep understanding of our current resiliency habits, and then try to improve from that point.

Angela Duckworth, winner of a MacArthur “Genius” award and author of “Grit,” summarizes the power of grit with the equation: “Talent x effort = skill. Skill x effort = achievement. Effort counts twice” (Grit, 2016).

Continued and consistent effort and practice is necessary to achieve a positive growth mindset. As a leader in ECE, the methods of resilience are applied at many levels of an organization. Determining your passion in your job and identifying your goals within that passion is a beginning step. The children you serve may be your top passion. Establish your specific goals for those children and create a plan or method to achieve those goals. Know that there will be setbacks and failures along the way, and know that you will persevere and continue with your goals. Additionally, advocacy is a critical and much needed trait in early childcare and education. You may be a passionate advocate for increased teacher pay. Create goals for raising awareness of this issue. You may decide to create a newsletter for the families that you serve, outlining the statistics of wage rates. Contact your local legislator and ask to have a meeting to discuss your concerns with the teachers’ wages. The important thing is to find something that you are passionate about, go after it, and do not give up. The families, teachers and children that you serve will respond to

your passion in a positive and appreciative way.

The application of positive psychology toward leadership in early child care and education is about finding more meaning, more positive emotions, better relationships and more accomplishments. These outcomes will increase the wellness of an organization and, incidentally, these are quite similar to the goals that we have for the children that we care for and educate. In ECE, we depend highly on the social and emotional curriculum when teaching. Just as we want children to learn how to increase their positive emotions, create strong, healthy relationships with friends, and feel the rewards of accomplishment, we need to seek this for ourselves as well. We teach children that the brain is a muscle that must be shaped and stretched by reading “Your Fantastic Elastic Brain” (2017). In the book, “What Do You Do With a Problem?” (2016), we teach children how to handle problems and turn them into opportunities for growth and learning. We teach children resilience with “The Little Engine that Could.”

Now, we need to take those same concepts and apply them to ourselves. We need to re-train our brains towards a growth mindset. And within that growth mindset, we need to strive for optimism, gratitude, and resilience. ECE is a profession in which great leadership will permeate to all those involved in the organization. A leader who inspires and motivates teachers will, in turn, manage teachers that motivate and inspire their children. The children’s motivation and inspirations will impact their family’s wellness. Positive psychology methods in ECE can be multi-dimensional with many benefits. It just takes practice.

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