

# POSITIVE EDUCATION AND THE RISE OF THE HAPPY STUDENT (IN SPAIN)

Edgar Cabanas and Jara González-Lamas



4<sup>th</sup> seminar “Child well-being and school and parental mediation”. 26-27 June, 2019.

# “HAPPYNESS TURN” IN EDUCATION

- A “revolution” (e.g. Layard & Clark, 2015; Seligman & Adler, 2018) or just another step towards neoliberal education? (Binkley, 2011; Furedi, 2009)
- Positive education → Happiness is not only a desirable goal in itself but also the most important means for mental illness prevention, better learning, and higher academic success (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Bernard & Walton, 2011; Noble & McGrath, 2008; Oades, Robinson, & Green, 2011)
- An increasing number of nonprofit organizations (e.g., CorStone), think tanks and consulting companies (e.g., Mindset Works, Inc.; Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, CASEL), associations (e.g., Positive Education Schools Association, PESA), private schools (e.g., Geelong Grammar School), and international networks (e.g., International Positive Education Network, IPEN) are calling policymakers worldwide to implement positive education in their respective education national systems.

# “HAPPYNESS TURN” IN EDUCATION

- Spain has established its own:
  - 1) research groups (e.g., Grup de Recerca en Orientació Psicopedagògica, GROPE)
  - 2) intervention programs (e.g., Aulas Felices)
- These initiatives are mainly funded by private foundations and institutions such as *The Botín Foundation*—widely involved in the promotion of emotional intelligence skills, resiliency techniques, and entrepreneurial education in primary and secondary schools.

# “HAPPYNESS TURN” IN EDUCATION

- There is a rising tide of scientific literature that challenges both the validity and efficacy of the movement → whereas positive education interventions are often justified on the ground that they provide the resources essential for educational success, there is no robust evidence that these interventions actually work towards raising educational standards.
  - Theoretical and methodological shortfalls (e.g. Martin & McLellan, 2013; Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004; Miller, 2008)
  - Lack of replicability and comparative studies (e.g. Loinaz, 2019)
  - Insufficient empirical evidence (e.g. Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Gutman & Schoon, 2013)
  - Poor and even counterproductive outcomes (e.g. Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010; Sisk, Burgoyne, Sun, Butler, & Macnamara, 2018)
  - Strong individualistic and ideological biases (e.g. Cabanas, 2018; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019)
  - Alignment with entrepreneurial values (e.g. Brunila, 2012; Furedi, 2009; Martin & McLellan, 2013)
  - Psychological vulnerability (e.g. Ecclestone, 2012; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Egado, 2018)

# OUTLINE STRUCTURE

- What is positive education?
- What is wrong with positive education? (1): scientific problems, lack of evidence, and poor intervention outcomes
- What is wrong with positive education? (2): ideological biases
- Conclusion

# WHAT IS POSITIVE EDUCATION

- An umbrella term (Kristjánsson, 2012) for the implementation in schools of those positive psychology interventions that “have worked” in the contexts of therapy (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Linley & Burns, 2010), organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) or the army (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Fowler, 2011).
- It also draws from previous and ambitious initiatives delivered in the school contexts of the UK, the US, and Australia:
  - Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning program (SEAL) and Social and Emotional Learning programs (SEL) → emotional intelligence (Hallam, 2009; Lexmond & Grist, 2011; Zins & Elias, 2007);
  - Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) → resilience and character strengths (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011)
  - BREATHE program → mindfulness (Broderick & Metz, 2009)
  - Geelong Grammar School Project (GGS) → full positive psychology interventions (Seligman et al., 2009)
- Two hallmarks: 1) A purely positive approach to education; 2) Wellbeing leads to better learning and higher school achievement

# A PURELY POSITIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATION

- Expand education from its focus on repairing negative and dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., bullying, burnout, dropouts, failure, addiction) to mainly promoting positive and optimally functional behaviors (e.g., resilience, self-esteem, hope, creativity, authenticity, gratitude, achievement) (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009)
- Triple educational benefit:
  - Reduces mental problems among school-age children and adolescents who experience mental health conditions—a 16% worldwide, as recently estimated by the World Health Organization (*Adolescent mental health*, 2018)
  - Prevents mental health conditions
  - Promotes flourishing, character, and satisfaction with life among the youth (Keyes, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009)
- A series of school-applied studies on hope (e.g. Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007), gratitude (e.g. Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009), resilience (e.g. Bernard & Walton, 2011), mindfulness (e.g. Kallapiran, Koo, Kirubakaran, & Hancock, 2015), character strengths (e.g. Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011), positive self-concepts (e.g. Bracken, 2009), or emotional intelligence (e.g. Buckley & Saarny, 2009) suggest promising effects of positive education interventions on those three aspects.

# WELLBEING LEADS TO BETTER LEARNING AND HIGHER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

- Wellbeing is not only synergistic with better learning and higher school achievement (Seligman et al., 2009), but that wellbeing often precedes these outcomes —thus establishing a *causal relationship* between positive moods and skills (e.g. resilience, self-control) and school performance (e.g. Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Duckworth, Tsukayama, & May, 2010)
- Two main reasons:
  - Students “do good by feeling good” (instead of the other way around) (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011; Fredrickson, 2013)
  - Negative emotions only facilitate critical thinking, but positive emotions enable a broader array of thinking possibilities —including creative thinking, holistic thinking, and innovative thinking (Seligman et al., 2009; see also Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002)
- Wellbeing would help close the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people, as well as to facilitate improved outcomes in the future, such as employability and work performance (e.g. Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Lleras, 2008) → Entrepreneurial education (e.g. Elert, Andersson, & Wennberg, 2015; Lackéus, 2014)



# POSITIVE EDUCATION IN SPAIN

- The interest in positive education has increased notably in Spain
- Nevertheless, official records on the influence of the field in this country are lacking
- Work in progress: to determine the impact and dissemination of positive education in Spain
  
- Three main areas:
  - Programs applied in schools
  - General training programs
  - Positive education as curricular subject

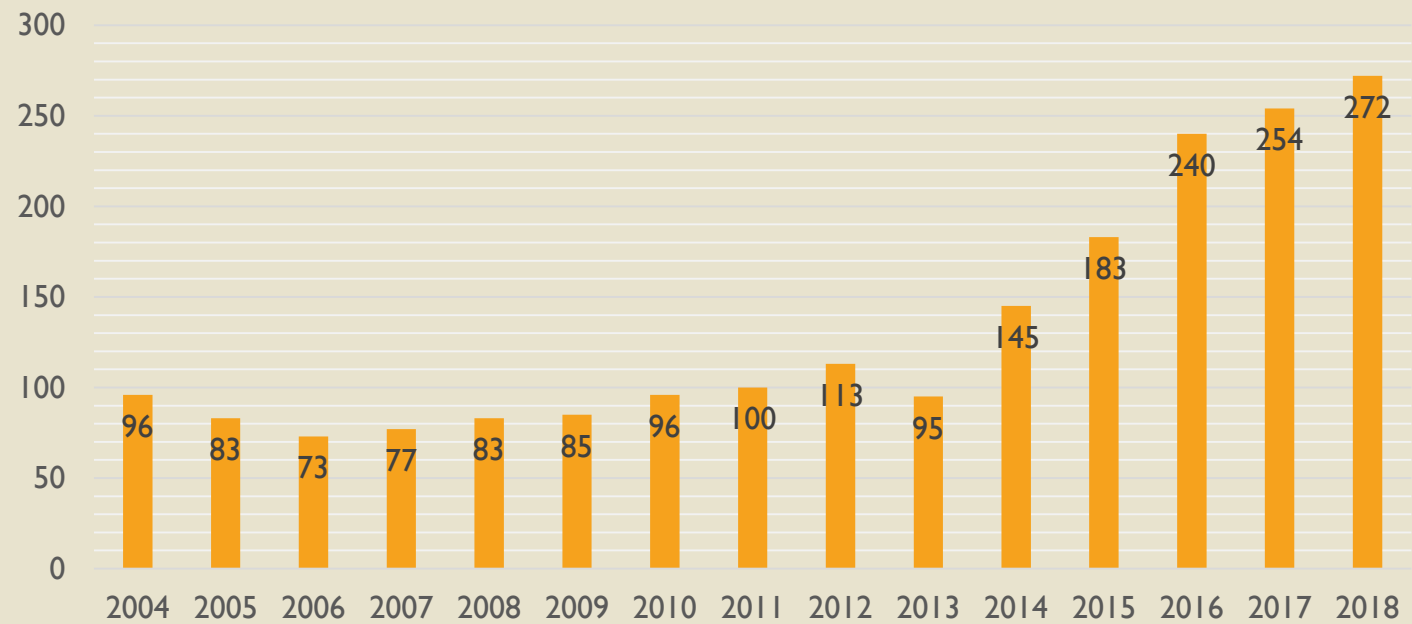
	Regions	Since	Educational Level	Target	Time
Curricular Subjects	Canarias	2014	Primary Schools	6-10 years-old children	Two 45-minute sessions/per week I hour less in language and math/per week
	Murcia	Project under development	Primary Schools	10-12 years-old children	

	Program	Entity	Target	Aims	Range
Programs applied in schools	“Educación Responsable” [Responsible Education]	The Botín Foundation (The Santander Group, Inc)	Children and adolescents Parents	Positive psychology-based interventions on flourishing and character	272 schools in 8/ 17 regions of Spain
	“Aulas Felices” [Happy Classrooms]	SATI	Children and adolescents Teachers	“Skills for happiness” Signature strenghts and virtues	Spain
	“Programa para el aprendizaje emocional y social” [Social emotional learning]	Guipuzcoa Administration	Children and adolescents	Emotional intelligence	26% of schools in Guipuzcoa

	Entity		Aims
General Training Programs	Government of Spain	Institutes for Education Sciences (IEC) and Teacher Training Institutes	Emotional intelligence and socioemotional skills for teachers
	Universities	Universidad de Cantabria (Botin Foundation)	Socioemotional skills for teachers
		(GROP) Universidad de Barcelona	
		Universidad de Málaga	

# UPWARD TREND

Number of schools



# WHAT IS WRONG WITH POSITIVE EDUCATION (I)

- Critical literature: positive education does not live up to the scientific standards or brings the educational benefits that advocates vindicate.
- Internal “buts” → criticism has not been only external: prominent positive education advocates have also acknowledged important limitations and problems with the movement
  - Excessive reliance on self-reports; use of small samples; failure at using random assignment and control groups in most studies (Waters, 2011)
  - Lack of standardized approaches in measuring social and emotional skills; absence of theory-driven research aiding the accurate identification of how different emotional skills are related; limited consideration of contextual factors (Durlak et al., 2011)
  - Publication biases (Kallapiran et al., 2015) and inconsistent effects across studies (Gillham, Hamilton, Freres, Patton, & Gallop, 2006)
  - Reliance on “personal impressions” and “illustrative anecdotes” (Seligman et al., 2009)

# CONCEPTUAL DEFICIENCIES

- “Research evidence, however voluminous, is only as good as the assumptions underlying the concepts, terms, and relationships being tested” (Miller, 2008) → The problem with positive education is not only that supporting evidence is generally sparse and insufficient; the problem is that the movement is also rather inconsistent on a theoretical level.
  - Heterogeneous and nebulous concepts that vary significantly depending on the author and the approach (e.g. self-control and self-efficacy): “it is not surprising that this area of research continues to display results and interpretations that struggle to achieve coherence” (Martin and McLellan, 2013, p.104)
  - “The range and scope of definitions that currently exist within the literature make inevitable comparisons between the science of emotional intelligence and the allegory underlying the Tower of Babel” (Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004, p.180; see also Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, & Woods, 2007) // “Emotional intelligence is a term bereft of any conceptual meaning” (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002, p.215)
  - SEAL has “failed to impact upon pupil’s social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro-social behavior or behavior problems” (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010, p.4; see also ) // SEAL is a completely “baseless program” whose “ill-conception” may not be simply “a waste of time and resources, but actually harmful” (Craig, 2007, p.59)

# EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AGAINST

- Meager positive impact of self-esteem, resilience, optimism, growth-mindset, and other non-cognitive skills on academic performance, mental illness prevention, and well-being (Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012)
- Any causal relationship is not only untenable in the light of the evidence available so far, but, if anything, such a causal relationship is more likely be the other way around (Gutman & Schoon, 2013)
- Some interventions have even yielded counterproductive results
- Examples:
  - “The benefits of high self-esteem are far fewer and weaker than proponents of self-esteem had hoped” (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003, p.38)
  - “Those seeking more than modest effects or effects for all students are unlikely to find them in these kind of interventions (Sisk, Burgoyne, Sun, Butler, & Macnamara, 2018, p.20)
  - Penn Prevention Program (PPP): it produced small effects on the reduction of depressive symptoms among adolescents (Spence & Shortt, 2007)
  - Penn Resilience Program (PRP): poor effectiveness on performance and mental health prevention (e.g. Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman, & Klieger, 2016; Brown, 2015; Eidelson & Soldz, 2012; Friedman & Robbins, 2012)

# IDEOLOGICAL BIASES

- Scientific criticism might not be enough as the heterogeneous and nebulous status seems not to entail a strong disadvantage but the very opposite:
  - Hampers critical analyses
  - Allows the anecdotal and impressionistic to be often taken as supporting evidence
  - Facilitates the movement's expansion as ambiguity helps it to flexibly include and adapt to the manifold and particular needs, interests, and views of a wide array of educational agents
- Positive education is very symptomatic of a long-standing tradition of therapeutic pedagogies built upon the firm belief that psychological factors are more fundamental facilitators of and barriers to school achievement than sociological or contextual ones
  - E.g. The Self-Esteem Movement → “A good example of how cultural and ideological artefacts often play a leading role not only in sustaining certain psychological premises and social interventions despite strong evidence against them, but also in motivating certain kinds of psychological research and interventions in the first place” (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019, p.79; see also Storr, 2017; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

# IDEOLOGICAL BIASES

- Behind positive education' catalog of well-intended interventions lurks an individualistic ideology that:
  - Neglects the role of socioeconomic and other contextual and structural factors in learning and achievement (e.g. Gorard et al., 2012; Martin & McLellan, 2013);
  - Instills values and attitudes that are strongly aligned with the entrepreneurship culture (e.g. Brunila, 2012; Furedi, 2009; Reveley, 2016)
  - Inserts a paradoxical image of the self, at the same time empowering and vulnerable (e.g. Barker, 2014; Binkley, 2014; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009)
- Pressing and fundamental issues of structural and social character receive very limited attention in positive education literature. This also applies to well-established variables mediating learning and school achievement such as socio-economic status (SES)
  - Makes more evident the underlying individualism and reductionism to the movement
  - Distort research and intervention outcomes by introducing a self-confirmatory bias → e.g. “the discrete positive association generally found between concepts like expectations, self-esteem or self-control and educational outcomes tend to disappear when high quality contextual data is available” (Gorard et al., p.10)
  - Reveals a rather simplistic idea of education



# CONCLUSION

“In Spain, the situation is similar to other countries (...) Moved by a strong desire for change, *teachers are not interested in boring scientific discussions and academic debates about the efficacy and evidence for emotional intervention programs.* Teachers rightly assume that nurturing socioemotional skills in children and adolescents is simply essential and that the emotional guidelines found in popular books are more than enough. Otherwise, they would not make any change since *for most emotional interventions delivered in our country there is absolutely no proof about their effectiveness* —among other reasons because they have not even been evaluated. *Most of these interventions lack a minimum scientific and methodological rigor*” (Fernández-Berrocal, 2008, p. 168, italics added)

- More driven by faith than reason?
- “It is necessary to mobilize a ‘cadre’ of “teachers acting as proselytes and high priests of the movement” (Layard, 2007, p.22)
- Small differences worldwide