POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN GUIDANCE COUNSELLING

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Summary

Positive psychology is a scientific study aiming to promote optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is a rapidly developing field that provides empirical research in areas such as character strengths, resilience, mindsets, life meaning and positive emotions. The purpose of the article is to identify how rigorously-evaluated positive psychology interventions can be used by Guidance Counsellors to enhance students' well-being, reduce depression and improve their school performance.

Whilst positive psychology interventions have been extensively used in clinical and educational settings (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Freres, Gillham, Reivich, & Shatte, 2002), they have only recently been applied to the work of Guidance Counsellors. In the US and UK educational policies have changed and programmes such as Penn Resiliency (University of Pennsylvania) has been introduced in hundreds of schools. They use positive psychology interventions to enhance students' post traumatic growth, reduce their depression and suicide rates, which is particularly relevant in view of the Mental Health Guidelines recently launched in Ireland (DES, 2013). Research shows that positive psychology interventions may be more effective in fighting depression than traditional approaches (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006) and are particularly beneficial for young people (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)

This ground-breaking article introduces some of the most effective Interventions Guidance Counsellors can use to supplement their work with students. It is not Guidance Counsellor´s role to engage in therapeutic counselling. Nonetheless, some of the interventions presented in this paper might help Guidance Counsellors to be even more effective in their jobs. It demonstrates how rigorously-evaluated PPIs can enhance the work of Guidance Counsellors in Ireland and it recommends further developments necessary to effectively integrate Positive Psychology into Irish schools.

Key words

Positive psychology, well-being, schools, resilience, character strengths

Whilst the relatively new discipline of positive psychology has been only recently applied in guidance counselling, there is already strong evidence of its effectiveness with adolescents. This article explains how some positive psychology interventions can be used to supplement traditional methods, including the promotion of positive mental health. It is suggested that Guidance Counsellors can use positive psychology to enhance well-being and improve performance; and an array of associated tools is offered.

Introduction

In Ireland we live, it would appear, in increasingly difficult times. In 2008, the country entered a recession, which resulted in an upward trajectory of unemployment rates, reaching 14.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2012 (CSO, 2012). Unemployment has a negative effect on the whole family, resulting in increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and interpersonal problems (Patton & Donogue, 2001, Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994). It adds an additional pressure for young people, many of whom struggle to cope with their daily challenges. Depression in young people is not only a personal, but also a social problem. It is associated with drug and alcohol abuse, increase of physical health problems, significantly increased suicide risk (NACD, 2011; Rohde, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1994; Brent, Perper, & Moritz 1993). In Ireland, almost five per cent of 12 -15 year-olds suffer from depression, and pre-recession youth suicide rates were the fourth highest in Europe (with 93 youth suicide deaths between 2004 and 2008 (CSO, 2012)).

In the school context, Guidance Counsellors play a pivotal role in flagging risk behaviours and helping young people effectively cope with daily challenges. The recent '*Well-being in Post-Primary Schools*' report (DES, 2013) which focused on preventing youth suicide, reducing depression and promoting positive mental health for all members of the school community, presented a framework based on psycho-education and interventions used in a therapeutic setting. While preventing depression is crucial for the future of the Irish society, it is also extremely important to enhance the well-being of non-depressed students. Positive psychology offers guidance not only for reducing depression, but also maintaining well-being and helping non-depressed individuals flourish.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is a new 'scientific and applied approach to uncovering people's strengths and promoting their positive functioning' (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p.3). It aims to endorse factors allowing individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In a parallel that might be familiar to many educators in this country, and certainly the majority of its Guidance Counsellors, who have been familiarised with *humanistic* psychology, positive psychology offers a similar escape from the basis of deficit. It will perhaps be recalled that Abraham Maslow's then-radical approach to motivation posited its basis being on the *drive towards* self-actualisation, rather than the *escape from* organic and intra-psychic discomforts that informed the basis for human action

according to behaviourists and psychoanalysts respectively (Maslow, 1954). This allowed both theoreticians and practitioners of the humanistic school to emphasise human potential in overcoming human problems; the influence of this change in aspect has been immense, in both applied psychology and education. Although only history will tell what its significance will be, positive psychology aims to provide scientific evidence for Maslow's position. In other words, rather than focusing on what is *wrong* with people, positive psychology focuses on what is *right* with them (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007). Having researched what makes people flourish and function at an optimum level (Seligman, 2011), positive psychologists created over one hundred positive psychological interventions that can help already well-adjusted individuals to further enhance their well-being and performance; teach them skills to improve life satisfaction, goal achievement and social actualisation; and, build resilience, optimism and engagement.

Positive Psychology and Depression

Whilst positive psychology interventions have been created primarily for people to flourish, they have also been applied to those suffering from depression. Research shows that positive psychology interventions not only reduced depressive symptoms in people but were more effective than the traditional therapeutic interventions in fighting depression (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). In a series of studies, Seligman, Rashid and Parks (2006) found that a six-week intervention using positive psychology exercises with a group of mild to moderately depressed individuals resulted in substantial symptom relief at one-year follow-up in comparison to the control group whose symptoms remained the same. In a study of twelve-week interventions with 45 severely depressed individuals based in the US, positive psychology intervention (PPI) was compared with treatment as usual (TAU) and treatment as usual with anti-depressive medication (TAUMED). The results showed that the PPI was more effective in both reducing depressive symptoms (see Figure One, below) and preventing relapse.

Figure One: Mean Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (Hamilton) scores and standard errors at the end of different twelve-week intervention types in severely depressed individuals (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006).

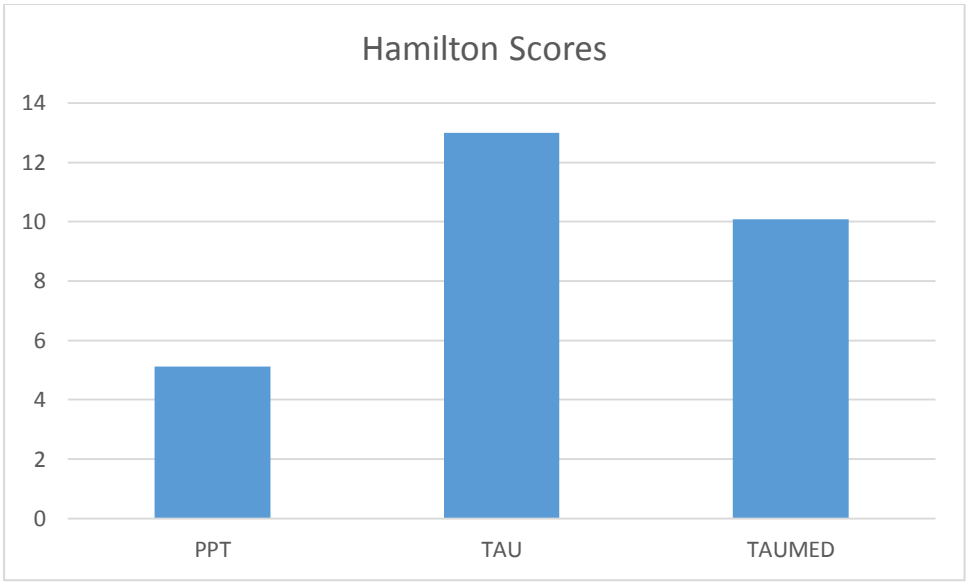

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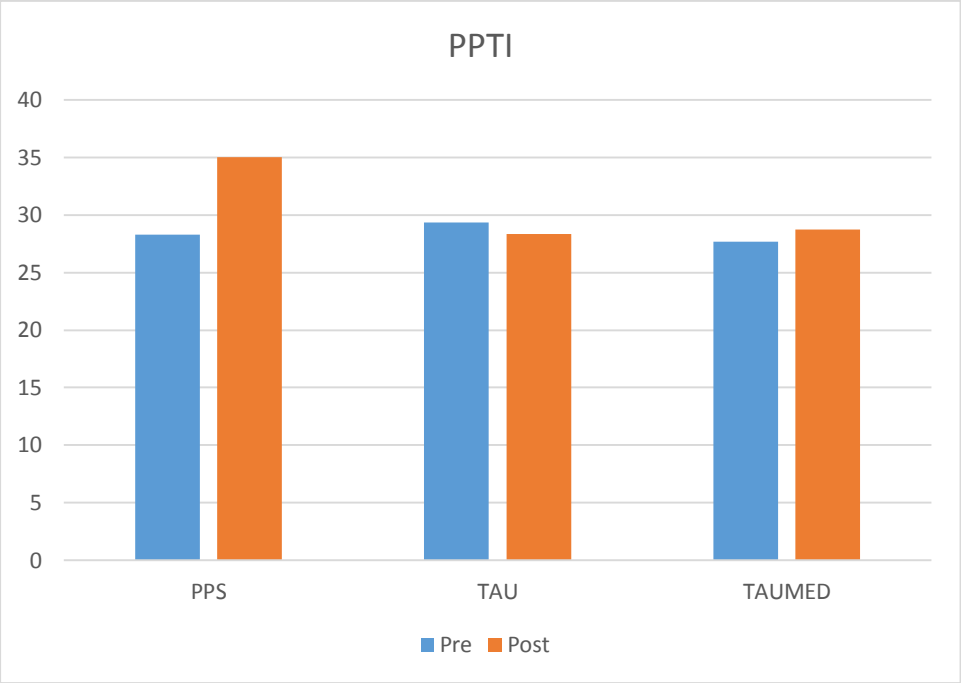
Figure Two: Mean Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPTI) scores pre and post at the end of different twelve-week intervention types in severely depressed individuals (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006)



Some of the interventions used in the afore-mentioned experiments included the following activities (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006):

Using Your Strengths: Take the VIA-IS strengths questionnaire to assess your top 5 strengths, and think of ways to use those strengths more in your daily life.

Three Good Things/Blessings: Each evening, write down three good things that happened and why you think they happened.

Obituary/Biography: Imagine that you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life. What would you want your obituary to say? Write a 1–2 page essay summarizing what you would like to be remembered for the most.

Gratitude Visit: Think of someone to whom you are very grateful, but who you have never properly thanked. Compose a letter to them describing your gratitude, and read the letter to that person by phone or in person.

Active/Constructive Responding: An active-constructive response is one where you react in a visibly positive and enthusiastic way to good news from someone else. At least once a day, respond actively and constructively to someone you know.

Savoring: Once a day, take the time to enjoy something that you usually hurry through (examples: eating a meal, taking a shower, walking to class). When it's over, write down what you did, how you did it differently, and how it felt compared to when you rush through it.
(Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006, p.776).

A meta-analysis of positive psychology interventions with over 4000 participants found they were particularly more beneficial to younger people and especially those experiencing higher levels of depression (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Hence, whilst positive psychology interventions have been used in both clinical settings (Freres, Gillham, Reivich, & Shatte, 2002; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), they are beginning to be used in guidance counselling. We shall now turn our attention to examining some ways in which they may be used as part of guidance counselling practice. We will consider (in order) the *Penn Resiliency Programme*, and the importance of focussing on the *growth mindset, positive emotions, expressive writing, gratitude, flow,* and *character strengths*.

The Penn Resiliency Programme

According to the recent *´Well-being in Post-Primary Schools' report* (DES, 2013) it is important to strengthen Irish students' resilience. Gillham & Reivich (2004) created the *Penn Resiliency Programme* to do just that. The aim of the programme is to grow psychological resilience and prevent depressive symptoms in eleven to fourteen year-olds. The programme has been tested globally, and there is evidence that it significantly reduces adolescent anxiety and symptoms of depression post intervention and one year later (Brunwasser, Gillham, & Kim, 2009) as well as up to fifty per cent over three years amongst 697 students from a suburban metropolitan area in the US (Gillham et al, 2007). Research suggests that the effect is even more significant as time passes by (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, & Seligman, 1995). Cutuli, Chaplin, Gillham, Reivich, & Seligman (2006) found it particularly useful with suburban middle school children from 718 families exhibiting conduct problems. A longitudinal study showed that the Resiliency Programme significantly reduced their depressive symptoms in comparison to the control group. Whilst there is some inconsistency in these findings, the overall results seem promising.

The programme is based on Albert Ellis' ABC Model (Gillham & Reivich, 2004) and includes attribution theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), according to which individuals attribute their failures to three habitual dimensions: internal vs external (am I to blame? Is someone or something else to blame?); stable vs unstable (is the situation permanent or temporary?); global vs specific (does it affect all aspect of my life or just one?) Hence, adolescents who think optimistically explain adversity as temporary, as affecting only one aspect of their lives, and do not blame themselves for the situation. Adolescents who think pessimistically explain adversity as permanent, affecting all aspects of their lives, and do blame themselves for it. The Penn Resiliency Programme teaches students how to change their attributions to more optimistic ones. As children learn attributions from their parents (Seligman, 1995) or teachers (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978), the Resiliency Programme is taught by teachers and Guidance Counsellors (Gillham, Reivich, Joycox, & Seligman, 1995), and also delivered to parents (Gillham et al., 2006), in order to enhance its impact. The success of the Penn Resiliency Programme in the US resulted in it being introduced in the UK schools as the *UK Resilience Programme* (Bailey & Challen, 2012). It is also the basis for the Australian *Bounce Back!*programme (McGrath & Noble, 2003).

The Resiliency Programme has been rigorously evaluated in over 17 control studies with more than 2000 children and adolescents, the results of which have shown that the programme reduces depression and anxiety symptoms with some studies indicating significant effects (Brunwasser, Gillham, & Kim, 2009). It is suggested that the Penn Resiliency Programme (Gillham & Reivich, 2004) adapted for the Irish schools could be introduced and delivered by Guidance Counsellors to reduce depressive symptoms and

enhance students' well-being. The programme could be made available to both students and parents to provide them with awareness of pessimistic explanatory styles and show them alternative ways of thinking. In order to enhance their effectiveness, it could be incorporated as part of the curriculum, teaching students life skills.

Growth Mindset

'Mindsets' are held to be individual beliefs about human attributes such as intelligence or personality (Dweck, 2012). It is argued that those who demonstrate *growth mindset* trust that people can change and develop. Their intelligence and personality can alter as long as they made an effort to do it. On the other hand, individuals demonstrating *fixed mindset* believe that their core qualities are set in stone and cannot be changed (Dweck, 2008). Having a fixed mindset leads to a lot of negative consequences. Research shows that most students with fixed mindsets are insecure about their abilities (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), and believe that if they need to put any effort into completing a task, it means that they don't have enough talent (Dweck & Legget, 1988). Therefore, they might either give up sooner than students demonstrating a growth mindset, or shy away from challenging activities to avoid being seen as unintelligent (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). When under-performing, fixed mindset students may also resort to lies, in order not to be judged by others (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Moreover, fixed mindset is associated with stereotyping (Placks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001), which may lead to bullying behaviour, and lower will-power to change unwanted behaviours (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010). In a study exploring the effect of mindsets on bullying behaviour of over 858 students based in the US and Finland, it was found that children and adolescents displaying fixed mindsets are more likely to aggressively retaliate and show hatred towards others (Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011).

On the other hand, children with growth mindset believe they can enhance their intelligence (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), and hence tend to seek learning opportunities; in other words, challenge excites, rather than discourages them. They also show resilience in the face of adversity, and seem to enjoy their lives more (Dweck, 2008). Teaching children growth mindset enhances student motivation, especially intrinsic and leads to more academic success (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

Dweck (2008) suggests that in order to change students' mindsets from fixed to growth, teachers need to tell their students about different mindsets as well as encourage them to select one area they are not very good at and create a stretching goal to improve their skill-set.

In an Irish school setting, growth mindset research, as well as feedback skills, could be taught to teachers and parents. They could be made aware of the consequences of their feedback on students' well-being, and given instruction on how to alter their feedback to enhance growth mindset. In-service teacher training could perhaps be carried out as a one-off intervention, or more ideally might be continuously embedded in the school culture by a principal's leadership strategy.

Positive Emotions

Over the years, positive emotions have been given very little attention in comparison to negative emotions (Fredrickson, 1998). One of the reasons for it is the difficulty in differentiating them. It is much easier to research the difference between shame and anger, than joy and pleasure. Negative emotions also have a very important function; they warn us

against danger, and narrow our focus to 'fight or flight' (Fredrickson, 2001). This is why they are particularly useful in many situations, but not all.

One of the benefits of experiencing positive emotions is their ability to broaden our minds and see more opportunities in life, as well as to become more creative (Fredrickson, 2009). Rowe, Hirsch & Anderson (2007) connected participants to an eye tracking device and found that when they were primed for positive emotions by listening to positive music, their peripheral vision expanded, and they were able to see more. Positive emotions improve resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), decrease depressive symptoms and increase psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2003). In other words, resilient people experience more positive emotions, which help protect them from depression; this in turn helps them to bounce back faster. Positive emotions are also able to counteract negative emotions by speeding up cardiovascular recovery (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). Studies found that experiencing positive emotions enhances our decision making process and performance (Straw & Barsade, 1993), improves closeness between people (Aaron, Aaron, & Smollen, 1992) and emotional well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found that in order to flourish, individuals need to experience a minimum of 2.9 positives to 1 negative emotion, and a maximum of 11.6 positives to 1 negative emotion (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005); experiencing a ratio of less than 3:1 is associated with depression. In order to improve this ratio, individuals need to either increase the amount of positive emotions they experience daily, or decrease their negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2009). Increasing positive emotions can be done in many different ways. Most positive psychology interventions aim to enhance positive affect. They include the following:

- Savouring (Bryant & Veroff, 2004);
- Expressing gratitude (Eammons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman, 2011);
- Intensely Positive Experiences (Burton & King, 2004);
- Random Acts of Kindness (Lyubomirsky, 2007);
- The Best Possible Self (King, 2001);
- Mindfulness Meditation (Davidson et al., 2003);
- Physical Activity (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994)

The authors recommend to use positive psychology interventions when encouraging students to think creatively about their current problems, helping them come up with innovative options and enhance their well-being. It may be used as a supplement to the commonly used Gerard Egan's Skilled Helper model (Wosket, 2006; Newnham-Kanas, Morrow, & Irwin, 2010) to enhance its effectiveness.

Expressive Writing

Over the last twenty years, almost 400 journals papers have been published about expressive writing. The vast majority of research attributes significant benefits to it. From the physiological viewpoint, there is strong evidence that writing reduces episodes of illness (King, 2001), and visits to the doctor (Frances & Pennebaker, 1992) as well as enhancing long-term improvements in immune functioning (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Psychological benefits include significant improvements in subjective well-being (King 2001), an increase in effective coping behaviour in the face of adversity (Spera, Buchfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994) and positive mood enhancement (Pennebaker, 1997). Expressive writing has also been correlated with a reduction in absenteeism (Frances & Pennebaker, 1992), depression and other mental illness (Esterling, L'Abate, Murray, &

Pennebaker, 1999). Therefore, its benefits are comparable to the effects of short-term therapy. In another experiment carried out with a group of 63 unemployed engineers (mean age of 54), the chances of them gaining new employment eight months later doubled following their completion of an expressive writing exercise over five days (Spera, Buchfeind, & Pennbaker, 1994).

There are, however, certain complexities in the writing process. Brewin and Lennard (1999) found that typing as a mode of expressive writing is less beneficial than handwriting. While the topics of writing do not seem to be overly significant (Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008), emotional expression appears an important component of this process (Spera, Buchfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). Moreover, those whose writing has been considered more thoughtful and smarter reported increased benefits of the activity (Pennebaker, 1993). The duration or frequency of expressive writing doesn't seem to matter, either (Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008). Even single writing activity has a considerable effect on a range of well-being variables (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996). Finally, Youngsuk (2008) explored the effects of using different languages in expressive writing amongst bilinguals and found that 89 Korean-English and Spanish-English students based in the UK, who wrote using two languages reported higher benefits. The instruction for the original expressive writing intervention requires participants to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings in relation to their life experiences (Pennebaker, 1997). Those feelings are often negative. According to Pennebaker and Uhlman study (1994) writing about negative experiences increases skin conductance level, therefore short term stress, while positive emotional expression puts people instantly into a state of relaxation.

The success of the expressive writing intervention made positive psychologists wonder what would happen if writing about traumatic experiences was replaced by writing about positive experiences. In one such experiment, King & Miner (2000) asked 118 participants, who were psychology students in the US, to recall a traumatic event, and then to focus on the positive aspects of it. In other words, to write an essay of how this experience benefited them as a person and made them more resilient. The results have shown that the participants' well-being increased and their visits to the doctor decreased for up to 5 months, hence potentially reducing their absenteeism.

Encouraged by the results of the benefit writing, King (2001) carried out a series of experiments in which she asked 81 participants, who were psychology graduates in the US, to write about their best possible self, and the time in the future when everything they wish to have come true actually has. Participants were asked to write about it for 15-30 minutes over 3-4 consecutive days. The results showed that writing about goals was significantly less upsetting than writing about trauma, and it increased participants' well-being, optimism, self-regulation and confidence. Five months later, it was also associated with decreased reports of illness. But most importantly, the intervention enhanced participants' positive emotions (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), the benefits of which are very significant to well-being. Burton & King (2004) took positive writing to another level, when they asked participants to recall intensely positive experiences. The results showed that the activity enhanced participants' positive emotions and five months later they had reduced numbers of doctor visits.

Overall, writing about both positive and negative experiences has the same long term benefits; however, expressive writing enhancing positive emotions has a very positive effect, in the short term. Expressive writing could be used by Guidance Counsellors when helping students figure out their future career path; to enhance their positive emotions in order to help

them see more options in life; to reduce their depressive symptoms; and, to improve their well-being. Again, it could be used as a once off intervention, or as part of a serial input.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a 'sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life' (Emmons & Shelton, 2005, p. 460). Expressing gratitude is a complex concept. It incorporates being grateful towards something or someone, as well as a generic life attitude of noticing and appreciating the world (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). The authors suggest that gratitude attitude maybe directly contrasted with Beck's (1976) orientation to negativity, which leads to depression.

Expressing gratitude is considered to be the most effective Positive Psychology Intervention (PPI) to reduce depressive symptoms and improve well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). It has been reported to enhance life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Grateful people experience more optimism and less depression than non-grateful people, and score lower on the neuroticism scale as well as feel less lonely and envious (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude is also associated with experiencing more positive emotions (Friedrickson, 2004; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts 2003), and is also related to the willingness to forgive (DeShea, 2003), which in itself is a source of well-being enhancement. It is particularly useful for people in crisis as it helps them interpret stressful events or negative life experiences positively (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).

In adolescence, gratitude is a predictor of higher grade point average, life satisfaction, social integration and lower depression (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011). It also ignites teenagers' motivation for reciprocity (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). Emmons & Shelton (2005) found it strengthens bonds between people: however, it does more than just strengthen bonds, it also spurs pro-social behaviour in benefactors (Emmons & McCullough, 2004).Expressing gratitude predicts social integration, prosocial behaviour and life satisfaction amongst school children (Froh, Bono & Emmons, 2010). Children low in positive affectivity demonstrated increase in their gratitude two months later when they engaged in a gratitude activity (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009).

Gratitude interventions include writing a list of five things in your life for which you are grateful (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). It can also include writing why you are grateful for it (Seligman, 2011). Another gratitude intervention suggested writing a gratitude letter to someone who has been especially kind to you (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).Research shows that it can be effective either as a once off intervention (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003) or an ongoing activity over many weeks (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). However, Lyubomirsky (2007) also warns against doing it too often as it may have adverse effects. Counting blessings more than three times a week is associated with loss of meaningfulness and decreased effectiveness (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Guidance Counsellors may use one of the Gratitude Interventions to help students improve their well-being. Expressing gratitude can be encouraged by school principals and teachers on a daily basis.

Flow

'Flow' is defined as an activity during which individuals lose track of place, time and self-consciousness, as their attention is fully invested in the task and they function at their optimum level (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Some of the conditions that facilitate flow are structured activities with clearly defined goals, the right balance of challenges and skills,

complete concentration and sense of control. Experiencing flow amongst adolescents is associated with subjective well-being (Massimini & Carli, 1988); experiencing intrinsic motivation (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996); enhanced positive emotions (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005); high levels of commitment to education and achievement rates (Carli, Delle Fave, & Massimini, 1988); and, spending more time on productive activities (Hektner & Assawa, 2000).

According to the '*Well-being in Post-Primary Schools'* guidelines (DES, 2013) schools are requested to encourage young people to participate in extra-curricular activities. Positive psychology research shows that such activities promote a sense of flow, which is crucial for their development. Flow-inducing activities include spending time with friends (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984); participating in sports, structured activities, listening to music (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002); and studying (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Across all school subjects, history created the lowest levels of flow in adolescents and maths the highest (Shernoff, Knauth, & Markris, 2000). Regular activity least promoting flow in teenagers is watching television, which induces apathy (Freire, 2004). Guidance Counsellors could help students find flow by redirecting them towards flow-inducing activities. The more flow students experience the easier it will become for them to re-create it (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The principles of creating flow and its benefits could be introduced to parents to ensure they structure their children's days accordingly.

Character Strengths

There are many differences in definitions of strength. For some they are talents enhanced by knowledge and skills (Buckingham & Clifton, 2005), or virtues in action (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Others call them 'pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user' (Linley, 2008, p. 9). Using top strengths is associated with a significant increase in well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007), reduction in depressive symptoms for up to six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson, 2005), higher performance (Robinson, 2006), and happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Recently, a study with 61 unemployed job seekers from Israel found that using strength-based counselling significantly enhanced the chances of them securing an employment 3 months later (Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul, & Benjamin, 2013). In comparison to the control group, over 20pc more participants either got a job or a training course they wanted. Qualitative data showed that clients were more satisfied with their sessions when strength-based counselling was used and their positive evaluation intensified with time. While this study needs to be replicated with a larger sample, we can speculate that using character strengths in guidance counselling practice may improve client results and their satisfaction.

There are three main strength questionnaires used by positive psychologists: VIA (Peterson & Seligman, 2004); the Personality Strenghts Project, otherwise known as Realise2 (Linley, 2008); and, Gallup's Signature Themes of Talen (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). While all these measurements are available, the authors suggest that Guidance Counsellors should not use them, without the Department of Education and Skills approval. The most widely researched and recognised questionnaire is VIA-IS (Virtues in Action Inventory of Strengths), a self-report questionnaire. One of its versions, VIA-youth, is used for identifying strengths in adolescents (Park, 2004). It comprises of 96 items and has good reliability and construct validity (Park & Peterson, 2005; Park & Peterson, 2006). Different strengths are associated with certain behaviours, ages and professions. For example, hope, teamwork and zest are

more common among adolescence than adults (Park, Peterson, Seligman, 2004). The most prominent strength for gardeners is 'love of learning' and jobs with mentoring element in them were best performed by individuals whose strength was 'kindness' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

DES (2013) encourages developing interventions to help students develop their potential. There is evidence that strength-based approach can enhance students' awareness of what's good about them, which contributes to developing their potential (Park & Peterson, 2008; Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbull, & Benjamin, 2013). Strengths can be used by Guidance Counsellors to enhance students' well-being, as well as to help them identify jobs which may be suitable for them (Park & Peterson, 2008). Teaching students how to use signature character strengths in a new way can enhance well-being and reduce depression for up to six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The strength-based approach is already recognised in a guidance counselling setting (Park & Peterson, 2008), Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbull, & Benjamin, 2013). Students may be helped to recognise what they are good at, and how they can use their strengths to build relationships, study and prepare for exams. Strengths language should be introduced in a classroom to continuously remind students of focusing on the positive aspects of their personality and others.

Positive Psychology and the Whole-School Approach

The 'whole-school approach' has been applied to the enhancement of student self-esteem in Dublin schools (Charles & McHugh, 2000); internationally, it is a long-standing philosophy and standard implementation strategy in anti-bullying intervention (O' Moore & Minton, 2004). The new '*Well-being in Post-Primary Schools'* report (DES, 2013) shows the importance of the structured whole-school intervention to enhance well-being, reduce depression and prevent suicide in Irish Schools. Positive psychology research and interventions can be used to refocus students' attention on what's good about them and their lives. This cannot be achieved unless the community reinforces students' new attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, it is necessary to deliver positive psychology well-being programmes to the entire school community rather than only students.

Case Study

Billy is a 6th year student who barely passed his Junior Certificate. His parents and teachers are concerned about his attitude and afraid he might fail his Leaving Certificate. They asked you to speak with him.

When Billy walks into your office he seems quiet and despondent. When asked to talk about himself he doesn't give much away. However, upon further inquiry, you find out that he doesn't find any classes, apart from PE, engaging (**lack of flow**) and doesn't understand how learning about Michael Collins or the chemical composition of carbohydrates can help him get a job in the future. He labels himself as non-academic and says he is just not good at studying (**fixed mindset**). He also can't see how that might change in the future (**pessimistic attributional style**). He sighs and says he just hopes he can pass his Leaving Cert, but doesn't aspire to anything more than this (**negative emotions**). When asked what strengths he has, he shrugs his shoulders and says jokingly: winding up my dad.

Billy looks clearly unhappy in this environment and with all the negative attention from his parents and teachers, his experience of positive emotions is reduced. In order to open up his mind to change, you begin with enhancing his positive affect. You ask him what he enjoys about the school, in other words, what he's grateful for (**gratitude**). He tells you about his mates and the great time he has with them. Then you ask him how his friends would describe him (**strengths**). He says they think he's funny and a good friend. Upon further enquiry, he tells you they appreciate how helpful he is when they are in need and admire his discipline when training for the basketball championship.

At this stage, Billy is enthusiastic and animated telling you about his PE successes. His demeanour is considerably different and he experiences a lot of **positive emotions**. He is now ready to open up to change. You praise him on his achievements and ask him once again about the **strengths** he used when preparing for his championships. He talks about his discipline and focus. You nod and ask how he motivates himself to get up early to train. You conclude that he is successful in PE because he made a choice to put effort into his training. Discuss with him ways in which he can put more effort into his Leaving Certificate preparation (**growth mindset**). The good news is that he has already used his strengths before and they worked for him so chances are, he will succeed in other subjects too, if he only puts his mind to it.

When you ask him how he challenges himself when training, he says he sets up stretching goals every week. Ask him how he can do the same when studying for History or Chemistry (developing **Flow**) and discuss specific examples.

Finally, ask him to tell you what his training was like before he became successful. He says it wasn't easy, but he kept at it and things have changed (**optimistic attributional style - unstable**). Discuss how his low grades can change in the future if he chooses to do something about them.

At this point, Billy is in a positive state of mind and feels like he has control over the situation. He also knows what he can do to change his circumstances. Most importantly, however, his self-efficacy is increased and he knows that he already has the psychological and intellectual resources that can help him succeed in his Leaving Cert.

In order to anchor all these feelings and thoughts, you ask Billy to do homework. Using his strengths, he needs to 'discipline' himself to take 15-20 min and 'focus' on writing about the '**Best Possible Self**'. Ask him to imagine he successfully passed his Leaving Cert and surprised himself with the results. His homework is to write how he made it all happen.

Summary

The aim of this article was to demonstrate how positive psychology research and interventions may be applied to enhance the effectiveness of the practice of Guidance Counsellors, particularly those working in Irish schools. It has been suggested how such research and interventions could be successfully integrated into the ethos of school communities, helping community members to thrive. Finally, some practical tools have been offered, with the goal of enabling Guidance Counsellors to introduce some of the findings immediately in their workplace.

Biography

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Jolanta is a Psychologist specialising in Positive Psychology. She graduated from Dublin City University with a BA (Psychology) and MSc in Education and Training Management. She then pursued a Post Graduate Degree in Applied Positive Psychology at the University of East London and is currently completing PhD research in the area of Positive Psychology applied in Education in Trinity College Dublin. Jolanta holds a graduate membership of the Psychological Society of Ireland, British Psychological Society and International Positive Psychology Association. She wrote numerous articles and presented at many conferences. Jolanta's interests relate to measuring well-being and applying positive psychology interventions in guidance counselling and other educational settings.

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