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## Positive Education to Promote Flourishing in Students Returning to School after COVID-19 Closure

Gökmen Arslan<sup>1</sup> and Jolanta Burke<sup>2</sup>

As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global disaster continues to unfold across the world, protective measures such as school closures, physical distancing, and stay-at-home orders have exposed wide numbers of young people to fear, worry, distress, academic challenges (e.g., amotivation), loneliness, depression, anxiety and they were particularly detrimental to children with special needs (Arslan, 2021; Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021; Bobo et al., 2020; O’Sullivan et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2021), Undoubtedly, one of the biggest disruptions for young people and the whole school community has been the rapid shift to remote learning (Castro & George, 2021; Flynn et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Peer-reviewed research on the impact of school closures and remote learning triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is only just emerging, but the few studies that are available have produced mixed results (Asanov et al., 2020; Watera et al., 2021). Some students have benefited from learning at home, making the most of being able to learn at their own pace and appreciating the calm of home compared to a noisy classroom (Lee, 2020). For others, the pandemic heralded change in their own preferences, whereby they were more likely to opt for online classes when given a choice (Castro & George, 2021). However, the majority of students have experienced negative effects, including high academic distress (Horita et al., 2021), decreased learning effectiveness (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020), reduced motivation to learn (Garbe et al., 2020), lack of personal space at home (Wang et al., 2020) and struggling to balance school and home responsibilities (Garbe et al., 2020). The negative effect of school closures is amplified for students who live in marginalized communities and areas where they were already exposed to intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., war, displacement, poverty, and weak healthcare and education systems; Banati et al., 2020).

In addition, educators and school-based mental health providers across the world are wondering how school or education will look when students return to school settings. Most importantly, they are wondering how to promote staff and students’ mental health and flourishing, regardless of the setting (Arslan et al., 2021; Asby et al., 2020). Specifically, positive education approaches can be an important resource to promote resilience and flourishing in students returning to school after COVID-19 school closure.

Positive education, a positive psychology-based approach, emphasizes the need to support student character and wellbeing skills in school context (Seligman et al., 2009). In addition to the traditional academic approaches, positive education aims to develop and foster young people’s strengths and skills for happiness and psychological, social and emotional health in educational context (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). Previous research indicated the effectiveness of positive psychology-based approaches (e.g., positive education) on positive youth development and wellbeing

Positive education calls for tweaking the curriculum to incorporate teaching content that enhances wellbeing. For example, helping young people reflect on life goals, promote aspirations conducive to wellbeing (Gill et al., 2021), practice positive psychology interventions (PPIs) such as three good things, signature strengths or writing a gratitude letter (Bridges et al., 2012), engaging with a positive education programmes, such as Strengths Gym, Penn Resiliency, or Making Hope Happen (Lopez, 2013; Proctor et al., 2011; Reivich & Gillham, 2010), or creating

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school-customised activities informed by positive psychology research, such as PROSPER, PERMAH, or FLOURISH frameworks (Noble & McGrath, 2015; Williams, 2011). However, positive education extends beyond teaching young people wellbeing skills and practicing PPIs, as it encourages the application of positive pedagogy to boost school community's wellbeing (Burke, 2021).

Positive pedagogy relates to incorporating pedagogical approaches in teachers' daily practice that make positive impact on students' and teachers' wellbeing. This includes pedagogies encouraging students' creativity that stretch beyond the arts subject and towards maths, language, science, technology, social sciences, physical education classes (Patston et al., 2021), shortening teacher long-winded instructions (Goemaere et al., 2018), or structured group play (Woolf, 2011). Alternatively, it incorporates a range of pedagogies that relate to positive learning experiences (e.g. being flexible, offering awards), teacher-child relationship improvement (e.g. appreciating children), or supporting children's autonomy (Ranta et al., 2020). Considering the impact of teachers on students (Harding et al., 2019), tweaks in teachers' pedagogies can have a positive ripple effect across the entire school community.

In the world obliterated by the negative COVID-19 experiences, positive education has an important role to play. It can help students and teachers tap into their strengths (Galloway et al., 2020), enable them to use and regulate their psychological, social and emotional resources to their full potential (Freire & Tavares, 2016; Morrish et al., 2018), and boost their wellbeing (Au & Kennedy, 2018; Waters, 2017), not only by implementing additional activities, but also by doing more of what is already working as well as tweaking the current practices to achieve better results. When applied with care, and cognisant of ecological and cultural factors affecting each school community (Coulombe et al., 2021; Lombardi et al., 2019), it has a potential of changing the lives of millions of children, teachers and parents worldwide.

## Conclusion

Although we hope for this public crisis to end soon, the effects of pandemic on youth valued outcomes signify that there is need to design mental health services to cultivate wellbeing and mental health in young people returning to school after coronavirus school closure. Positive psychology literacy is thus necessary for developing science that informed evidence helping students to cope with the challenges and providing positive adaptation after returning to schools. In this regard, we encourage researchers, mental health providers, and school authorities to develop effective interventions in educational context to support students' flourishing and academic development. We believe that application of the principles of positive psychology that emphasizes student strengths and skills into school context can play a key role for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. The *Journal of School and Educational Psychology (JOSEP)* thus engages these efforts and invites manuscripts informing educators and mental health providers of best positive psychology-based practices that sustain staff, parents, students' resilience and wellbeing during this most challenging worldwide emergency.

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