

Chapter 2

A Focus on the Human Potential

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Teacher 1 to a student: Peter, the problem with this piece of work of yours is that it is unclear how you got to these results. Next time you should pay more attention to explaining what you did and how you found these outcomes!

Teacher 2 to a student: Well done, John! In this piece of work I can see your creativity. I feel this is a strength of yours that you can use more often and that you can further develop.

Principal 1 to a teacher: If I take the list of teacher competencies, I think there is a problem with your classroom management. I think you should learn how to maintain more control over the classroom.

Principal 2 to a teacher: I admire your commitment to children! I feel this is a personal strength of yours that supports the learning in your classroom. How could you use this quality to further strengthen your teaching?

Mahatma Gandhi said that the real goal of education is to bring out the best in people.

Wherever we go in the world, we find that educators agree on this as a pivotal goal of education.

And when we speak with school principals or teacher educators, they invariably say that it is crucial to bring out the best in teachers. Yet, in spite of this general consensus around the goal of bringing out the best in others, a lot of confusion seems to exist when it comes to the question of *how* to do this. Although almost everyone in education holds the ideal of supporting others in their growth, people try to do so in many different ways, as we can see in the four examples above.

For a long time, many people have thought that the best way to 'bring out the best' was to confront people with what was not going well and then try to help them improve. This is what we call *the deficiency model*: you try to 'repair' what is weak. This model is strongly intertwined with almost every aspect of education. Look, for example, in how a teacher assesses her students after

completing a test. Most teachers mark the parts that are incorrect. Very few teachers write positive remarks in the margin at places where the students have done well. Or observe an evaluative meeting between a school principal and a teacher that focuses on assessing the teacher's instructional planning and implementation. In general, most of the time in such a meeting is devoted to what could be improved in the teacher's behavior and not to an in-depth analysis of the teacher's strengths. But there are some positive exceptions. Some school principals and superintendents have discovered that professional growth among educators is strongly promoted if the evaluative emphasis is put on what goes well and how this can be extended.

Positive Psychology

The deficiency model in education is grounded in a more general view of human growth that has influenced our society as a whole, probably as a result of this dominant view in psychology. During the 20th century, psychologists have become better and better at mapping and diagnosing abnormalities and traumas in people, at searching for causes to be found in people's life histories, and at finding and prescribing treatments. The idea was that as soon as we know what exactly is the problem with a person, we then may find a solution and 'cure' the person. Martin Seligman, who was the president of the American Psychological Association around the turn of the 21st century, took a brave stance against the deficit orientation that was common among almost all of his psychologist colleagues. Together with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is well known for his publications on the concept of *flow*, Seligman wrote an often quoted article stating that for too long, psychology had focused on pathology, weakness, and the damage done to people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to these two influential psychologists, a critical review of the psychological literature showed that the deficiency model has not been very effective in enhancing people's well-being.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi emphasized that psychology had insufficiently acknowledged the human potential. Since the year 2000, Seligman has supported the development of a completely new direction in psychology, called *positive psychology*, which focuses on people's strengths as the fundamental basis for growth. Seligman speaks about nurturing people's *psychological capital* in order to help them develop resilience, the capacity to overcome problems and to see new opportunities in times of trouble. In the end, this makes people more happy, or, to say it in more scientific terms, it enhances people's well-being.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) emphasized that "treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best" (p. 7). Hence, they pointed to the importance of positive traits in individuals, which they call *character strengths*, such as creativity, courage, perseverance, kindness, and fairness (Seligman, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Central issues in positive psychology are how such strengths can help people cope better with their lives, and enhancing resilience and well-being. These seem to be issues that are also highly relevant for education.

There have been other developments that foreshadowed the rise of positive psychology long before this new branch of the field was founded. For example, in the second half of the 20th century, the psychologists Rogers and Maslow also focused on the human potential. Their work, grounded in extensive experiences in therapeutic relationships, became the basis for a more student-oriented approach in education that focused on the relationship between the teacher and the student and on the qualities of acceptance, respect, genuineness, and empathy as important ingredients of a teacher's attitude. Although the humanistic-based view, as it was called, created many positive changes in classrooms, for the most part it seemed not much more than just a view, or a 'belief', and little rigorous research was carried out to provide evidence that the principles of a humanistic-based education were effective or made a difference in students' learning. The

strength of positive psychology is its focus on solid empirical research, which has, for example, led to evidence-based approaches for helping people identify their personal strengths and build on them.

The change that we are talking about is the change from focusing on the negative and problematic to focusing on quality, potential, and opportunities. Some people make a caricature of this ‘new’ view of personal growth. They say that, in this new vision, everything is possible and that you will become happy, as long as you think positively and keep smiling. Of course, this is not true, and the caricature has very little to do with positive psychology, which instead says that it helps to know and build on your own personal qualities and to be very conscious about how you do this. It is possible to deal with struggles and misfortunes in a way that makes us stronger and happier. Positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (2002) conducted some interesting empirical studies that showed how a focus on failures and inadequacies is counterproductive to creativity, whereas a focus on positive aspects makes people more open, creative, motivated, and effective. Together with mathematician Losada, she was able to conclude from observations of effective management teams and people in happy marriages that people need at least three times as many more positive than negative experiences in their professional or personal relationships in order to grow (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). This conclusion may challenge the philosophy and practice of many in the field of education!

What has become clear through the work of researchers in positive psychology is that we can influence our own well-being, not by just digging into our problems and trying to ‘solve’ them, but by building on our strengths, our *psychological capital*. However, an important assumption underlying this book is that the positive side of things is only half the story, as we also take seriously the problems people—children or adults—encounter during their daily struggles. The approach we describe in this book is, ultimately, about connecting the negative and the

positive: how can you utilize your problems to discover your qualities, and end up happier and stronger?

Exercise

1. Think back on an inspiring situation, in your work or in your private life, in which you were interacting with one or more other people. Look back at this experience with a focus on what you did in the situation and how you did this. And how did you feel? Was there a certain quality in you that came to the fore, a personal strength?
2. Now go back to a situation that was less pleasant or that was difficult, or perhaps even a situation in which you felt stuck. What was so unpleasant or difficult in this situation? What happened within you? What did you think? How did you feel?
3. Is there a difference in the degree to which you used your personal strengths in both situations?
4. Regarding the unpleasant or difficult situation, was there a possibility to use one of your personal strengths more?

This exercise may have helped you discover or remember some core qualities in you, and perhaps it even gave you some ideas about how you can use these more often in your work or in your private life. But perhaps it was difficult for you in this exercise to focus on your strengths. Most people are so used to dwelling on their failures and nasty experiences, instead of their successes and assets, that the negative aspects often draw all the attention.

Although we believe there are certainly benefits to understanding more about your own problems and traumas, and how they can be grounded in your personal history, this doesn't always lead to a solution for today's problems. Sometimes these problems even get worse because, for example, you start to believe that something is wrong with you. This belief system alone can create serious problems. For instance, if you think that you are not able to learn mathematics, this may rapidly become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which may create a block to ever learning how to solve quadratic equations.

Core Qualities in Teachers

We will now discuss what the view of positive psychology could mean for education. Let us first look at what we mean by teachers' strengths and their psychological capital. After that, we will turn our attention towards students.

Exercise

Think back on an inspiring teacher you have had in school or at the university level. Write down one or two characteristics of this teacher.

At a variety of educational conferences and in professional courses, we have asked people the same question: think back on an inspiring teacher you've once had and identify a characteristic of this teacher. Most of the answers we get from this prompt name characteristics such as enthusiasm, commitment, care, humor, passion – in other words, personal qualities. Educationalists are not used to putting such qualities at the foreground of their views and theories on education. As noted above, they are rarely included in official lists of teacher competencies and assessment criteria. In such lists, often the focus lies more on technical competence or skills and not on personal qualities, whereas most of us have had the experience that personal qualities are what made the memorable difference in our teachers. As Tickle (1999, p. 123) puts it: "In policy and practice the identification and development of personal qualities, at the interface between aspects of one's personal virtues and one's professional life, between personhood and teacherhood, if you will, has had scant attention." Tickle mentions such qualities as empathy, compassion, understanding, tolerance, love, and flexibility. He says that they are essential qualities for teachers, maintaining: "The teacher as a person is the core by which education itself takes place" (p. 136). This does not mean that technical competence is not important in teaching. It surely is. What we want to emphasize, however, is that it does make a difference if teachers' professional competencies are grounded in personal qualities such as empathy, love, enthusiasm, and passion.

While positive psychologists use the term character strengths for these qualities, we prefer the term *core qualities* coined by Ofman (2000), because it refers to the 'core' of the person. The term core qualities also stresses its difference from the concept of 'core competence' (often used in the literature on competency management, for example by Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Ofman

states that core qualities are always potentially present in human beings. He maintains that the distinction between qualities and competencies lies primarily in the fact that qualities come from the inside, while competencies are acquired from the outside. Almaas (1987, p. 175) uses the term *essential aspects*, which he considers absolute in the sense that they cannot be further reduced, or dissected into simpler component parts. This is an interesting observation: indeed, technical competencies, such as the competency to maintain classroom discipline, can be further reduced into sub-competencies, whereas a core quality such as passion or care cannot be split up; they are one 'whole'.

Core Qualities in Students

Now we turn our attention to students in schools, either at the elementary or at the secondary level. But everything we will discuss is equally applicable to university students as well.

Example

Two 9th grade students are working on an assignment to design a truck with a crane capable of hoisting up an object that a person would need both arms to lift. They have to construct a prototype at a scale of 1:5.

This assignment is a real challenge for the students. They have to use their creativity along with their analytic strength, perseverance, handiness, and so forth. These are core qualities that are not only important for the rest of their school careers, but also in the rest of their lives. This is an important reason to focus on children's core qualities: these qualities can be applied to many different situations. They are less domain-specific than many subject-specific competencies; in other words, they have a *high transfer value*.

If we want to make optimal use of the value of core qualities, it is important that teachers help children recognize such assets in themselves and use them as much as possible.

Example: A test

A student in elementary school has written the following answers to five problems:

$$12 + 9 = 21$$

$$35 - 7 = 28$$

$$25 + 8 = 32$$

$$14 - 8 = 6$$

$$33 + 9 = 42$$

$$36 - 7 = 29$$

Many teachers will react by saying "One mistake!" instead of "Well done, they are almost all correct." A teacher who responds "well done" may even go one step further and use his or her experiences with the student to name a core quality. For example, when a student has not been very motivated or attentive for a period of time, and now shows improvement in these areas, the teacher may say: "You have the ability to be very focused!" And it is helpful then not to talk about the period of time in which the student used that quality less.

Sometimes we ask students: "When was the last time a teacher noticed a quality of yours?" Generally these students look at us as if they would say: "What on earth are you talking about?" Then we explain what we mean, but generally this only clarifies that core qualities are seldom mentioned in school. Teachers do say things like "well done," which generally leaves the student with a positive feeling but brings little specific insight into what exactly was well done. Teachers seldom say: "I see in you the quality of persistence," or, "Wow, you are creative!"

Through such interventions, children can feel truly seen as a person. This is generally not the case if teachers, in their feedback, focus on competencies. The interesting thing is that core qualities can actually be stimulated or nurtured in this way. For example, if students are seen displaying their quality of 'care' for others, as we start to recognize and name this quality as a personal strength, they become more caring, as if qualities somehow grow through giving them attention. If a teacher views a student as creative, this student will become more motivated to use her creativity in future situations. We do not believe in using this as a new 'trick' to promote children's growth. In our view, what is needed is that the teacher is whole-heartedly committed to children's growth, so that the children can feel that the feedback on core qualities is genuine and stems from the teacher's love and care for them.

Some teachers believe that you have to wait with giving feedback to children about their core qualities until the secondary school level, because only then they can understand what you

mean. However, elementary school teachers have noticed that you can start at an early age, for example when children are four years old.

Example

A teacher in a elementary school in Amsterdam discusses with her 3rd grade students what they are good at. The students react enthusiastically. The boys focus on their physical abilities: one can stand on his hands, the other can spin on his hands or feet, and a third can do push-ups with one hand. Gradually the students start to see that there are also other qualities that are important, such as: creativity, care for others, attentiveness, and so forth. Next, the students make a birthday calender of their group. Each name on the calender is accompanied by a core quality of the child.

Of course, you will have to find a language that children understand. This appears to be less difficult than people expect. Because children feel truly seen when their core qualities are fed back to them, they are very strong at understanding what the words mean. Some examples as used by an elementary school teacher:

Honesty: You tell exactly what has really happened. You are honest.

Curiosity: You like to understand things, and discover new things. You are curious.

Patience: You are very good at waiting and at working on something that takes time. You have much patience.

Humor: You can make nice jokes. You have humor.

Does the Emphasis on Core Qualities Work?

An interesting question is: Does it work? Does the attention given to core qualities lead to positive outcomes? And if so, what kind of outcomes? A striking experiment was carried out by Seligman and his colleagues (Seligman et al., 2005). With the aid of a questionnaire measuring people's core qualities, they helped participants in an experimental group to identify their 'top strengths' and asked them to use one top strength in a new way, every day during one week. Before and after the week, the experimental group used the questionnaire to rate their well-being, in other words, the general feeling of happiness in their lives. The remarkable outcome was that, after the week, the experimental group scored significantly higher than a control group whose assignment had been to write a short passage each day of the week on something they remembered from their past. Even more striking, however, was the finding that half a year after the experiment, the experimental group still scored significantly higher than the control group on the well-being questionnaire. The idea that people can become more happy through such a small

experiment, and with such a small investment of time and energy, seems to suggest that there might be an important positive impact from a focus on core qualities.

However, in these times of emphasis on academic standards and testable outcomes, one might wonder if it is sufficient that people become more happy. In this respect, other studies in positive psychology reveal outcomes that should, in our view, convince people in education of the need to focus on students' and teachers' core qualities. For example, research by Fredrickson (2002, 2009) has consistently shown that a focus on positivity leads to higher motivation, more self-efficacy, and better performance.

All this has led Dutch researcher Peter Ruit to carry out an experiment with elementary school students quite similar to the experiment done by Seligman and his team. In Ruit's experiment, described in Chapter 9 of this book, we can see that the outcomes in children at least partly concur with the results of the research in positive psychology. Ruit's study showed that by means of a short intervention, young students can be helped to become aware of their core qualities, to choose one of them, and to use this core quality consciously in new ways. After three months, more than 80% of the students still remembered the chosen core quality and 58% of the students indicated that they still used it.

In another example given in this book, we tried to promote teachers' awareness of the importance of focusing on strengths—in themselves and in their students. Although our intervention is generally limited to a small number of workshop days for staff and the promotion of peer coaching, it seems to be highly successful according to the participants (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008). In Chapter 8 of this book, Attema-Noordewier and her colleagues report the outcomes of their study that introduced such a staff development program into six elementary schools in the Netherlands. One important outcome was that teachers became more focused on their students' qualities instead of their weaknesses. Teachers also felt more effective in

recognizing and tackling obstacles to learning and personal growth, in students and in themselves. Thus, much more potential was being liberated than before, again in teachers as well as in students. When looking at the professional development that took place in these teachers, it was evident that they became more successful in creating the conditions for optimal learning.

Through all of this, the relationships between teachers and students and among students changed fundamentally. In other words, the culture of the school changed. Participants reported back that this even expresses itself in coffee table conversations. Parents reported in their observations that their children were changing in a positive sense. Really *seeing* each other and making personal contact then became central themes in teaching. Teachers started to recognize that these form the basis for interpersonal relations supporting learning and growth (see Chapter 8 for more details). When talking about outcomes, what those involved in the study said is the most telling, as in the statements below.

A female teacher put it like this:

I have never felt more at home in my team than I do now. We are really talking to each other. That to me is the biggest outcome. And add to this the wonderful fact that it has already been channeled to the children. Life in the school is vibrant again. This is something I have missed for years. I think this is very precious.

Another teacher reported:

I find it something very dear to me that I can stand there in front of the class and hand this 'flow' to these children, and that they hand it on to each other. And the trust you then give them and that they gain in each other. You then really have the feeling that you are giving them something for society, and that it is not just the math lesson that matters.

The head of an elementary school said:

Teachers' progress can be observed in the student group. Even an 'old hand' tells me with a broad grin that he is doing things differently! That, too, I have been able to observe. They [the teachers] are really involved in it. I also notice that relations between teachers and students are improving. Mutual understanding is genuinely growing. There is more openness between colleagues.

Another school principal said:

To have taken this road together as a team has tremendous added value, has triggered a lot of commitment and awareness, and is being much appreciated by the parents.

A colleague, who was a regular visitor to one of the participating schools, but had not been there for the last three months, noticed:

Something has changed here, something has happened. Earlier, there were frequent grumblings, now there is a positive atmosphere in the school and in the team room.

Adding to the examples above, we have also worked with teacher educators in the U.S., the Netherlands, and several other countries, sometimes with even more striking results. Here are some of the evaluative remarks of US participants following a four-day workshop on ‘core reflection’.

- The biggest benefit for me has been learning new tools for refocusing problems and obstacles into strengths.
- A gained a sense of self-identity, freedom from limiting beliefs, empowerment to fulfill my life purpose.
- You would not know how much profound impact you’ve done to me personally and professionally. I feel so fortunate to be there at the first workshop you’ve given in America!
- To function from a place of strength, to affirm the qualities in self and other, and to have language that is approachable are all incredible valuable.
- Since returning, I have told colleagues and students that in my many years as an educator, I think this has been the most powerful and transformative experience I have ever had.
- The techniques of core reflection are really limitless in their application.
- This has been the most profound, influential workshop I’ve ever had in my life. It presented me with, no, immersed me in an ideal vision for my work, my teaching and my way of being that.

In Chapter 12 of this book, Erin Wilder, Younghee Kim, and William Greene report on the significant changes in teacher preparation at Southern Oregon University resulting from two professional development programs on core reflection. Again, their study shows that the outcomes were not only important for individual teacher educators and their students, but that a remarkable cultural change took place within their School of Education.

The other chapters in this book, too, present evidence that core reflection has a strong impact on student, teachers, and teachers educators. The chapters in this book also highlight *how* and *why* core reflection works. Before ending the present chapter, we wish to focus on the deeper meaning of such outcomes for the development of identity—both as a person and as a professional.

A Final Reflection

We believe that becoming aware of your own core qualities is an important ingredient in identity formation. For children, we think it is important to develop a sense of who they are as human beings and what their role in the world might be. For teachers, we connect the idea of core quality awareness to the notion of professional identity, a topic that has received much attention over the last few years.

It is clear that we live in a complex and rapidly changing society where, for many people, the traditional bonds of family and community, have eroded. As a consequence, people have less connection to the self-evident beliefs and values that were once integral to these traditional bonds. Sometimes this familial and social estrangement means that people have to discover for themselves their own direction and purpose in life. Core reflection suggests that staying in contact with their own personal *identity* and developing core qualities is a prerequisite for people to tap into their own unique potential, for directing themselves in realizing that potential, and for relating to other people. As Buber (1983, first edition 1923) helped us see, one's personal identity is formed and experienced in the company of other people. Moreover, the encounters we have with other people help us realize that we are not merely individuals but that our lives are connected with others, in fact, that we could not survive without them. In other words, it is in the relationship between oneself and other people that self-understanding and the awareness of one's *interconnectedness* with other humans becomes possible.

In our view, it is a teacher's task to guide children in these, perhaps most essential, aspects of life: the development of self-understanding and a sense of interconnectedness. This can be crucial in situations in which children struggle with their parents' divorce, or other family problems, but also of issues such as finding their place within the peer group, dealing with stress and emotions, meeting the demands of today's school system, and so forth. These challenges can direct the child toward questions such as: who am I (*self-understanding*), and how can I live the

life I wish in supportive relationships with others (*interconnectedness*), amidst the challenges that I am faced with? We believe it is an important goal of education to help children find answers to these fundamental questions. This has a direct bearing on the role of schools and teachers, and thus on the development of teachers' professional identity.

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