When venturing down the path of Positive Education, a logical and indeed essential stop is an exploration of character strengths.

Character strengths are central to the tenets of Positive Psychology, or the science of human flourishing and thriving. They may be defined as ‘our natural capacity for behaving, thinking or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes’ (Linley & Harrington, 2006).

When introducing positive psychology to the uninitiated, an easy definition is the research surrounding what’s *strong* in a person, organisation or community, as opposed to what’s *wrong*. Current Western psychology has tended to focus on deficit and pathology when analysing human characteristics. You only have to look at the expansion of the illnesses included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* over the recent decades for evidence of society’s predilection toward the negative.

Historically however, the *virtues* of humans have been written about for thousands of years in books such as the Bible, Torah and Quran and contemplated and refined by philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle.

Aristotle’s teachings suggested that it was the precise use of an individual’s strengths in just the right proportion that bought about what he referred to as the ‘golden mean’. For example, the correct use of the strength of courage is when consideration is given to what one could do to intervene in a situation to defend oneself or others from harm without being reckless (overuse of the strength of courage) or doing nothing at all (cowardice).

According to Aristotle, the pinnacle of human achievement was to use these strengths in the golden mean to live a eudemonic life. Eudemonia translates roughly from Greek, as “good spirit” however *flourishing* is also a widely accepted definition.
In 2004, in an effort to collate a classification of human strengths and virtues, Drs Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman published their pioneering book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*. The text outlines 24 character strengths - positive traits and abilities that are derived from 6 foundational virtues. Stemming from the book, the VIA strengths organisation was created. Its aim is to “bridge the science and practice of character strengths to build a better world” (VIA, 2019).

The 24 strengths, and their 6 virtues are set out in the infographic below. They exist in differing measures in each of us, and are universally valued. In children and in adults alike, they can be nurtured, grown and developed intentionally.

The VIA Strengths survey is a free, practical tool that you, your colleagues and your students can use to ascertain your individual strengths profiles. The website also has courses, fact sheets, research articles, and a myriad of other resources to assist you and your school to facilitate enhanced individual and collective wellbeing.
Exploring character strengths can be a wonderful entrée into the world of positive psychology for educators, as well as an illuminating self-reflection.

Some of our members have created resources that explain and encourage the display and practice of character strengths in their own schools. An excellent example is work done by PESA member, Deirdre Walters, at St Columba College in Adelaide who has shared with us some interactive character strengths games she devised, to not only teach her fellow staff about their own character strengths and those of their colleagues, but also to overcome any potential reluctance staff might feel in embracing Positive Education.

In order to flourish and thrive, understanding your character strengths and utilising them in the correct way is essential. Balance is essential to achieve optimal benefit from our use of strengths - as in the courage example above, it is of course possible to underuse and overuse our strengths.

Why not spend some time getting to know your own character strengths profile? To quote A.A Milne, maybe you will find that “You’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think”.

References -

Linley, PA and Harrington, S (2006), Playing to Your Strengths, The Psychologist


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