



# LITERATURE REVIEWS

Norrish, J., Robinson, J. & Williams, P. (2011).

## POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT

**“THE GRASS IS NOT, IN FACT, ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE. NO NOT AT ALL. FENCES HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THE GRASS IS GREENEST WHERE IT IS WATERED. WHEN CROSSING FENCES, CARRY WATER WITH YOU AND TEND THE GRASS WHEREVER YOU MAY BE.” - Robert Fulghum**

Being engaged involves living a life high on interest, curiosity, and absorption, and pursuing goals with determination and vitality. It is proposed that engaged individuals are curious (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004), interested (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), and passionate about worthwhile pursuits (Vallerand et al., 2003). The purpose of this summary is to review literature on engagement and explore its place within the model of positive education. More specifically, the aims are to: (a) define positive engagement; (b) explore research on the benefits and consequences of engagement; and (c) overview pathways to engagement: namely cultivating flow, fostering intrinsic motivation, and understanding and using signature strengths.

### POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT DEFINITION

Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that engaged individuals are curious, interested, motivated, and persistent in the face of challenges. In contrast, disengaged individuals are bored, apathetic, and alienated. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) define engagement as consisting of three related components: concentration (i.e., absorption and sustained attention); interest (i.e., curiosity and inquisitiveness); and enjoyment (i.e., feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction). Closely related to engagement is the concept of flow, defined as a state of intense absorption and optimal experience that results from taking part in intrinsically motivating challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow is conceptualised as the peak experience of engagement when people are most immersed, focused, and energised (Bakker, 2005). Cultivating student engagement is an important element of the model of positive education. However, it is important to note that individuals can experience concentration, interest, and enjoyment while taking part in activities that have detrimental impact on their wellbeing (e.g., gambling, online gaming, risk activities). For example, in their exploration of activities that evoke passion, Vallerand et al. (2003) differentiate between activities that are adaptive (i.e., evoke harmonious passion) and activities that are detrimental (i.e., evoke obsessive passion). Therefore, a consideration of whether activities have beneficial and worthwhile outcomes is important when fostering student engagement.

## ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING

Living a life high on engagement, interest, and absorption is considered a worthy goal in itself (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Furthermore, boredom may be linked to at-risk behaviours via attempts to evoke sensations and seek “cheap thrills” (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). In addition to being a valued outcome in its own right, engagement is believed to have benefits for wellbeing and flourishing. Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) divided a US sample of 1,215 students in years 10 and 11 into four groups based on their levels of interest and engagement. Participants in the most interested quartile reported significantly higher self-esteem and optimism, and lower pessimism than adolescents in the least interested quartile. Furthermore, interested adolescents experienced an internal locus of control (i.e., they felt they had control over their actions and life circumstances).

Froh, Kashdan, Yurkewicz, Fan, Allen, and Glowacki (2010) conducted a comprehensive exploration of engaged living which they conceptualised as a two component construct consisting of: (a) absorption and immersion in motivating activities; and (b) social integration, helping others, and altruism. In five studies of adolescents (N = 2,198; aged 11 to 18), Froh et al., found engaged living to be a positive predictor of wellbeing (e.g., positive affect and life satisfaction). Moreover, in the fifth study, engaged living at one time point was found to predict beneficial outcomes (i.e., life satisfaction, gratitude, teacher ratings of student happiness, and pro-social behaviours) three and twelve months later suggesting that engagement leads to beneficial outcomes over time. Froh et al. also found engaged living to predict increased school enjoyment and grade-point average and fewer problematic behaviours as measured by trips to the principal's office, suspensions, and expulsions. Taken together, these studies suggest engagement has important consequences for wellbeing, behaviour, and academic performance.

## ORIENTATIONS TO HAPPINESS AND PERMA

Engagement forms an integral component of Seligman's (2002) authentic happiness model and his (2011) PERMA model. In the authentic happiness model, Seligman proposed that wellbeing can be pursued through three pathways or orientations: pleasure (i.e., sensory experiences); engagement (i.e., involvement in intrinsically motivating challenges); and meaning (i.e., doing things for others, experiencing a sense of purpose). Research has found that all three orientations to happiness are related to wellbeing, with engagement and meaning having the larger effect sizes (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Schueller & Seligman, 2010;

Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009). Furthermore, people high on all three orientations (i.e., those who live a full life) report the highest wellbeing. Recently, Seligman revised his model to also include achievement and relationships (i.e., PERMA) proposing that accomplishing important goals and nurturing positive relationships are as integral to wellbeing as pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Future research that explores the PERMA model empirically, including research in child and adolescent samples, would yield important insight into how the elements of wellbeing contribute to thriving across the life span. However, within each model, engagement forms an essential component of a full and flourishing life.

## ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

In addition to benefits for wellbeing, engagement is believed to lead to effective learning and skill development. Shernoff et al. (2003) propose that engaged students are committed to their learning and are more likely to complete school successfully than disengaged students. An individual who is engaged with an activity (e.g., school subject, sport, or hobby) finds it enjoyable, practices it frequently, and persists despite challenges (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). In turn, the investment of time, energy, and attention leads to the building of skills and resources, resulting in increased capabilities and capacities, and growth overtime. Engagement has been found to be associated with important educational and occupational outcomes (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). For example, students' engagement in high school has been found to predict later motivation, commitment, and performance in tertiary education (Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001). Similarly, in a longitudinal study of 208 high school students, interest (i.e., excitement, involvement, and openness) was found to predict talent development and ratings of performance three years later (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). In contrast, disengaged students are at higher risk of boredom, poor learning performance, alienation, and drop out. Taken together, these results suggest that engagement makes a valuable contribution to positive accomplishment, another essential domain of the model of positive education.

## PATHWAYS TO ENGAGEMENT

There is substantial evidence that engagement is associated with wellbeing, learning, and the accomplishment of important goals. Therefore, creating school environments and systems that cultivate and foster engagement is a worthwhile endeavour. This review will focus on three fields of research that help to create positive engagement: cultivating flow, nurturing intrinsic motivation, and applying signature strengths. Importantly, student engagement is believed to result

from an interaction between individual factors (e.g., motivation, strengths, personality) and environmental factors (e.g., supportive classrooms, effective student-teacher relationships) (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008). Therefore, cultivating engagement involves addressing both individual and environmental factors (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005)

## CULTIVATING FLOW

Flow is defined as a feeling of peak experience that occurs when an individual is engaged in a challenging and intrinsically motivating task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi's initial conceptualisations of flow came from interviews with artists, musicians, sportspeople, and chess players, where they explained their experiences of single-minded immersion when engaged in their favourite pursuits. Subsequent research in flow has utilised the experience sampling method (ESM) which involves using a signal device (e.g., pager) to prompt individuals to reflect on their current experience (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). The ESM avoids biases associated with retrospective reporting and creates a comprehensive picture of daily experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997) proposed 9 features of the state of flow: (1) task-challenge balance; (2) feeling of oneness with the activity or merging or action and awareness; (3) clear goals; (4) clear and immediate feedback; (5) concentration and absorption; (6) a sense of control; (7) loss of self-consciousness or awareness; (8) decreased awareness of time; and (9) a task that is valued and intrinsically motivating or autotelic. An essential element of flow is the appropriate match between skill level and the task challenge so that skills are stretched but not overmatched (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). A mismatch between task challenge and skill level can lead to anxiety (i.e., low skill, high challenge), relaxation (i.e., high skill, low challenge), or apathy (i.e., low skill, low challenge). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) propose that flow activities are inherently rewarding and enjoyable and should be pursued for their own sake. Furthermore, there is evidence that flow has meaningful and important benefits such as increased experience of positive affect (Rogatko, 2009) and decreased procrastination (Lee, 2005). Strategies for cultivating flow include noticing and making time for flow activities and re-crafting activities to create an appropriate match between skill and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Shernoff et al., (2003) investigated the conditions that foster flow in classroom settings in a longitudinal study of 526 adolescents. Shernoff et al. found that flow was more likely to occur during experiential and interactive activities (e.g., group work, discussions) than passive activities (e.g., watching lectures or videos). Shernoff et al. also recommended strategies for creating matches between student skill levels and task challenge such as: providing choice between various activities; setting clear goals and

expectations; teaching skills in an incremental way; and providing regular and specific feedback.

There is evidence that teachers' experience of flow and engagement influences their students' experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997). In a study of 178 music teachers and their students (N = 605), Bakker (2005) found that teachers' experience of flow, intrinsic motivation, and engagement were related to students' experiences of enjoyment and absorption. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997) propose three strategies for cultivating teacher engagement: (a) encourage staff to continue to nurture and cultivate their own passions and interests; (b) focus more on the intrinsic rewards of learning (e.g., satisfaction in acquiring new information) than external rewards such as grades or competitions; and (c) provide mastery or learning feedback versus performance or outcome feedback (see the positive accomplishment module for more information). In sum, research suggests that enthusiastic, genuine, and inspiring teachers help create students who are engaged and interested in learning.

## INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, humans have three innate needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence concerns the belief that one can bring about desired effects and outcomes through their actions. Autonomy involves having the ability to make choices that are consistent with one's values and desires. Relatedness (also called belonging) is a sense of connection and closeness to others. Fulfilment of the needs of competence, autonomy, and belonging is believed to lead to intrinsic motivation, or the drive to seek out new challenges, engage with activities, and learn and grow (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students who are intrinsically motivated find tasks inherently enjoyable and rewarding. In contrast, extrinsic motivation occurs when performance and effort result from outside forces such as rewards or the desire to please others (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

The pursuit of intrinsically motivated goals is related to improved wellbeing and mental health (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Meeting individuals' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence has been found to be associated with enhanced wellbeing and reduced psychological distress (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). For example, Van Ryzin, Gravely, and Roseth (2009) studied self-determination theory and engagement in a sample of 283 adolescence over a five-month period and found that autonomy and belongingness had independent effects on learning, engagement, and psychological adjustment. The authors suggest that students who perceive their learning environments as supportive and nurturing experience higher engagement and wellbeing than those who do not.





In order to cultivate intrinsic motivation, it is important to create classrooms that support students' needs for autonomy, belongingness, and competence (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). Strategies for fostering autonomy include listening to students, allowing choice and self-direction, and providing a rationale for tasks and activities (Radel, Sarrazin, Legrain, & Wild, 2010). Belongingness can be fostered through nurturing peer and staff-student relationships and by implementing specific structures that foster positive relationships such as mentoring and tutoring programs (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). Exploring and cultivating strengths is a valuable way of ensuring students feel competent and efficacious thereby increasing the likelihood they will be intrinsically motivated and engaged.

There is evidence that teachers' intrinsic motivation influences students' engagement. In a study of 91 students, Radel et al. (2010) found that students who believed a physical education teacher to be intrinsically motivated (i.e., volunteering to take the class) were more interested and involved than students who believed the teacher to be extrinsically motivated (i.e., motivated by payment). The authors propose a model of social contagion whereby teacher motivation influences student experience. Bakker (2005) recommends ensuring teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and social support are met in order to cultivate both teacher and student engagement.

## UNDERSTANDING AND USING INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER STRENGTHS

It is proposed that understanding, exploring, and applying signature strengths is an important pathway to engagement. Strengths are defined as "a 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, p. 88). Attending to students' unique strengths and passions is an invaluable way of encouraging fit with subjects and extracurricular activities (Reschly et al., 2008). Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997) credit teachers with the ability to recognise talents and strengths that students may not be aware of, potentially leading to the cultivation of new areas of interest and passion. Similarly, Wesson and Boniwell (2007) propose that using a strengths approach can lead to flow as improved awareness of strengths can enhance individuals' perceptions of their skills thereby increasing the likelihood of challenge-skill congruence.

The benefits of a strengths approach for student commitment to learning has been empirically supported. For example, Austin (2005) conducted a study where 524 students were allocated to a six weeks strengths

condition or a control condition whereby they took part in the standard curriculum. Students allocated to the strengths condition explored their top five strengths, wrote about their strengths, and shared their strengths with friends and families. Austin found that students allocated to the strengths condition displayed significantly higher perceptions of ability, efficacy, and motivation than students allocated to the control condition. Overall, cultivating and nurturing strengths and interests is believed to be an important pathway to engagement. More information on the benefits of exploring and using strengths is provided in the strengths module.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Helping students to live lives high on concentration, interest, and enjoyment is an essential element of the model of positive education. According to Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997), classrooms flourish as learning environments when teachers and students are engaged, curious, and motivated. As well as being a valued outcome in its own right, engagement is an important predictor of wellbeing and mental health (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Furthermore, engagement fosters development and growth as individuals invest time in worthwhile activities, learn new skills, and build resources for future success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, an imperative aim is to create school environments that cultivate engagement, interest, and absorption. Flow can be fostered by facilitating a match between skill and challenge, setting clear goals, and providing frequent feedback (Shernoff et al., 2003). Supporting students' needs for relatedness, autonomy, and belonging can lead to students taking part in activities because they want to, not because they have to (Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001). Similarly, helping students to explore and apply their strengths creates pathways towards activities that are consistent with their values and interests.

Research suggests that the teacher-student relationship has an especially powerful influence on student engagement and intrinsic motivation (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009). Therefore, supporting teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and encouraging them to cultivate their own interests and passions, is integral to creating engaging learning environments. Overall, it is proposed that helping all members of the school community to become engaged in worthwhile, challenging, and intrinsically motivating pursuits equips them to thrive in the present and the future.



## REFERENCES

- Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Check & Connect: The importance of relationships for promoting engagement with school. *Journal of School Psychology, 42*, 95-113.
- Austin, D. B. (2005). The effects of a strengths development intervention program upon the self-perception of students' academic abilities. Dissertation Abstracts International, 66(05), 1631A. (UMI No. 3175080).
- Bakker, A. B. (2005). Flow among music teachers and their students: The crossover of peak experiences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 66*, 26-44.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K., & Whalen, S. (1997). Schools, teachers and talent development. In M. Csikszentmihalyi, K. Rathunde & S. Whalen (Eds.), *Talented teachers: The roots of success and failure* (pp. 177-196). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Froh, J. J., et al. (2010). The benefits of passion and absorption in activities: Engaged living in adolescents and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 311-332.
- Hunter, J. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2003). The positive psychology of interested adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*, 27-35.
- Kashdan, T. B., Rose, P., & Fincham, F. D. (2004). Curiosity and exploration: Facilitating positive subjective experiences and personal growth opportunities. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 82*, 291-305.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22*, 280-287.
- Larson, R., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1983). The Experience Sampling Method. *New Directions for Methodology of Social & Behavioral Science, 15*, 41-56.
- Lee, E. (2005). The relationship of motivation and flow experience to academic procrastination in university students. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 166*, 5-15.
- Linley, A., & Harrington, S. (2006). Playing to your strengths. *Psychologist, 19*, 86-89.
- Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2005). The concept of flow. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 89-105). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ntoumanis, N., & Standage, M. (2009). Motivation in physical education classes. *Theory and Research in Education, 7*, 194-202.
- Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 6*, 25-41.
- Radel, R., Sarrazin, P., Legrain, P., & Wild, T. C. (2010). Social contagion of motivation between teacher and student: Analyzing underlying processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*, 577-587.
- Rathunde, K., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1993). Undivided interest and the growth of talent: A longitudinal study of adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 22*, 385-405.
- Reis, H. T., Sheldon, K. M., Gable, S. L., Roscoe, J., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Daily well-being: The role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26*, 419-435.
- Reschly, A. L., Huebner, E. S., Appleton, J. J., & Antaramian, S. (2008). Engagement as flourishing: The contribution of positive emotions and coping to adolescents' engagement at school and with learning. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*, 419-431.
- Rogatko, T. P. (2009). The influence of flow on positive affect in college students. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 10*, 133-148.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*, 68-78.
- Schueller, S. M., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2010). Pursuit of pleasure, engagement, and meaning: Relationships to subjective and objective measures of well-being. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 253-263.



Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1, 73-82.

Sherhoff, D. J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Schneider, B., & Sherhoff, E. S. (2003). Student engagement in high school classrooms from the perspective of flow theory. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 18, 158-176.

Sherhoff, D. J., & Hoogstra, L. (2001). Continuing motivation beyond the high school classroom. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2001, 73-88.

Vallerand, R. J., et al. (2003). Les passions de l'âme: On obsessive and harmonious passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 756-767.

Van Ryzin, M. J., Gravely, A. A., & Roseth, C. J. (2009). Autonomy, belongingness, and engagement in school as contributors to adolescent psychological well-being. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 1-12.

Vella-Brodrick, D. A., Park, N. A., & Peterson, C. (2009). Three ways to be happy: Pleasure, engagement and meaning - findings from Australian and US samples. *Social Indicators Research*, 90, 165-179.

Wesson, K., & Boniwell, I. (2007). Flow theory – its application to coaching psychology. *Coaching Psychology Review*, 2, 33-43.



GEELONG GRAMMAR SCHOOL®  
EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATION

INSTITUTE OF  
**POSITIVE  
EDUCATION**