

Growing the Future Growers in the Garden of Positive Education

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Australia is home to some of the world's most forward-looking innovations in education. And no single group is spreading the evidence-base, the science, and what I call the *living proof* of it all more than Dr Mathew White at St Peter's College – Adelaide, an Associate Professor and Principal Fellow the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne and the School's Headmaster, Simon Murray. Together with their colleagues from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, associates from around the world, and most important of all, the student leaders leading the transformation, this team caught my attention with their first book *Evidence-based Approaches to Positive Education: Implementing a Strategic Framework for Well-Being in Schools*. That book set the standard of excellence for a nascent field-in-the-making: it modeled exactly how theory and practice, as one unified and integral whole, might well be the number one success factor in realizing, long term, the vast potential of this, a positive revolution in education.

Between that first book and now this remarkable volume, *Future Directions in Well-being Education, Organizations, Policy* edited by Dr Mathew White, Dr Gavin Slemp, lecturer from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne and Simon Murray, I found myself wandering beyond the data. I felt hope; I felt inspiration; and I felt a sense of joy. I thought about the pervasive reach of 21st century education, the more than two billion children and youth in our world's schools, and the call of our times. Beyond humanity's grand challenges, I also reflected on what a prolific time it is to be alive in the human sciences— unparalleled breakthroughs occurring in everything from brain neuroscience and the human science turn toward a psychology of human flourishing, to the digital opportunities for sharing, spreading, and scaling new knowledge through exponential technologies of worldwide connectivity. My conclusion:

We have an unprecedented opportunity in human history to create educational systems that lead to *full spectrum flourishing*, that is, the development of our highest and best potentials in human, societal, economic, technical, ecological, and spiritual ways. We've never had more knowledge and resources for

the fulfilment of academic achievement and for realizing the life skills for attaining overall well-being. “Education is not preparation for life” said the great thinker John Dewey, “education is life itself.”

A major transformation is under way—and it has been for nearly three decades now—in our understanding of human development and education for the good life, for thriving, for advancing human well-being and for elevating every child’s signature strengths. Yet all of this is largely unnoticed by much of the world. How many teachers, for example as part of their training, have been exposed to the genius of Barbara Frederickson’s science on the cognitive power of positive emotions such as hope, inspiration, love of learning, and joy and, instead of just eliminating negative anger and fear and anxiety, how to cultivate more of the beneficial positive emotions in our lives, our learning designs, and our growth-promoting relationships?¹ How many have seen the double-blind, gold standard research that shows that the rising rates of depression and suicide among our youth can be reversed and dealt with, and with more long-term efficacy than anything pharmacologically, if teachers are able to see and lift up each child’s signature character strengths, and then discover ways to play to those strengths, enable their expression, and apply them in fresh and creative ways both academically and in extracurricular activities? How many have been exposed to the concepts of “growth mindsets vs. fixed mindsets” or the concepts of “grit” and “learned optimism” instead of learned helplessness, especially as these relate to learning? How many have the skills to apply P.E.R.M.A to the classroom and school system-wide culture—the acronym today is known as the great summing up of a decades-long scientific quest into the foundational elements of individual and collective flourishing—in ways that not only will help each child realize the best version of themselves, but can activate advances in learning, in math, reading, writing, and everything we traditionally teach as academics.² And how many have seen the new, second-generation applications of the science of character strengths, where recently I’ve personally pre-viewed over 73 positive interventions, for cultivating the human strengths of love of learning, social intelligence, courage, leadership, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, fairness, bravery, zest, perspective, humility, and more?

Indeed, Harvard’s Howard Gardner looked at all of this—this eruption of new knowledge on how to advance human happiness, well-being, and lives marked by high levels of psychological strength and flourishing—and called the whole of it, quite simply, “the most important advance in psychology of the past half-century.”³ Why?

¹ Fredrickson, B. L. (2003). The value of positive emotions. *American Scientist*, 91, 330- 335.

² Seligman, M.E.P. (2010) *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³ Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. (2004). [Character Strengths and Virtues A Handbook and Classification](#). Washington, DC: APA Press and Oxford University Press.

Because it re-constructs how we actively see the world. Change the way you see your life and you change your life. Change the way you see the world and you change the world.

One of the high points in my career happened a few years ago when I had a chance to collaborate with Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, whereupon we gave over 10 speeches together all across Australia. In those talks with business leaders, educators, and government officials he summed up the individual flourishing side of the equation, including the public policy implications of measuring beyond GNP to measuring individual wellbeing, while I spoke about the discovery and design of positive institutions, and the method of Appreciative Inquiry to enable positive organizational and large systems change.⁴ As it turned out, it became what Marty called “a great duet” because much of his work, as does most of psychology, focused heavily on the individual, while my organizational science background had me concentrating on institutions, and large system positive change breakthroughs with whole industries, economic regions, whole cities, and UN World Summits. In one of our evening chats Marty shared how something totally tectonic is happening across the disciplines, and said we need a unity:

“To bring the rich findings of the science of positive psychology to society, we need both: we need the development of thriving at the individual level along with the discovery and design of positive institutions...do you think, David, we could use the large-group Appreciative Inquiry Summit methods with whole school systems, at local and national levels, just as you’ve have shown in the videos of your work building the United Nations Global Compact and enabling systems change at Apple, the Red Cross, and the U.S. Navy?”

With this in the foreground, let me now draw upon three things from that series of speeches that helps to highlight, and celebrate, the big ideas in this volume.

First, as Marty Seligman illustrated in one early exercise, it is clear that we all want to create a flourishing society where everyone is able to fulfill their potential and achieve both success and wellbeing. Every institution in society, he proposed, has a moral obligation to promote human flourishing, and none more so than those responsible for educating young people, in everything from early childhood to our schools of higher education.

⁴ Cooperrider, D., and Godwin, L., 2011 Positive Organization Development: Innovation Inspired Change in an Economy and Ecology of Strengths. In Oxford *Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*. Kim Cameron and Gretchen Spreitzer (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 737-750.

And the subsequent exercise was telling. He invited everyone to place themselves into the role of a parent and to turn to the person next to them and to ask “as parents, what do you most wish for and desire for your child—what you want most for them as you look to *their* future?” The answers were consistent and revealing: “I wish for their long-term health and happiness” and “I pray for them to have loving relationships and good families” and “I want them to have a life of meaning and value, and purpose” and “I want them to be a good person, someone respected, and someone who is content and feels good about themselves.” And then, with this rapidly expanding list of like-minded thoughts and hopes, Marty asked everyone: “How many of these things—happiness, well-being, personal character development, etc.— are being taught in our schools, and if not, *why not* when in fact this is what we truly want for our children and grandchildren, and even more importantly, why are we not teaching for well-being when the new science, and tools for teaching these skills, are now so prolific?”

So, as you read this book think about the enormous potential of it all, and how, as this book demonstrates with case studies and empirical research, positive education is ready to go prime time—as long as we approach it as a work in progress, as a search for what works, and an ongoing inquiry as opposed to a closed system. What is positive education? Positive education, as the authors of this book define it, aims to create educational environments that enable the students to engage in the established curricula, and also to learn the knowledge and skills that will develop their own and others’ well-being. Moreover, as Mathew White defines it, there is the rigorous research and scientific dimension: “Positive Education” writes Mathew White, “is an umbrella term used to describe empirically validated interventions and programs from positive psychology that have an impact on student well-being.”

Second, the data-base is mounting: this volume extends what Marty Seligman, a careful scientist, has concluded from his pioneering research. In a nutshell, this is what can be said with clarity; he said: “more well-being is synergistic with better learning.” A combined focus on academics and human betterment is not about trade-offs. This volume builds upon the evidence base, but in my reading, goes even further. I call it education’s *great tradeoff illusion*—something positive education often faces whenever people see it as a “bolted on” sideline to an already overflowing academic agenda. And this book simply shatters this great tradeoff illusion. Increased sense of well-being in students, the authors of this volume show, has been linked to better learning outcomes, subsequent employment success, economic participation and empowerment, overall health, increased love of learning, decreases in risky behaviors, and more. I found myself and perhaps you too are asking how could it not be so? Is there a single study that shows, for example the opposite: that rising rates of depression, thoughts of suicide, and the growing mental illnesses among our youth strengthens academic success? Of course, it’s a rhetorical question. Learning for flourishing and flourishing for learning are conceptually allied and intimately

threaded and are, as this book underscores, best viewed as one inseparable and embedded whole. Feeling good about one's total life-space and future prospects, having life-giving instead of toxic relationships with others, experiencing a deeper sense of calling and purpose for something greater than the self, elevating and engaging signature strengths, being able to focus to the point of flow, having persistence in the quest for achievement, and having a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset that nothing can change—all of these are pure plays, not *incidental derivatives*, for long-term educational attainment aligned with a life of intrinsic well-being.

For me that's one of the fascinating hidden gems to emerge in this volume. Instead of *bolted-on positive education* the true North Star needs to be what we might term *embedded positive education*. Embedded positive education is the incorporation of positive education in the classroom, the school system, and the so-called "external system" of family and community interfaces, with no trade off-in academic excellence. As a professor in the field of management I'm having déjà vu with the early days of the quality revolution. In almost every major corporation—from General Motors to Royal Dutch Shell, and from Toyota to Rio Tinto—the call for quality was, at one time, totally at odds with the quest to eliminate costs. It was seemingly true for many years, that is, until the Japanese did a complete reframe. They asked, essentially this: "How might we turn the quest for quality into an innovation engine to dramatically drive out costs—to lift both, to achieve synergy, to enable unprecedented innovation?" Total quality and decreased costs? It was an oxymoron. At the time this question was totally heretical. Everyone "knew it" quality would always cost more. But the new question and *the new intention* was placed front and center and we all know what happened. Imaginative possibilities were designed and discovered, in breakthrough ways, and soon mainstreamed. The Japanese caused a worldwide paradigm shift. Old manufacturing mindsets, the ones that did not change, were put out of business. Companies that chose one over the other in either/or fashion felt the enormity of creative disruption. In many ways, we live in worlds our questions create, and in this case even the question eclipsed the great tradeoff illusion. That's what I see this volume doing: it insists in seeing the unity, and it calls the positive education field to also study, weigh in on, and prioritize academic achievement with the same passion and rigor as it pursues optimal human development and wellbeing.

So thirdly, this book directly addresses the pragmatic question that's on everyone's minds. It's about managing change. It's about scaling up excellence. It asks the question: is it about evolution or revolution in our educational institutions? And it's saying we need to unite positive education with systems science, an interdisciplinary field that studies the nature of systems in this case the whole system of education from public policy to strategy, and from national governance to decision making locally. It's also something Marty and me, as mentioned earlier, focused on in our speeches together. Positive psychology is the scientific study of what Aristotle called the good

life—what is it, where is it happening and what nurtures it—including the strengths and systems that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field was founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves and others, and to enhance their experiences of love, work and play. Positive psychology, at the founding stages, zeroed in on three central pillars of concern: the study of positive human experience; the identification of positive individual traits and strengths; and the discovery and design of “positive institutions.” Yet it is the later, the third pillar, that’s been conspicuously absent from positive education field, that is, until now.

One of the great achievements of this book is that it takes it all on. The success of positive education requires systems science, organization development, and systemic change. How many of our schools, in the spirit of advancing positive education, are also questing to become positive institutions? How many know what that means—for example Harvard has called them “deeply developmental organizations” while like-minded studies into best places to work point to the ideal of “the fully human organization” -- and how to get there? A simple example illuminates the stakes. I was recently working with the Urban School Food Alliance across the United States with the Los Angeles schools, New York city schools, Miami Dade Schools, Chicago Public Schools, and more. Prior to the work I read dozens of reports on the state of our urban public schools and the themes were not surprising: budget cut after budget cut; buildings in decay; teachers without voice at the planning table; state and national governance regulations and local union-management conflicts, teachers with rising levels of stress and disengagement with the institution; feelings of quiet despair that “nothing is going to get better anytime soon” and, perhaps because of complex conditions, there were signs of growing mistrust in leaders with many of them “increasingly toxic to be around.” In one of those city systems, school dropout rates were alarming, and only 19% of the high school children were passing the state’s basic proficiency tests in math and reading (in comparison the suburban school in the area had a 99% proficiency test success instead of failure rate.) I was heartsick: “What’s happening to this whole generation of kids?” And then I remembered one of the findings in my early PhD. dissertation research in hospitals years ago. It really spoke to one of the profound dynamics of systems. Like many hospitals, at least years ago, the nurses were often treated badly by the doctors—with arrogance, impatience, and constant critique, not compassion and care. But the finding was how this dynamic, just like a virus flowing through a network, found its way to the patient.⁵ There was an isomorphic relationship: the nurses mirrored, in their relationships with patients, the same qualities they experienced with their physician superiors. They were impatient and quick, often critical of the patients, and cold—just the opposite of compassionate. And I

⁵ Cooperrider, D. (1986). *Appreciative inquiry: Toward a methodology for understanding and enhancing organizational innovation*. Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH. Ann Arbor Michigan: University Microfilms. <http://www.davidcooperrider.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Dissertation-Cooperriders-1985.pdf>

saw much of the same dynamic in these schools, in our difficult and often organizationally dysfunctional urban school systems. So maybe it's obvious, but the question must be asked: how can we expect positive education to excel and thrive in organizational and systems contexts that are negative, life-depleting, ineffective, and dysfunctional?

The proposition of this book is clear: positive education will excel only when we think holistically and systemically and think not just about the garden of the individual mind, but the living garden of the whole. Mahatma Gandhi had a legacy of powerful words and there is one that's become dear to gardeners: "To forget how to dig the earth and to tend the soil is to forget ourselves."

When was the last time you stopped to really ponder that adage and consider the ways the entire garden of education—from parents and family, to the school system as a whole, including the community and nature—has a ripple effect, affecting all parts of the educational ecosystem, and shaping the course of the future? If we aim to better positive education, our schools, and the world at large, then it's worth looking beyond the "what" of positive education content to get to the "how?" Should you need some inspiration, look no further than this book, and the stories of the real leaders driving the changes and positive education initiatives at St Peter's College – Adelaide — it was the students! And the planning process they used required courage. They believed in people. They believed that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. They believed in tending to the whole diverse garden. They believed that there needs to be a congruence between the means and ends of positive education, that strengths-based character development would require strengths-based organization development.

While it is beyond this foreword to delve into it, what the student leaders chose to do was to bring the whole-system-into-the-room using some of best we know about large-group planning, the kind that leads to the discovery and design of positive institutions. Today an entire field has emerged transforming how we convene and bring out the best in collective planning—it's called "large group methods" of positive organization development-- and one of those planning methods is the large group Appreciative Inquiry Summit.⁶ The "AI Summit" is a whole-system-in-the room planning methodology tailored for this, the age of collaboration. It is a strengths-based method used by whole cities, UN World Summits, entire industries, and some of the most advanced corporations in the world, such as Apple, Unilever, Whole Foods, and Johnson and Johnson, as well as NGOs from the Red Cross to Save the Children. A recent UN Leaders Report singled out the AI Summit and simply called it "the best large group method in the world today." Today AI's approach to strengths-inspired,

⁶ Cooperrider, DL, and McQuaid, M. (2013) The Positive Arc of Systemic Strengths. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, Vol. 46.

instead of problematizing change, is being practiced everywhere: the corporate world, the world of public service, of economics, of education, of faith, of philanthropy, and social science scholarship—it is affecting them all.⁷ The AI Summit a large group strategic planning, designing or implementation meeting that brings a whole system of 300 to 2,000 or more internal and external stakeholders together in a concentrated way to work on a task of strategic, and especially systemic, importance. Moreover, it is a roll-up-the-sleeves 2.5 to 3-day co-design session where all relevant and affected stakeholders are engaged as co-designers to share leadership, create and alignment of strengths, and take ownership for making the future of some epic opportunity successful. The meeting appears bold at first—but St Peter's had the courage to do it—and it is based on a simple notion: when it comes to system-wide innovation and integration, there is nothing that brings out the best in human systems—faster, more consistently and more effectively—than the power of 'the whole'—bringing together every group that has a solid stake in the task. University of Michigan's Bob Quinn said in his book *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Results* "Appreciative Inquiry is revolutionizing the field of organization development and change." You can imagine how courageous it is, for example imagine the "whole system" principle in a trucking company: you would have dock workers; truck drivers; senior executives; every level and function from finance to the warehouse; and you would have every key external stakeholder, including customers, community leaders, and supplier partners.

And this is what the student leaders of St Peter's College – Adelaide did. They led the way creating a culture, an organizational soil, and an eco-system of wellbeing—where positive education would not be a bolt on, but an embedded reality. If you read nothing else in this fine book read every line of Chapter 2 by two student leaders, Alasdair McCall and Sam Beer. They speak eloquently about their own transformations and young leaders: development of leadership confidence and the power of ideas; rising awareness of not only the importance of but the ways to create extraordinary teams and high quality connections; more capability for rallying others for a new and better future; new skills in the art of the question; sensitivity to how we make disproportionate impact on the lives of others; skills for taking ownership of the positive education learning and applying those at home and in the community; and how to give back to society. They state: "For example, as student leaders we have been more intent on our focus on relationships and set positive goals for our community to accomplish. This has made a significant difference on the effectiveness of leadership across the student body." And then they, the students took their passion to a national level bringing 116 other schools and school leaders to St Peter's for the first in a

⁷ Cooperrider, D. (2013) A Contemporary Commentary on Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life. In Cooperrider, D.L et. al (2013) Organizational Generativity: The Appreciative Inquiry Summit and a Scholarship of Transformation. Volume #4 in *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

series of “National Student Leadership Summits.” They write: “Thanks to these Leadership Summits, these small changes within St Peter’s College have resulted in large-scale growth in other student leadership techniques all across Australia, with more schools across Australia and in Norther Adelaide, starting up their very own leadership summits, adopting the techniques and ideas we have share with them and teaching these to more of their students...ultimately, this evolution derived from the implementation of a positive education and Well-being program that has created important change.”

That’s why I titled this foreword the way I did: *Growing the Future Growers in the Garden of Positive Education*. I spoke with these students. They were on fire. They were alive. They were learning by doing. They were building an ecosystem, a culture, and a positive institution. And in speaking with them I found myself wanting to see them share their story far and wide. I *felt* the far-reaching potential and vast vistas for positive education in ways I had never imagined. I was reminded of the idea that education is not preparation for life but is life. I heard them beaming, all the way from around the world.

And then the words of the great Spanish Cellist, Pablo Casals flashed in my mind’s eye:

“What we should be teaching them is what they are. We should be saying:

Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the world, there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed, there has never been another child exactly like you. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything.

Yes, you are a marvel.”

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David L. Cooperrider, PhD, is a University Distinguished Professor and holds the Fairmount Santrol - David L. Cooperrider Professorship in Appreciative Inquiry at the Weatherhead School of Management, *Case Western Reserve University*, where he is the faculty founder of the Fowler Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit. David is also the Honorary Chairman of *Champlain College’s* David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at the *Robert P. Stiller School of Business*.

David is best known for his original theoretical articulation of “AI” or Appreciative Inquiry with his mentor Suresh Srivastva. Today AI’s approach to strengths-inspired, instead of problematizing change, is being practiced everywhere: the corporate world, the world of public service, of economics, of education, of faith, of philanthropy, and social science scholarship—it is affecting them all. Jane Nelson, at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Leadership recently wrote, “David Cooperrider is one of the outstanding scholar-practitioners of our generation.”

David has served as advisor to prominent leaders in business and society, including projects with five Presidents and/or Nobel Laureates such as William Jefferson Clinton, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Kofi Annan, and Jimmy Carter. David advises a wide variety of corporations including Apple, Johnson & Johnson, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Verizon, Hunter Douglas, Cleveland Clinic, National Grid, Smuckers, Clarke, Fairmount Minerals, McKinsey, Parker, Dealer Tire, and Wal-Mart as well as the Navy, Red Cross, United Way of America, USAID, United Nations, and hundreds of international private voluntary organizations (the GEM project.) David is also a founding Board Member of the Taos Institute and the International Association of Positive Psychology.

David has published 25 books and authored over 100 articles and book chapters. He has served as editor of both the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* with Ron Fry and the current academic research 4-volume series on *Advances for Appreciative Inquiry*, with Michel Avital. In 2010 David was honored with the Peter F. Drucker Distinguished Fellow award. David’s books include *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (with Diana Whitney); *The Organization Dimensions of Global Change* (with Jane Dutton); *Organizational Courage and Executive Wisdom* (with Suresh Srivastva); and *The Strengths-based Leadership Handbook* (with Brun & Ejsing.) David’s work has received many of awards including *Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning* by ASTD; the *Porter Award* for Best writing in the field of Organization Development and the Aspen Institute Faculty Pioneer Award. In 2016 David was named as one of the nation’s top thought leaders by Trust Across America, and honored as one of “AACSB’s Most Influential Leaders.”

In the highest recognition, Champlain College’s Stiller School of Business honored David’s impact with an academic center in his name. Opened in 2014 it is called the *David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry*, and David serves as its Honorary Chair. For the center’s dedication Professor Marty Seligman, the father of the positive psychology movement wrote: “David Cooperrider is a giant: a giant of discovery, a giant of dissemination, and a giant of generosity.” Likewise Jane Dutton, former President of the Academy of Management said, “David Cooperrider is changing the world with his ideas and who he is as a person. There are few who combine such insight, inspiration and energy.”