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Character education: A role for literature in cultivating character strengths

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A Capstone Project Submitted In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: James O. Pawelski
August 1, 2013

Character education: A role for literature in cultivating character strengths

Abstract

Positive psychology is devoted to studying the flourishing human life beyond the mere absence of illness. The ability to know, measure and cultivate those elements that contribute to such a life is transforming many fields. The emerging applied field of positive education is using the findings of positive psychology to more effectively educate for psychological well-being alongside that of traditional academic learning. One crucial area of study in positive psychology is character strengths. Individuals who are not only cognizant of their strength profile but also use their strengths daily are happier, higher achieving, more resilient and more satisfied with their lives. These findings give new life and scope to what schools might call "character education". This paper argues that by cleverly capitalizing on the existing skills of regular classroom teachers all schools, regardless of their human and financial resources, location or demography, can begin embedding principles of positive psychology. Accessible, empirically-based, and well-integrated curricula are needed to bring to scale the work of positive psychology. We need to promote robust, cross-curricular learning in our students *and* better equip regular classroom teachers for the task. English literature, by virtue of its content and pedagogy, presents a rich opportunity for an innovative model. Learning about character strengths through literature provides a medium for robust debate, higher-order understanding and personal reflection and cultivation. More than merely achieving the agenda of positive education, the science of well-being also has a great deal to offer our study of literature. Using character strengths in our literature study can enrich the analytical process. After providing an empirical and theoretical base, this paper offers a sample unit of work on the strength of hope. Designed for an upper-secondary English classroom, it vitally demonstrates that a rich focus on well-being in literature need not come at the expense of academic rigor, deep ethical and emotional competencies or analytical essay writing.

Character education:
A role for literature in cultivating character strengths in adolescence

Emily Margaret FitzSimons

University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology is devoted to studying the flourishing human life beyond the mere absence of illness. The ability to know, measure and cultivate those elements that contribute to such a life is transforming many fields. The emerging applied field of positive education is using the findings of positive psychology to more effectively educate for psychological well-being alongside that of traditional academic learning. One crucial area of study in positive psychology is character strengths. Individuals who are not only cognizant of their strength profile but also use their strengths daily are happier, higher achieving, more resilient and more satisfied with their lives. These findings give new life and scope to what schools might call "character education". This paper argues that by cleverly capitalizing on the existing skills of regular classroom teachers all schools, regardless of their human and financial resources, location or demography, can begin embedding principles of positive psychology. Accessible, empirically-based, and well-integrated curricula are needed to bring to scale the work of positive psychology. We need to promote robust, cross-curricular learning in our students *and* better equip regular classroom teachers for the task. English literature, by virtue of its content and pedagogy, presents a rich opportunity for an innovative model. Learning about character strengths through literature provides a medium for robust debate, higher-order understanding and personal reflection and cultivation. More than merely achieving the agenda of positive education, the science of well-being also has a great deal to offer our study of literature. Using character strengths in our literature study can enrich the analytical process. After providing an empirical and theoretical base, this paper offers a sample unit of work on the strength of hope. Designed for an upper-secondary English classroom, it vitally demonstrates that a rich focus on well-being in literature need not come at the expense of academic rigor, deep ethical and emotional competencies or analytical essay writing.

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Character education:

A role for literature in cultivating character strengths in adolescence

1. Introduction: What is positive psychology?

> *"Our mission is to … reorient our science and practice toward human*
>
> *strength. In this way, we can learn to identify and understand the traits and*
>
> *underpinnings of preventive psychological health and, most importantly,*
>
> *learn how to foster such traits in young people".* (Seligman, 1998, p. 561)

In his 1998 address as President of the American Psychological Association, Martin E.P. Seligman heralded a new era in psychology. Arguing that traditional psychology's focus on pathology and curing ills wass limited in its scope, Seligman suggested we should re-align our attention to also explore what makes life worth living and identify enabling conditions of that life, both in individuals and communities (Seligman, 2011, p. 1). That is, we could study and cultivate an authentic state of human flourishing over and above the absence of psychological deficits (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Positive psychology's aim is certainly not the denial of the distressing, unpleasant, or negative aspects of life but to *also* study the alternatives such as people's positive emotions and the creation of healthy families and institutions. In so doing we are addressing the full spectrum of human experience (Gable & Haidt, 2005), including the unique positive characteristics of the individual and the maximizing of potential (Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004). In a seminal issue of *American Psychologist*, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for the scientific study of the building of positive qualities, strengths and virtues. More specifically, they sought a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology, then, is the study of those conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of

people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). The field is impelled by an interest in finding out what is *right* with individuals and a focus on human potentials, motives, hopes and capacities (Sheldon & King, 2001). As an apt metaphor for the new pursuit, "we can either curse the darkness, or light a candle" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 203).

Of course, the interest in human well-being and what constitutes a good life is not new. Much of the contemporary literature on happiness begins with a discussion of Aristotle's 4th Century B.C. *Nicomachean Ethics* (for example, Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011). In it, Aristotle argues that happiness is both inherent in, and a result of virtuous behaviour. This behaviour is not innate but something learned or acquired throughout life and is reflected in good character (Aristotle, 2000). He defines "virtue" as the mean between two extremes of behaviour, one of excess and the other of deficit. So, for example, we arrive at courage somewhere between cowardice and rashness. Of particular relevance for the field of positive psychology is the relationship between virtuous behaviour and happiness, or *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, happiness is "activity in accordance with virtue" (2000, p. 194). As another early example of the interest in well-being, at the dawn of the 20th Century philosopher William James argued for a new focus on what he termed "healthy mindedness" (1985). In contrast to many other psychologists and theologians of his time James suggested that, rather than happiness emerging as we learn to endure negative experiences, humans have the ability to *see* the world and themselves differently. Stemming from his writings on religion and the place of evil in the world, James says that the healthy-minded person "looks on all things and sees that they are good" (1985, p. 79), rather than exclusively seeing peril and misery in the world. Despite such examples of well-being scholarship, the prevailing focus in psychology since World War Two has been negative. It was, and still is, a science often focused on repairing damage within a disease-shaped model of human functioning. There have been, of course, significant achievements in this world of healing but such

victories have come at a considerable cost, according to Martin Seligman: "when we became solely a healing profession, we forgot our larger mission: that of making the lives of *all* people better" (Seligman, 1998, p. 561). So, positive psychology has grown, in no small part, from the recognition of this imbalance in clinical psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

To study and cultivate well-being, its operationalization is critical. No single measure can adequately capture all that we mean by well-being. Instead, psychologists and other researchers are now working on defining and measuring the various *elements* of human well-being and finding ways to cultivate them (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's operationalization is one model, or way of conceiving of well-being, that has emerged in recent years. It began as an articulation of three possible pathways to the flourishing life; what constitutes the *pleasant* life, including hedonic theories of happiness and positive emotion (Seligman, 2002); the *engaged* life, ot the pursuit of involvement and absorption in work, relationships and leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2002); and the *meaningful* life, that pivots on using one's signature strengths and talents to belong to and serve something bigger than the self (Seligman, 2002). Overall, he contends that people can achieve happiness by identifying their individual virtues, cultivating them, and living in accordance with them (Seligman, 2002). Happiness is not only focused on an ephemeral present, either. Striving for the pleasant, engaged and meaningful life centers on subjective human experience and a satisfaction with life in the past and present, *plus* our hopes for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). More recent work tends to build on these core pathways, including Seligman's newer framework in which he argues that human well-being is a function of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and a sense of accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). The framework is often shortened to the acronym PERMA.

From such beginnings we can see that, rather than being a singular or narrow topic, positive psychology functions as an umbrella term. It unites the study of many elements that promote human flourishing as well as the relationship between psychological well-being and various physical and behavioural correlates. For example positive psychology studies what facilitates happiness, the effects of autonomy on psychological well-being and motivation, how optimism and hope affect health, and how creativity may come to fruition (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It also includes the study of resilience and optimal functioning beyond the realm of psychological research, in fields as diverse as education, business, public health, neuroscience and leadership (Donaldson, 2011). To this end, it is worth briefly outlining the growth and current scope of the field.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman hosted a positive psychology summit in 1999, paving the way for the first international conference in 2002. In January 2000 *American Psychologist* released a special issue focused on happiness. This seminal issue had several main themes including positive experience, positive personality and positive communities and institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, dedicated to both research and practice in the field, began publishing in 2006. To date, over 18,000 documents are identified as belonging to the field of positive psychology, with 2300 being published in 2011 alone, representing over 4% of PsycINFO® documents within the data-set published that year (Rusk & Waters, 2013).

Beyond psychological research, the study of well-being is gaining attention within other sciences. In neuroscience, for example, pioneering work is being done on the neural correlates of well-being (such as Urry et al., 2004). In medicine, well-being's role in physical health and recovery from illness is proving important (for example Scheier et al., 1989). Beyond laboratories, too, well-being is now making tracks into other areas. In fact, 49% of positive psychology-related documents published between 1991 and 2011 came

from fields *outside* of psychology (Rusk & Waters, 2013). These fields included leadership (for example, Rath & Hartner, 2010; Grant, 2013); social science (such as Prilleltensky, 2005); theology (such as Charry, 2011; Pargament, 2002); and, perhaps most notably for this paper, education (for example, Park & Peterson, 2009; Noble & McGrath, 2005) and literature (Pawelski & Moores, 2013; Potkay, 2013a &b). This re-aligning or re-focusing of attention to include what causes individuals and communities to flourish has been termed the "eudaimonic turn" (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). The development of this inter-disciplinary interest in the good life, whilst grounded in scholarly research and theory, is gaining momentum in a range of highly practical applied areas (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). Indeed, many of the concepts within positive psychology, ranging from goal-setting to mindfulness, are not exclusive to the field of psychology but are researched within other disciplines. Diener (2009) argues positive psychology, rather than being an exclusive and discreet domain, is a highly open field that both draws on and feeds research in a diverse range of academic areas. Given such growth within the field and the ever-expanding reach of positive psychology, the organised positive orientation to research, application and scholarship is really just beginning.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss all the many and varied potential applications of positive psychology, but rather to focus on one: character strengths in education. We are starting to understand how positive psychology can revitalise schools and whole education systems (Donaldson, 2011). In an era when depression, anxiety and disillusionment among young people are at record-high levels (Seligman, 2011) schools may be able to *better* promote positive human development. Schools are in a privileged position. They are one of the few institutions with funding, human resources, and a long-term influence in the lives of children and their families (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004). One area for development in education will be school psychology,

that needs to be more proactive rather than reactive (Terjesen et al., 2004). Taking a positive, rather than solely diagnostic approach is needed. As school psychologists work to instil optimism, hope and resilience, they will enhance development of *all* students, not just those traditionally seen as clinical problems in schools. Relatedly, a growing body of literature is in favour of expanding traditional thinking on the delivery of welfare and pastoral care structures in schools (such as Terjesen et al., 2004; Waters, 2011; Biswas-Deiner, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). Curriculum areas usually reserved for academic subjects such as literature, history or religious education may be part of the solution, particularly in the wake of the eudaimonic turn across such disciplines (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). For example, literature and film can be analysed for its exploration of values and character strengths (such as in Niemiec & Wedding, 2008; Potkay, 2013b); poetry's presentation of human emotions and life's journey might help to show what a good life looks like (Potkay, 2013a); and biblical figures may be studied to understand both earthly and eternal concepts of happiness (Helliwell, Weijers, Powdthavee, & Jarden, 2011). So the curriculum and school support structures can assist in the promotion of well-being amongst youth. But this promotion of well-being is only *one* reason for the need for positive psychology in schools. The other, according to the research, is that levels of well-being actually enhance the traditional imperative of education, that of learning (Seligman, 2011; Peterson & Park, 2009).

This paper brings together the teaching of literature and the cultivation of character strengths. The aim is to explore the possible application of character strengths in a school's well-being program. In understanding some of the elements of *adult* well-being, schools can better channel their energies into preventative psychological health (Seligman, 1998). We endeavour to prepare students for higher education, the workforce, and a globalised world; but what are we doing to prepare young people for the emotional, psychological and inter-

personal challenges of adulthood? Indeed, positive psychology is showing that we can do a great deal to promote psychological well-being, both for the short term and for the road ahead, including identifying and learning how to use our character strengths. This paper, firstly, provides an overview of the development of the study of human character strengths before then exploring the links between character strengths and well-being, both in adults and youth. In this way, the paper provides an empirical imperative for schools' attention to what is often, nebulously, referred to as "good character". Rather than merely reflecting a kind of social affability or cultural preparation for life beyond school, character education can and *should* be re-drawn to focus on developing individual students' awareness and use of their own character strengths. This paper culminates in arguing for the need to bring such character education into the traditional curriculum; English literature is one potentially powerful avenue for the cultivation of character strengths. The appendix to this paper presents a literary unit of work, designed for the Year 10 or 11 classroom, that focuses on understanding and developing the strength of hope.

2. Strengths of character and well-being

According to Aristotle (2000) happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) is a product of living and acting in accordance with a virtuous life. Rather than the popular hedonic philosophies on happiness of his day, Aristotle argued for the pursuit of excellence in *virtue* (2000). Being true to one's inner self, or *daimon*, entails identifying one's virtues, cultivating them and then living in accordance with them (Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Great achievements and positive feelings, according to Aristotle, are ephemeral and empty in the absence of the highest good and our greatest quality of the soul: virtue (2000). Rather than being lofty, intangible concepts, virtues drive our character and are concretely manifested in our behavior and actions. When developing a scientific field dedicated to the

study and cultivation of human flourishing, then, it is not surprising that "character" features heavily. Let us begin with an overview of positive psychology's recent work on character strengths and virtues and, vitally, what the science is telling us about the role of character strengths in well-being.

Character strengths are stable, morally-valued and universal personality traits that manifest through thinking, feeling and action (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is important to distinguish character strengths from other personality traits such as introversion or extroversion, which are not morally-laden (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). *Good character* then, as understood in the field of positive psychology, is a well-developed family of these positive personality traits that have emerged across time and culture as contributing to the good life (Park & Peterson, 2006a). This family of traits, although largely stable, universal and transcendent of culture, is *multidimensional* and *malleable;* there are individual differences, such as traits existing in degrees (Park & Peterson, 2006a) and the character profile can evolve across our lifetime, shaped by our context and experiences (Park & Peterson, 2009). If character is to be studied, measured and cultivated then tools are needed to help frame the research, devise interventions and measure outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

So, in answer to both the individualised nature of character and the need for a framework for its study, Peterson and Seligman published the seminal Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) in 2004. Although the historical development of the CSV is not within the scope of this paper, a very brief introduction to it is useful. It was the culmination of several years of research and discussion. Nick-named by the authors as a "manual of the sanities" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) it is intended to do for psychological *well-being* what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) does for the labeling of *disorders* (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Namely, the CSV provides us with a language and framework as the DSM continues to do. But, rather

than being a tool for diagnosis, it is a tool of celebration. Peterson and Seligman (2004) drew together significant existing science and theory on character strengths as well as taking inspiration from disparate works such as literature, philosophy and religious doctrine. For example, they found that an exploration of legal and cultural texts from around the world rendered many character strengths as ubiquitous and, hence, the authors included those that appeared to transcend culture and time (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005).

The resulting classification differentiates between "virtues" and "strengths". *Virtues* are core characteristics, valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. Peterson and Seligman's classification suggests there are six key human virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. Character *strengths* then, of which there are 24 in this model (see *Figure 1*), may be understood as the psychological ingredients that define the virtues, serving as a pathway to and manifestation of the virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). So the virtue of transcendence, for example, is shown in and achieved through the strengths of spirituality, humor, hope, gratitude and the appreciation of beauty and excellence. When we say "psychological ingredients" we mean that a strength is "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, 2006b, p. 88). "Natural" denotes that strengths are partly innate and largely stable but are shaped by our environmental experiences and can be more or less developed by our psychological activities and experiences (Linley & Harrington, 2006b; Park & Peterson, 2009). Peterson and Seligman also characterize strengths as; fulfilling and morally valued in their own right, not diminishing of the strength in others, being seen in consensual paragons who exemplify it, and having rituals or institutions to celebrate or express it (2004).

This classification is certainly a dynamic one, intended to change over time as measurement continues (Peterson & Park, 2011). In fact, there is already some discussion in

positive psychology circles about the validation of this classification. Although this model of character strengths is being used to anchor much of the research and aid in scoping the applied fields, there remains some disagreement regarding the structure of the six virtues and their corresponding character strengths. A number of studies have revealed that, though the internal validity of each strength is high, factor analyses do not always produce a factor structure consistent with the six virtues of the CSV. In other words, there lacks a clear, consistently validated demarcation of the six virtues. Some strengths *could* belong to alternative clusters of strengths, suggesting a three, four or five-factor structure may work as well as the current six virtues (for examples of such work, see Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; Singh & Choubisa, 2010; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010). Robust debate need not hamper the progress of applying virtues and character strengths in education or other fields, especially given that the strengths themselves have been shown to be internally valid. Indeed, the impetus for much of the applied work lies not in the factor structure of the classification at
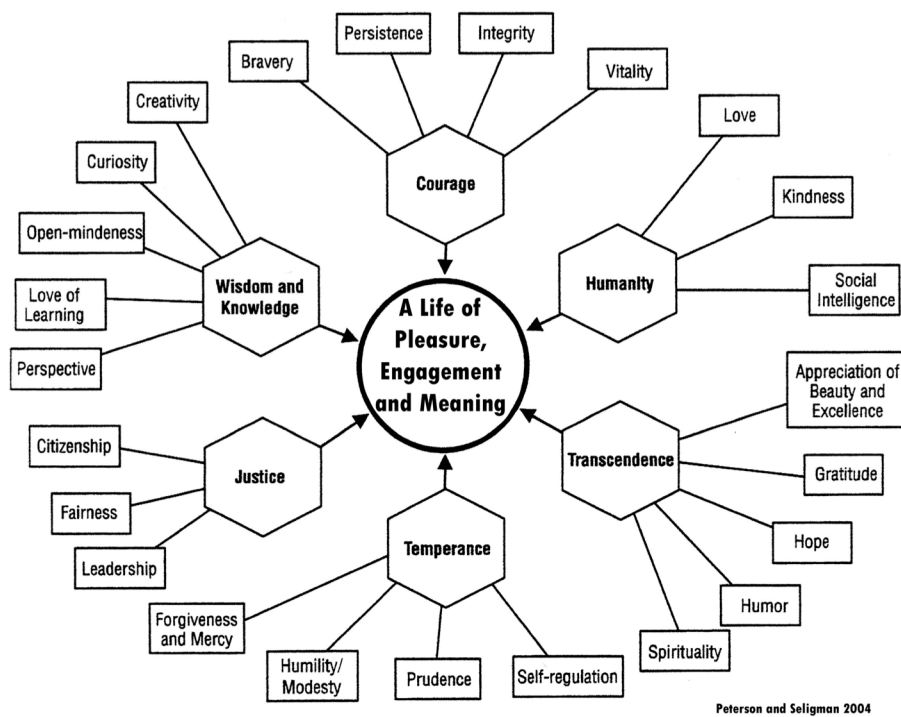
Figure 1 : The Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues
From Peterson and Seligman (2004)

all but, rather, the relationship between character strengths and well-being. So, let us move on to explore some of the research with respect to this relationship.

More than providing mere nomenclature, we also want to be able to measure character strengths, individually and collectively. To enable this, Peterson and Seligman (2004) operationalized the CSV to form the Values-In-Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). The VIA is a framework to aid in the conducting of research on character strengths and in the devising of interventions for developing the strengths in people (Peterson & Park, 2009). The inventory is a self-assessment tool (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) used to measure each character strength. It is a self-report survey consisting of 240 items that asks respondents to rate the degree to which the statement accurately describes their behavior, emotions or thoughts on a five-point Likert Scale. The *ipsative* results list the 24 character strengths in order for the individual. This means that results are intra-individual, rather than comparing a respondent to the rest of the population (Park et al., 2006). So, for example, an individual might have self-control at the bottom of their list, despite the fact that they may possess much more self-control than the average person in the population. So, more than a framework for the world of research, the VIA can help everyday individuals discover, explore and use their qualities (Niemiec, 2013). The VIA-Youth is a special version of the survey adapted for children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17. The format is the same as the adult version though only contains 198 items, 7-9 items per strength. It takes about 45 minutes to complete (Park & Peterson, 2006a) and thus is shorter than its adult counterpart. It also uses more youth-friendly language and age-appropriate scenarios. For example, situations familiar to them such as school or family and friends feature, rather than the more adult themes of work and personal relationships (Park & Peterson, 2006a).

Research in the area of character strengths is revealing interesting demographic and cultural patterns across the world in adult populations. It is informative from a youth

development perspective to know what the psychological future may hold for young people; our understanding of the structure and effect of particular character strengths in adulthood can inform our educational and developmental programs for youth. So, let us start with what we know about character strengths in adults. The most commonly *endorsed* strengths in the United States, based on a large survey of all 50 states are kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude and judgment (Park et al., 2006). With the exception of religiousness, this profile of the American population converged with the profiles of 54 other nations (Park et al., 2006). A more recent study in the United Kingdom revealed that the most endorsed VIA strengths were humour, love, kindness and social intelligence, whilst the least endorsed were leadership, perseverance, wisdom, spirituality and self-control (Proctor et al., 2011). What about gender differences? Women typically scored higher on strengths than men in another UK survey of over 17,000 adults. But as many as four of the top five strengths overall were the same for both men and women: open-mindedness, fairness, curiosity and love of learning (Linley et al., 2007).

Rather than merely exploring population profiles per say, it is the association of character strengths with meaningful correlates that is proving most significant for positive psychology. Subjective well-being, consisting of high levels of positive affect, low levels of negative affect and overall life satisfaction (Diener, 2000), is one such correlate. Research reveals consistently that, among adults, several strengths in particular show a robust relationship with life satisfaction and overall subjective well-being. These are love, gratitude, hope, curiosity and zest (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson et al., 2007; Shimai et al., 2006). Some strengths do *not* correlate highly with life satisfaction, namely the intellectual strengths of creativity, judgment, appreciation of beauty and love of learning (Park et al., 2004). The relationship between character strengths and life satisfaction has indicated, further, that *excess* on a strength does not diminish life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004). This might

suggest we cannot have too much of a good thing. Many of the measurements for character strengths and its correlates rely on self-report so do these findings hold up, then, in peer-rated reports? A recent study of Swiss adults, including informant ratings, found that hope, zest, love, gratitude and curiosity play key roles in life satisfaction (Buschor, Proyer & Ruch, 2013). The peer ratings of strengths related positively with the individual's endorsement of a pleasurable, engaged and meaningful life. Ultimately, people who are perceived by their *peers* to be hopeful, zestful, curious and grateful see themselves as more satisfied with their life in general (Buschor et al., 2013).

The science is revealing that, over and above a mere awareness or presence of character strengths, people who *use* their strengths frequently have greater subjective well-being (Proctor et al., 2011); experience less stress (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011); experience higher levels of happiness (Seligman et al., 2005); experience enhanced satisfaction and meaning with both volunteer and occupational activities (Littman-Ovadia & Sterger, 2010); have an increase positive experiences and the likelihood of seeing one's job as a calling (Harzer & Ruch, 2012); and have elevated levels of self-esteem (Minhas, 2010). Strengths *use*, overall, is found to be a unique predictor of subjective well-being (Proctor et al., 2011). Not only does knowledge and use of character strengths promote positive states and life satisfaction, but it also reduces the possibility of negative outcomes. Studies are revealing that the use of character strengths can lower levels of depression (Seligman et al., 2005) and that certain strengths, such as hope, kindness and social-intelligence can act as a buffer against the negative affects of stress and trauma (Park, 2004a, 2004b).

In light of the findings on strength usage, can building those strengths most robustly related to life satisfaction increase overall well-being? Intervention research would suggest that it can (Gillham et al., 2011). We know that positive psychology interventions do enhance well-being and decrease depressive symptoms, in a statistically significant way (Sin &

Lyubormirsky, 2009). Particularly strong, though, are those interventions focused on character strengths. For example, using one's top strengths in a new way each day for a week increases happiness and decreases depressive symptoms for up to 6 months (Seligman et al., 2005). Strengths that promote connections with others, encourage altruistic thinking and build the transcendent strengths are particularly important (Peterson & Park, 2011; Gillham et al., 2011). As evidence of such, a recent study showed that targeted interventions on those strengths most often highly correlated with life satisfaction - curiosity, gratitude, hope, humor and zest - improved significantly life satisfaction of participants. This is when compared to a control group, whose focus was on strengths frequently least correlated with life satisfaction - appreciation of beauty, creativity, kindness and love of learning (Proyer, Ruch & Buschor, 2012). It is still unclear precisely *why* using one's character strengths so greatly influences our life satisfaction and overall psychological well-being. Perhaps playing to our strengths is good because we are doing what we naturally do best (Park et al., 2004); in doing so we generate feelings of autonomy, competence and self-esteem (Linley & Harrington, 2006a). There is also a link between organismic valuing and well-being. That is, knowledge of one's own feelings, needs and values, when combined with our use of character strengths, results in higher levels of well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Perhaps strengths ownership and that sense of authenticity is intrinsically motivating because using strengths connects to what we value (Linley, Nielsen, Gillet, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Whatever the reason, it is clear that character strengths and their usage is a robust predictor of life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

In addition to these important psychological correlates, character strengths also relate to other outcomes. Temperance and perseverance, for example, predict academic achievement (Peterson & Park, 2009). Five strengths in particular are correlated with higher grade point averages in the United States: persistence, judgment, self-regulation, love of learning and

prudence (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). Success at work is also predicted by character strengths. For example, the strength of love predicts performance among West Point military cadets (Peterson & Park, 2009); teaching effectiveness is predicted by the teacher's levels of zest, humour and social intelligence (Peterson & Park, 2009); people who use their strengths are more likely to achieve their set goals (Linley et al., 2010); and the strengths of zest, persistence, hope and curiosity play a key role in healthy and ambitious work behaviour (Gander, Proyer, Ruch & Wyss, 2012). Finally, in studying individuals recovering from major physical illness, the character strengths of bravery, kindness and humour were associated with a better return to full life satisfaction (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

Having studied character strengths in adults, educators of children and youth are in a powerful position. We know, for example, which character strengths are most commonly endorsed, which strengths are the most robust predictors of psychological well-being and which strengths promote academic success. Well-being programs in schools can reasonably expect a good rate of return on their investment in building these key strengths. But that is not to say that youth do not *already* possess great strengths on which educators can capitalize. The most common strengths among youth are gratitude, humor and love (Park & Peterson, 2006a). Girls tend to score higher than boys on some strengths, such as appreciation of beauty, kindness, fairness and gratitude (Park, 2004a). Gender profiles across other cultures are similar. One study explored the convergence of strengths in American and Japanese youth, revealing that females are more likely to score highly on the strengths of love and kindness, whereas males report strengths of bravery and creativity (Shimai et al., 2006). A comparison of strength profiles for youth versus adults in the United States revealed that hope, teamwork and zest were *more* common in youth than adults but the opposite was true of appreciation of beauty, leadership and open-mindedness (Seligman et al., 2005). Clearly, there are already a lot of strengths in our youth on which we can capitalize in education programs. During

discussion groups with high schools students Steen, Kachorek and Peterson (2003) found that character strengths engaged adolescents strongly in discussion. Youth were particularly drawn to strengths like leadership, wisdom and social intelligence. Students believe that these strengths were largely acquired rather than innate, developing as a result of life's experiences, rather than formal instruction. Interestingly, students lamented the lack of contemporary role models who exemplify different strengths of character (Steen et al., 2003).

As with the data on adults, it is the relationship of character strengths to psychological correlates that is of great interest in well-being. A recent study of character strengths and well-being in Australian adolescents found that several strength factors in particular – temperance, vitality and transcendence – were independently associated with well-being and happiness (Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012). Within these factors, students' character strengths of hope, caution, zest, and leadership predicted well-being on both measures of life satisfaction and happiness. Fairness was a further predictor of life satisfaction while curiosity and love further predicted greater happiness. Notably, there was one strength in this study that was a robust and reliable predictor on *all* measurable scales: hope (Toner et al., 2012). Park and Peterson (2006b) also found hope, love, gratitude and zest to be robustly connected with life satisfaction. Their longitudinal study of middle school students found that some character strengths present at the beginning of the year were related to increased levels of life satisfaction at the end of the school year. These were love, hope and zest (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Largely consistent findings from Park et al. (2004) and Toner et al. (2012) have revealed that the strengths predicting *lower* life satisfaction in youth are judgment, appreciation of beauty and creativity. Another study found that students reporting very high levels of life satisfaction were found to have higher levels of life meaning, gratitude and self-esteem than for unhappy youth (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010). A further study, focusing on future well-being, found that other-directed strengths (such as kindness and teamwork)

predicted few depressive symptoms and the transcendence strengths (such as meaning and love) predicted greater life satisfaction at the end of the school year (Gillham et al., 2011).

The focus on youth life satisfaction in all these studies is important because it is one important indicator of positive youth development (Park, 2004b) but it is also known that life satisfaction is more than a desirable end in itself. It is a mitigating factor for the effects of stress and negative experiences (Park, 2004b). For example, results from a study in personality strengths revealed that youth with numerous strengths at the age of 16 were at a decreased risk of developing psychiatric disorders, educational problems or interpersonal difficulties by the age of 22 (Bromley, Johnson, & Cohen, 2006). Or, as another example, Proctor and colleague's (2010) findings suggested that very unhappy youth would benefit from focused interventions that boost life meaning and satisfaction as these lead to significantly lower scores on depression scales, negative affect and social stress measures.

Character strengths have also been found to positively relate to school-based satisfaction in youth. A recent study by Weber and Ruch (2012) found that love of learning, zest, gratitude, perseverance and creativity were associated with school-related satisfaction. More specifically, hope, love of learning, perseverance and prudence were positively associated with academic self-efficacy; and hope, self-regulation, perspective and teamwork distinguished between those students who demonstrated improved, as opposed to decreased, grades during the school year (Weber & Ruch, 2012). One study even explored the relationship between character strengths and vocational interests. It revealed that intellectual strengths related closely to artistic vocational interests in youth. Transcendent strengths related to social vocational interests. Finally, other-directed and leadership strengths were shown to relate to enterprising interests in students (Proyer, Sidler, Weber, & Ruch, 2012). Thus, character strengths are linked not only to present happiness in school but future life satisfaction.

If character strengths are key to life satisfaction, to what extent can we *cultivate* them to promote human flourishing? Whilst strengths are heavily influenced by family and other contextual factors (Steger, Hicks, Kashdan, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2007), they are malleable. According to some psychologists, they *can* be taught and developed through practice, (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Gillham et al., 2011). There has been comparatively little research in the area of strength cultivation, though. Only some of the 24 strengths have been explored in any detail, including hope, gratitude, kindness, social intelligence, leadership and creativity. There is a sense that a kind of scattershot approach to strengths, dealing with each one in isolation, may not be the most effective path to what we call "good character" (Peterson & Park, 2009), so work has begun on exploring other approaches. If we are able to shape strengths through the environment, for example, then the development and scale of positive institutions is important (Toner et al., 2012; Biswas-Diener, 2006). It also appears to be important that we cultivate strengths and build their usage during childhood and adolescence (Proctor et al., 2011). As suggested above, mere knowledge of one's strengths is not enough. It is when they are used and developed that the real benefits emerge, giving a focus to future research and practice. One final important point to be made regarding strengths' cultivation in adolescence is that, like many other aspects of humans' physical and psychological growth, character develops over *time*. Rather than viewing adolescents as miniature adults, interventions that wish to have the greatest long-term impact, ought to be approaching strength promotion on a developmental continuum, considering all of life's stages before adulthood (Kirschman, Johnson, Bender, & Roberts, 2009). We are starting to appreciate this more in the context of childhood resilience and the way in which character strengths can be valuable protective factors in adverse circumstances (Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Protective factors are highly contextual and the degree of resilience shown at one point in an individual's development or in one context will look very different in alternative

circumstances or individuals (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). As such, models of resilience are now tending to focus on developmental pathways to resilience, balancing maturation turning points, cognitive growth, the interactions of the individual with others and changing contexts (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2006a). Development is a continual process of building resources and self-actualising as the developing child interacts with his or her environment (Damon, 1988) and character strengths are precisely the type of traits we might expect to change during this process (Linley et al., 2007). Character develops throughout our lives (Park, 2004a, 2004b) not merely through thinking or being taught *how* to behave. This is shown in the fact that the more sophisticated strengths are unlikely to develop fully in youth. In fact, we know that youth' lesser strengths are prudence, forgiveness, religiousness and self-regulation (Park & Peterson, 2006a). Such strengths emerge following from life experiences and a measure of natural maturity (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Developmental differences in character highlight the need to shape age-appropriate interventions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

It is useful to return finally to Aristotle's (2000) concept of eudaimonia: the fulfilling life is an inherent feature of virtuous activity, not a later consequence or outcome of it. This means that life satisfaction may come from, during and as an inherent part of virtuous activity. Fostering good character during childhood and adolescence will bring life satisfaction in the present *and* develop the strengths for later use, too. It is not simply a case of preparing for the future, but enhancing life satisfaction during adolescence.

3. Character Education

Schools are changing. Educational institutions are being challenged by the need to prepare students for an increasingly globalised, technological and skills-driven world. As a result, the very fabric of many school environments and their curricula is changing. At the

same time, though, many are drawing attention to the psychological distress facing our youth (for example Waters, 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). There is, then, a call for a focus on psychological well-being alongside the traditional academic education. For example, a cross-cultural study of attitudes towards Peterson and Seligman's classification revealed widespread acknowledgement of the importance of virtues and, more potent for education, the three cultural groups in the study indicated that *all* 24 strengths were highly desirable for their children (Biswas-Diener, 2006). This, of course, is not supplanting the intellectual aims of education, though it does suggest that parents and communities are looking to schools to provide something *more*. It is important to highlight that character education in no way diminishes or supersedes the traditional goals of education, such as the accumulation of knowledge and development of practical and intellectual skills. On the contrary, the benefits of character education are not only seen in the psychological well-being of citizens but in academic outcomes, too. As shown in the previous section of this paper, the development of character serves not only itself, but contributes to a variety of vocational and achievement outcomes. So the goals of education are slowly being re-framed such that social, emotional and ethical competencies are being valued alongside, not merely as an adjunct to, academic outcomes (Cohen, 2006). What is now, therefore, termed *positive education* is defined as education for both traditional skills and, alongside that, for happiness (Seligman et al., 2009).

As a popular aspect of this re-framing, there is a growing appreciation of the need to teach "good character". We need only look at the promotional material of high schools around the world to see the prevalence of words like "values", "character" and, more recently, "well-being". As early as 1924, educational literature acknowledged that, "school achievement involves other factors than those measured by means of the intelligence test … [such as] character traits" (Poffenberger & Carpenter, 1924, p. 67). Where the character education of

centuries past seemed to focus on good manners, social outreach and leadership, what we mean by "character" in education is now expanding. Character education might be defined, variously, as a form of moral education that aims to teach young people about virtues (Park, 2004a) and develop socio-moral competencies, whereby students can act as moral agents in the world (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). There is much more to this kind of agenda than has, perhaps, been realised. This sort of education has, traditionally, be something of a practice rather than a science (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Producing young men and women of "good character" has seemed a nebulous goal, measured often in the calibre of student behaviour at the school, or students' affability and community spirit upon graduating. The rapid growth in positive psychology and its research on character strengths as pathways to values means that educators now have an empirical platform on which to build, measure and promote their programs. Our understanding and cultivation of "character" in education is taking on a new look. Fostering an individual's sense of self, cultivating character strengths and promoting resilience are among the aims of positive education.

As an environment, schools are in an especially privileged position, situated at the forefront of positive human development (Clonan et al., 2004). There is much to envy about the school environment. Young people spend up to half their waking hours either at school or engaged in school-related activities each year. Increasingly, parents look to schools to provide not only intellectual learning, but social and emotional skills, too. Schools employ great staff, experts in teaching, caring for and developing children and youth. Many schools and educational systems are well funded to focus on youth development. As such, schools are uniquely placed to bring positive psychology to scale and impact millions of lives.

Positive education requires a re-aligning of educational theory, pedagogy and practice. Changing an entire institution or system is hardly an expeditious process but some schools have begun. There are voices in school psychology and counselling, for example, calling for a

paradigm shift (Terjesen et al., 2004). School psychology needs to be more proactive and preventative, rather than reactive and clinical. School counsellors can find new ways to foster positive development when they see their role as involving working with *all* students, not merely those who present with problems (Terjesen et al., 2004). The goal of positive youth development, after all, is to foster psychological assets such as resilience and good character enabling *all* young people to flourish both during adolescence and into adulthood (Park, 2004b). It is both protective and promotive in that sense, not merely medicinal. But beyond school psychology and a zealous determination to change our schools for the better, we currently have little agreement on how best to bring together the theory, research and assessment tools at our disposal. Positive psychology research is spawning interventions but there are now some challenges in aligning the research and practice (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). In their eagerness, practitioners can surge ahead with piecemeal or ill-founded approaches, not rooted in the latest research. Conversely, the interesting or potentially ground-breaking research gathers dust in the annuls of academia, if educational practitioners are not empowered to embed it in their daily work. It is in this gulf between the science of well-being and the classroom practice where positive education can do its work.

At the intersection of two different but interrelated agendas – promoting of subjective outcomes such as well-being *and* enhancing objective academic outcomes – lies the potential of character strengths. The growing body of research on character strengths outlined in the previous section suggests that, much more than a passing craze, the identification, use and development of character strengths is potentially central to subjective well-being and satisfaction with life, both in adolescence and adulthood. Character strengths are a significant enabling factor of flourishing at school. It is not all about psychological well-being; indeed, the use of character strengths at school have been linked to academic success (Weber & Ruch, 2012); positive emotions, facilitating creativity (Fredrickson, 2009); academic self-efficacy

(Weber & Ruch, 2012); a love of learning (Knoop, 2011); and positive classroom behaviour (Weber & Ruch, 2012). So, in this section we will explore some of the features of existing positive education programs, particularly those focusing on classroom-based teaching of character strengths.

The field of positive psychology is starting to show us that character can, in fact, be taught. So what sorts of programs might schools implement? The aim here is to canvas the research and practice, with a view to generating guidelines for shaping effective school-based interventions on character. There are a number of existing classroom-based programs targeting positive psychology concepts. A discussion of some of them is useful for the purposes of compiling a list of their salient features. A recent meta-analysis of school-based interventions under the banner of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) found that developing *interrelated competencies* in cognitive, affective and behavioural areas yields significant positive mean effects across several outcomes including attitudes and behaviours in students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). One program seeking to develop these competencies is the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), the most thoroughly studied of all existing school-based programs. Developed by psychology researchers affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, the program is comprised of twelve sessions of cognitive behavioural instruction as well as interventions designed to bolster the adaptive cognitive skills and optimism of young adolescents (Gillham et al., 2007). Its pilot with middle school-aged children achieved positive results including a reduction in depressive symptoms and an increase in positive psychological benefits over a two-year follow-up (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox & Seligman, 1995). The success of this program was not as thoroughly supported in more recent studies of the PRP conducted outside the school environment and in other locations worldwide (Brunwasser, Gillham, & Kim, 2009). The PRP's effects tended to be larger, though not significantly, when delivered to targeted samples (such as those already

displaying some depressive symptoms), rather than to a universal group. Also, effects findings on boys relative to girls are inconclusive, with a number of studies returning varied results (Brunwasser et al., 2009). Effects did tend to be more significant in studies where research team leaders delivered the program rather than community leaders such as teachers or other school personnel. Greatest success in the program occurred when team researchers from the University of Pennsylvania was responsible for conducting the study as well as administering the intervention (Brunwasser et al., 2009). Conclusions from research on the PRP are that contextual factors including delivery setting, group leader characteristics and participant characteristics, may influence PRP's effects (Brunwasser et al., 2009).

Several other programs target resilience and well-being outcomes in similar age groups. The PATHS program (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), like the PRP, utilizes cognitive behavioral strategies and has been shown to improve executive functions as well as emotional and behavioral regulation in elementary school students (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995). Shorter-term modules of Well-Being Therapy (WBT) have also been utilized in middle schools in the hopes of aiding psychological well-being (Ruini, Belaise, Brombin, Caffo, & Fava, 2006). Sessions with Year 9 and 10 students in Italy focused on topics such as emotional competence, teamwork, identifying positive character traits and autonomy. The results from a study of WBT demonstrated positive outcomes, namely in personal growth and a decrease in distress within participants (Ruini, Ottolini, Tomba, Belaise, Albieri et al., 2009).

Some programs specifically target character strengths, either in individual modules within a larger program, or on their own. The Master Resilience Training (MRT) program in the US Army has a module on strengths (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Although done with adults, the structure of the program is of interest for character education in schools. In it participants explore their own strengths profile, both in terms of strengths they already

possess and use in their leadership, plus others they might like to cultivate more strategically. They practise identifying strengths in others, using their own strengths in a variety of situations, and harnessing the groups' strengths for completing missions. The most recent inquiry into the effectiveness of the program found that MRT assists in improving the resilience and psychological health of the soldiers who participate and this, in turn, appeared to reduce the chance of developing diagnosable mental health issues (Harms, Herian, Krasikova, Vanhove, & Lester, 2013). According to this study the resilience training, which includes work on character strengths, has an indirect negative effect on mental health, in that it promotes adaptability and optimism (Harms et al., 2013). Since its inception in 2009, the MRT program has trained many thousands of active-duty soldiers. Via its train-the-trainer model, it is anticipated that learning in the organisation will continue.

Returning to schools settings, some programs employ character strengths for enhancing well-being in students. The Strengths Gym program aims to encourage students to build their strengths, learn new strengths, and to recognize strengths in others (Proctor et al., 2011). The VIA-based activities - called Strengths Builders and Strengths Challenges – are age appropriate for Year 7, 8 or 9 and involve defining and building different strengths. Results of an effectiveness study indicated increases in life satisfaction of 12-14 years olds who participated in this Strengths Gym program (Proctor et al., 2011). As another example, one Australian program uses strengths-based coaching with primary school children. A study of the program revealed an increase in hope and engagement in the Year 5 boys, who used the VIA Youth to identify their strengths and set goals using their strengths. They also received eight coaching sessions as part of the personal development curriculum at their school (Maddern, Green, & Grant, 2010).

One of the most comprehensive school-based programs to date is the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Program (PPP) whose goals are to increase strengths use in every day

life, promote resilience and positive emotion and to foster students' sense of meaning (Seligman et al., 2009). Consisting of 20 to 25 sessions of 80 minutes in length, the lessons centre on discussing a character strength and then exploring the strength through activities and take-home work, including a follow-up journal. Seligman and his colleagues' (2009) evaluation of the program, including a two-year follow-up, revealed that students in the PPP reported greater enjoyment and engagement in school. Teacher reports also revealed an increase in evident student strengths and social skills. A significant example of this program in practice is at Geelong Grammar School in Victoria, Australia. Staff from the University of Pennsylvania, including the authors of the program, spent time at the school training staff to implement the PPP with 200 students in Year 10. The effectiveness of the program, though mostly anecdotal, is well documented (for example, Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011; White, 2013).

The empiricism so anxiously anticipated in the field of positive education may, perhaps, come in the wake of another Australian school's work. St Peter's College, Adelaide will be the first school in the world to have gathered comprehensive, whole-school baseline data on student and staff well-being before implementing its school-wide approach to positive psychology. An eagerly anticipated book will present some of this data and provide a framework for other schools to assist in adopting a positive psychology culture and curriculum (White & Murray, in-press). St Peter's College is already bringing positive psychology into school leadership (Waters, White & Murray, 2012); the sports program (Waters, Scholes, & White, 2012); the religious ethos and values education in the school (McCall, Waters, & White, 2012) and the classroom curriculum (for example, Barbieri, FitzSimons, Pitt, & White, 2012). Among the innovative programs, the English Faculty has done some preliminary work fusing character strengths and literature (Barbieri et al, 2012). Presenting their findings at the *Australian Positive Psychology and Well-being Conference*,

the Faculty found that explicit teaching on character strengths, using the VIA, greatly

enhanced the ability of students in both Year 8 and Year 11 to sympathise with and analyse

the construction of character. More specifically, the sessions enhanced the students'

vocabulary for discussing literary characters in works such as Kafka's Metamorphosis and

Doris Lessing's short story, *Flight*. Student writing consequently showed greater depth of

understanding of motivation in human behaviour which, in turn, produced more robust and

analytical responses on the construction of character (Barbieri et al., 2012). What is now

needed is a way to share such practice in curriculum areas with other teachers around

Australia and the world and, in so doing, empower them to embed principles of positive

psychology in their classrooms.

4. Positive psychology in the academic curriculum: A key role for the classroom teachers

> *... The field of positive psychology is concurrently addressing the need to*
>
> *continue to build a solid research base, determine ways to translate this*
>
> *information to practice, and develop innovations within appropriate*
>
> *contexts. (Scott-Huebner & Hills, 2011, p. 93)*

As highlighted in this paper, we have substantial evidence for the importance of

character strengths for both well-being *and* academic outcomes. School education is both

obligated and well poised to contribute to positive youth development; school is the ideal

place for a multi-faceted, institution-wide approach to promoting well-being (Waters, 2011;

Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Despite such potential, there are some key challenges to be

overcome. Positive psychology and education are entering very interesting times for their

relationship. Firstly, many of the existing programs, such as those outlined in the previous

section, are effective as a result of having been presented by their psychologist authors, or at

least by field staff who have had extensive training. For example, staff at both Geelong

Grammar School and St Peter's College are well trained by specialists, from the University of Pennsylvania no less, using a train-the-trainer model. Such institutions are now blessed with highly-trained staff and access to leaders in the field, so are well placed to deliver positive education. Clearly though, the demand for school-based programs will very soon out-strip the availability of the trained personnel and costly curricula. Bringing the positive education movement to scale is a key goal. But many schools do not have the human or financial resources to access, or even replicate for themselves, the effective programs. So the first challenge is to *empower* and *equip* regular classroom teachers in schools around the world. A second challenge is for positive psychology to maintain its status and integrity as a science. If so many in the applied fields struggle to access or use the science, then they must rely on other means. This dilutes the rigor of positive psychology over time. So how can we bridge the current gulf between the *research* in positive psychology and the classroom-based practice (Cohen, 2006)? Thirdly, how can we take the principles of positive education, such as character strengths, and promote robust, inter-disciplinary learning and practice for students? There are no simple answers, but plenty of potential strategies.

To assist us, plenty of work is being done through both the scientific study of character strengths and in positive psychology interventions. As we seek to shape effective curricula there is much to be gleaned from this work already done. Here is a summary of some key recommendations;

- Interventions *can* be incorporated into routine educational practices taught by school personnel (Durlak et al., 2011).
- Indeed, programs implemented by regular classroom teachers may be *more* effective due to the existing relationships they have with the students (Waters, 2011).
- The earlier the interventions the better the longer-term gains (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

- There are benefits of a shot-gun approach, that is, multiple exercises across time (Proctor et al., 2011).

- Having students working together on character strengths enables them to learn that others have different, but equally valued, strengths (Proctor et al., 2011).

- Longer interventions, rather than a one-off program, or a "flavour of the week" approach, are likely to produce greater gains (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Steen et al., 2003).

- A sequenced, step-by-step approach allowing for adequate skill development, rather than mere awareness of strengths, is likely to be highly effective (Durlak et al., 2011; Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

- It is important to consider cultural factors, such as religion, school context and age of the students, when promoting character strengths, addressing both internal and external factors (Park, 2004a, 2004b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

- Failure to work within the school context may result in attention being drawn to conflicting moral messages and values (Steen et al., 2003).

- Life experience is a powerful teacher in character strengths as youth learn through doing, viewing and modelling (Steen et al., 2003).

- Positive role models play an important role in the development of character strengths, rather than prescriptive programs on what students should and should not do (Park, 2004a; Park & Peterson, 2009; Proctor et al., 2011; Steen et al, 2003).

- If schools, families and communities can align themselves with the existing interest in strengths and seek to capitalise on existing strengths profiles among adolescence, we are more likely to effectively promote positive youth development (Lerner, 2009; Knoop, 2011).

- Trying to capitalise on the strengths youth already possess is desirable (Park & Peterson, 2009); to this end, individualised programs may be better than generic ones (Park & Peterson, 2009).

- Well-integrated programs, taught across several areas at school and even reinforced at home, are more effective than isolated lessons (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Noble & McGrath, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

- Programs should teach specific activities of strengths, then encourage daily use (Park & Peterson, 2009).

- It is important to offer daily opportunities for students to practise behaviours and newly-acquired skills within the school environment (Clonan et al., 2004; Scott-Huebner & Hills, 2011).

- Supportive parenting and high-quality connections with significant others, as a result of their correlation with life satisfaction (Park, 2004b), may enrich the development of strengths in the program.

Many of the above recommendations point to the potential of the classroom. Schools and the world of positive psychology have an unprecedented opportunity to bring character strengths into the *regular* classroom, even in schools with little access to positive psychology experts. Classroom teachers are undoubtedly experts in their fields. They are highly skilled at engaging with young people, at generating units of work that inspire, and at challenging youth to achieve. As yet, they are the unrealised champions of positive education. Years of attending education conferences has revealed that, perhaps more than anything else, teachers are hungry for new ideas, better ways to help their students and innovative resources. If you have ever seen the book stalls in foyers at teacher conferences being picked over, much like a restaurant buffet, then you start to appreciate the un-tapped potential here. Teachers of both primary and

secondary students are always searching for new, easily-implemented materials. Now, in the wake of rising attention on positive psychology, any teacher materials that purport to use positive psychology concepts will be in high demand. As such, we need to be careful. And clever. If readily available resources existed that brought together the science of positive psychology *and* traditional curriculum areas in which teachers are already authoritative, then we could capitalise on the skills of the classroom experts and apply the science at the same time. Teachers would not only be *empowered* they would be *equipped* to take the science of well-being in to their classrooms. If positive psychology is to be rapidly scaled, whilst still maintaining its empirical and theoretical integrity, then there is a need for the publishing of such accessible teaching materials. Empirically-based curriculum materials on character strengths, in the hands of the classroom experts, can result in well-integrated, practical, culturally-sensitive, long-term programs for schools.

5. Positive Psychology and Literature

> *... the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a*
>
> *work of literary art. (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 148)*

Why literature? English literature is one curriculum area that, by virtue of its creative, personal, discussion-rich pedagogy and its curricular focus on the lives and emotions of others, is a natural fit with positive psychology. Let us begin by exploring what literature has to offer to the study and cultivation of well-being, before returning to character strengths particularly. By way of introduction, the insights proffered by literature help form a picture of the meaningful life and what it means to flourish. Literature is very much concerned with the human condition and great writers, from William Shakespeare to George Orwell and Arthur Miller show concern for humans, in whatever circumstances they find themselves. In fact, literature has the power to make us reflect on *ourselves* and see the lives of *others* with more

than a casual observer's interest, but with involvement, insight and sympathetic understanding. We come to see, in the end, how circumstances *shape* lives (Nussbaum, 1998).

Literature assists us to understand the concept of *eudaimonia*. That is, what does the flourishing life look like? How can we achieve it? For example, happiness may of course come from a positive experience of affirmation or transcendence, such as through loving relationships. But equally, it could be argued that stories of loss connect us to the good things in life more so than the happy ones by focusing our attention on what is truly valuable; our consciousness of well-being is often at its height when it is threatened (Potkay, 2013a; Pawelski & Moores, 2013). To this end, the eudaimonic turn in literature allows us to see that happiness may be something transformative that occurs through suffering and adversity (Pawelski & Moores, 2013; Kephart, 2013). As a literary illustration, consider one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *King Lear* (1607). In a scene of reconciliation, the ailing King Lear is reunited with his daughter, Cordelia, in the emotional climax to the drama. As the tragic hero though, Lear suffers greatly, losing Cordelia only two scenes later. Literature vitally demonstrates to us the centrality of *human agency* throughout life's narrative and that human beings contribute to their own well-being (Kephart, 2013; Nussbaum, 1998). Shakespeare's humanist themes set fatalism, in the characters of Gloucester and Edgar, against those who believe in authoring their own destiny, like Edmund and Kent. The final scene is one of redemption where the fallen monarch realises, albeit superficially, the ways in which he has authored his own suffering and ultimate demise. As he clutches Cordelia's lifeless body, Lear experiences a kind of epiphany or re-birth, making him what Kephart (2013) might call "twice born" (p. 230). The recurring imagery of breath, being rescued from the grave and birds flying are used by Shakespeare to convey this re-birth, whilst at the same time capturing the love between Lear and his daughter. There is a deeper awareness of and regret for Lear's own mistakes such as in banishing those who loved him most, namely Kent

and Cordelia. However, in the spirit of Greek tragedies, there is little suggestion that the King truly acknowledges his own character flaws of vanity and rashness. In all of this, as in many other great works of literature, the drama suggests that the eudaimonic life *may* be filled with positive emotions but, more importantly, is one of self-awareness, human agency, and ultimately, transformation.

Literature does not just explore different paths to happiness, but it offers guidance on what a *meaningful* life might be and how we attain it (Potkay, 2013a). For example, stories challenge conventional human wisdom and values (Nussbaum, 1998) by showing the consequences of decisions, such as spending a life pursuing power and public recognition. To cite the Shakespearean tragedy once more, King Lear's pride consumes him, so much so that he is figuratively blind to the motivations of those around him. This is powerfully explored via the motif of eyesight throughout the play. The drama also questions the human value placed on duty. Although a society such as Shakespeare's hailed duty as important, he asks of them, should that "duty" prevent us speaking honestly to a leader for fear of reprisals? Is our "duty" given unconditionally, regardless of how we are treated? These are the kinds of challenges literature may throw up against human values and, in so doing, help us to explore how one finds meaning in life. Our meaningful life may lie, then, in the answers to some of the questions literature asks (Pawelski, 2013).

In addition to aiding our understanding of well-being, literature also has something to offer epistemologically to positive education. That is, the means by which we arrive at answers in literary study are not so dissimilar from how we might study well-being. Traditional literary criticism, for example, has sought to understand works through a variety of lenses. Despite much criticism taking a deficit approach by asking what is missing or incomplete in a literary picture (Pawelski, 2013), some understanding of the texts does still come from this kind of literary *interpretation*. The eudaimonic turn offers us a new lens

through which to view texts (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). It enables us to see that there are different types of stories; what makes them "positive", both theoretically and practically, is a similar process of *interpretation* (Pawelski, 2013). The power of epistemology in literature lies in being able to understand texts in different ways, often more deeply. One example of literary epistemology is cognitive constructivism, a developing sub-set of reader-response theory. It asks how can the *validation* of literary interpretation be demonstrated (Steen 1991)? We have no self-report surveys or randomised controls to measure in literature, but perhaps we could call cognitive constructivism a kind of literary empiricism. It holds that textual interpretations are not only tied to the *text* but, to a greater extent, the *reader* (Steen 1991; Miall & Kuiken, 1998). In this way, empiricism in literature may often be about the idiographic, subjective experience (Pawelski, 2013). Noteworthy for our understanding of the role of literature in well-being is the interplay of the objective and subjective experience. The kind of "truth" in objective measurements of well-being is incomplete without the subjective measurement of how an individual is faring. Like the relationship between the reader (subjective) and the text (objective) in cognitive constructivism, we can come to see that one's sense of well-being is an interaction between both object measurements and personal circumstances (Prilleltensky, 2005).

Another method of epistemological importance in literature is the interaction of form and meaning. Meaning is construed through the marrying of form, the readers' experience *and* the content of a text; this is something the study of English literature has been hailing for decades. It explains, to a great extent, the penchant for the analytical approach to literary techniques in so many high schools' literature curricula. It is here, under the eudaimonic lens, that such an approach to the literature can remain central and, in so doing, maintain the academic rigor and outcomes-focused approach in senior classroom. Rather than suggest that the world of examinations and assessments are incompatible with positive education, here is

just one way for the two to work to each other's advantage. For example, *King Lear* is structured in Acts 3 and 4 to alternate between, on the one hand, Lear and his loyal supporters as they wander the barren heath and, on the other hand, the manipulative, brutal behaviour of Regan and Goneril within the castle walls. The juxtaposition highlights an irony. Those living within supposedly civilized walls are more bestial and depraved than those living like animals in the wilderness. Those living exposed to the open air are, ironically, the more civilized humans as the action progresses. The message here is that, despite all the trappings of civilization and regal power, immoral humans are little more than wild beasts. The symbolism of clothing throughout reinforces the theme. Thus, dramatic structure, staging *and* symbolism combine to reveal a truth of human behavior. Such a technique-focused response would delight examiners.

Literature also serves as a useful tool in positive education by helping to give meaning, texture and application to the nomenclature and constructs of the field. The science of well-being defines constructs such as life satisfaction, joy or hope, often fairly thinly, to be able to accurately measure those constructs. The humanities, particularly literature, can assist with the development of more robust constructs, where science needs to carefully simplify. Literature can help us to both unpack and then build on constructs to aid in their cultivation. For example, is the kind of "joy" measured in a psychology survey representative of the fullness of joy that we understand it to be (Pawelski, 2013)? Literature, rather than measuring its narrow existence, asks other things of "joy" to help develop the construct. For example, what do we *mean* by joy? Is the kind of joy explored in *The Great Gatsby* similar or different from Barbara Fredrickson's construct (Potkay, 2013a)? When Shakespeare repeats "joy" to refer to familial relationships in King Lear (I,i) he does so ironically. For Shakespeare's time "joy" was a heavenly gift, bestowed upon those who served dutifully and loved accordingly. Thus, when Lear and Regan declare their joyous love, it is undercut by their vanity and

duplicitous behavior. Joy in the 21st Century is not, according to Adam Potkay, teleological; joys are of the here and now, not yoked to some heavenly master or narrative of progress or growth (2013b). So, literature allows us to see all manner of *different* joys: in the planet, in eroticism, in faith, joy in ethical deeds, and so forth. Thus the humanities enable us to explore the fluidity, complexity and dynamism of a term like joy.

Can literature aid in the *cultivation* of well-being, and hence play an important role in positive education? Literature's function, it should be said, is more akin to a "green pill" (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). That is, rather than something which directly alleviates *suffering*, in the medicinal sense, literature works by promoting what is *good* (Potkay, 2013a). Literature offers a range of cognitive and emotive benefits to readers. To this end, literature can and should be a linchpin of a well-integrated positive education program. Firstly, immersing oneself in a good story opens us up to the diverse world of positive emotions. There is so much to admire in noble characters, stories of unlikely triumph or heart-warming relationships. We know that an increase in positive affect contributes to our creativity through opening our hearts and minds, allows us to build new skills, expands our range of vision, alters how we connect with others and connects us to our full humanity (Fredrickson, 2009). Secondly, literature provides us with valuable perspective, giving us distance from local issues and our own lives to educate us on moral or global concerns and, in doing so, inspires a mind in harmony with wider man (Potkay, 2013a). If positive education is to be rooted in the promoting of, among other things, good character, then this education on moral concerns and citizenship an important element. Martha Nussbaum (1998) argues that the arts play a vital role in cultivating an imagination that is essential to citizenship. She says that stories promote judgment and sensitivity and so, in a curriculum for world citizenship, literature's ability to represent the lives and cultures of many different people makes it an important part of any education (1998). Literary interpretation shows readers that experience and culture shape

many aspects of what lies "under the skin" in humankind. It does this by expanding our sympathies for others that real life cannot cultivate sufficiently (Nussbaum, 1998). Finally, literature functions as a promoter of the good through its calming effect on our mind. John Stuart Mill writes in his autobiography (1909-14) about poetry as "medicine" for his mind (paragraph 12). He writes of Wordsworth's poems: "in them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings … And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence" (paragraph 12). So, at least according to Mill, literature both connects us to other humans and is a balm for our own mind and spirit.

Excitingly, the recent call for a eudaimonic turn in the humanities (Pawelski & Moores, 2013) means that, even dark and heavy tragedies can have their place in the annals of "positive literature". An existing problem with privileging dark narratives, which we so often do in studying literature, is that they do not always fully represent the human experience as simultaneously challenging and positive. Too much artistic tragedy gives us an imbalanced view of life (Pawelski & Moores, 2013). Whilst this may be true, and a new interpretive lens will help to re-balance the focus, stories of loss can, indeed, hold great delight and relevance for the study of human well-being and virtues. Works can be very much about *virtue* and strength in humanity even whilst employing more scathing techniques, such as satirists like Jonathan Swift and Ben Johnson (Potkay, 2013a) *or* presenting a bleak landscape, apparently void of hope such as Holocaust fiction or the works of Cormac McCarthy. Even if literary characters seem far too sentimental, too barren, or too evil to be realistic, they still serve as a "placeholder" for what a life bereft of well-being might look like (Pawelski, 2013).

Not all texts offer a positive redemption, either. Many portray characters as victims who suffer greatly and whose suffering has little meaning (Pawelski & Moores, 2013), like the death of Cordelia at the end of *King Lear*. Such conclusions do not leave readers feeling

inspired but are disturbing because they, "shake our naïve belief in the essential benevolence of the universe" (Pawelski & Moores, 2013, p. 43). It is in these times, paradoxically, that literature *still* contributes to our well-being by working on our moral and cognitive imagination. How can we derive happiness from loss? One suggestion is that through the higher faculties of human reason and imagination readers create a harmony; a right mind, says Adam Potkay (2013a), can create apparent order from chaos. At the end of *King Lear*, then, readers are encouraged to see a divine harmony that underlines the apparent disorder. Lear's decline befits that of a tragic hero. Although suffering is awful, the order of the realm is finally restored in Edgar and Albany's twain rule. We judge there to be coherence and harmony where there would otherwise be none. In this way literature, whether dark or cheerful, can play a vital role in cultivating powers of imagination, capacities of judgment and sensitivity (Nussbaum, 1998).

It is worth finishing here with a note on the valuable role of *creating* literature for human flourishing. More than merely an exercise in reading and studying literary works, research is revealing the power of writing to contribute to well-being. There are positive interventions shown empirically to contribute to positive affect such as gratitude letters (Seligman et al., 2005). Further, the writing process cultivates flow states (Perry, 2009) and fosters self-regulation (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). In the concluding poem to his first anthology, Nobel-Laureate Seamus Heaney (1966) articulates his inspiration for writing as a career. It speaks, I think, to the heart of literature's role in well-being: "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing" (Seamus Heaney, 1966).

6. Character strengths through literature: A model for the English curriculum

Let us return for a moment to the impetus for this paper. For the future application of the science of positive psychology, and also for the integrity and effectiveness of positive

education, it is important that accessible and empirically-sound curricula now make it into every classroom. Given that English literature is so wonderfully placed to enrich both our *understanding* of well-being concepts and the *epistemology* of well-being, the English classroom seems a natural starting point for positive education in the curriculum. Taught in every school around the world by skilled and passionate teachers, literature as a subject transcends culture and socio-economic backgrounds. All high school students study narratives, poetry and films at some stage in their schooling. The goal now is to publish a book of curriculum materials for high school English teachers, focusing on the pivotal role of character strengths in well-being. The first two sections of this paper outlined compelling evidence for the importance of our understanding and using of character strengths for psychological well-being and other outcomes, notably achievement in school and work. As such, a concrete and empirically-sound place to start in the English classroom is with character strengths.

I believe there is a strong need, too, to tackle the more senior years in literature study. Well-being through literature does not need to exclusively target younger children and early adolescence. Firstly, in Australia and many other countries there is a mountain of existing material for middle school classrooms, under the assumption that it is in these years that the fun can be had. The perceptions, often, is that once students move into the more senior years, the agenda changes from integrated, thematic, creative units, to more sophisticated, rigorous literary study, perhaps in preparation for examinations and final assessments. Secondly, the later adolescent years come with their own social and emotional challenges but also great cognitive benefits. A curriculum that marries their changing pastoral needs with their increasing cognitive maturity is a new way to conceive of character education. I would argue that, both pastorally and intellectually, some of the best work on character strengths can be done in the upper high school years. As such, this resource demonstrates that a rich focus on

well-being in literature need not come at the expense of academic rigor, deep ethical and emotional competencies or analytical essay writing.

My desire is to see a book for English teachers containing a chapter of introductory material on character strengths and its empirical base, much like the opening of this paper. What should follow is a series of adaptable units of work on individual character strengths. The salient features of each chapter are should be;

1. An overview of the literature on the character strength, such as its definition, operationalization (if relevant), importance and relationship with correlates such as satisfaction with life and subjective well-being. This section is tailored to a popular audience, namely classroom teachers, rather than positive psychology students and practitioners. It is designed to provide English teachers with the necessary background understanding and empiricism to work meaningfully with the character strength in their classes.

2. A sequenced unit of work that unites the theory and practice surrounding the strength with at least one substantial work of literature. Although the activities relate to a specific text, the units are adaptable; teachers may take the scaffold and apply it to a different text of their own choosing. This means the text can be appropriate to the age, interests, culture and ability of the students, enabling the resource to be used with young age groups, if so desired. It is important, though, that the scaffolding of the unit remains intact, having been built around the research on the character strength. Taking selections from it, such as a single writing task or one poem, will not result in the same carefully-sequenced and robust learning.

3. A number of different texts integrated into the study of the main work of literature. By using one main text as something of a launching pad into other shorter ones, such as

poems and short stories, students can build up a tapestry-like picture of the character strength and some of its nuances.

4. Interventions (called activities) that promote the strength in the students. They are writing, talking to others in their lives, watching media, and so forth, to foster their *own* strength throughout. This means the unit brings together the study of literature *with* the cultivation of strengths in an innovative way.

5. A number of suggested additional texts to pair with the main one. Rather than prescribe a series of connected texts, this is where teachers have the most scope to select additional texts that suit their purposes. There are some guidelines provided on the types of texts which would be of most benefit, with one or two specific examples, to assist teachers in this process.

In an attempt to provide a concrete illustration of this model for the English curriculum, the appendix to this paper provides a sample unit of work on the character strength of hope. Using John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, plus a number of carefully chosen additional texts, the program unites the science on the character strength of hope, a contemporary model of hope theory (Snyder et al., 1997), writing to promote gratitude and hope and, of course, rigorous analysis of the texts.

6. Conclusion

Positive psychology is devoted to studying the flourishing human life beyond the mere absence of illness. The ability to know, measure and cultivate that which contributes to such a life will transform both individuals and societies. Education's new focus on promoting psychological well-being alongside that of traditional academic learning is changing the face of schools. One crucial area of study in positive psychology is character strengths; it is revealing that individuals who are not only aware of their unique strength profile, but use their

strengths daily, are happier, achieving, more resilient and satisfied with their lives. These findings give new life and scope to what schools might call character education. To bring to scale the work of positive psychology, promote well-integrated and robust learning in our students, and to better equip regular classroom teachers for the task, accessible programs are needed. Embedding principles of positive psychology, such as learning about and cultivating character strengths, in traditional curriculum areas is one promising solution. English literature, by virtue of its themes and modes of study, is an obvious place for such a program. More than merely achieving the agenda of positive education, the science of well-being has a great deal to offer the study of literature. It can enrich the process, leading to outcomes such as a greater appreciation of character, the relationship between form and meaning and a deep exploration of the nuances of theme.

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APPENDIX :

A sample unit of work for the English classroom on the character strength of hope

The thing with feathers: A unit of work on hope for Year 10/11 English

A Teacher Guide

Theoretical and Empirical Background

a) Why is hope important?

> *Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and*
>
> *sings the tunes without the words, and never stops at all.*
>
> *Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)*

The subject of so many great works of literature, so many contemporary greeting cards and so many parent-teacher interviews in schools, hope is very familiar to us. And yet, when we talk about having hope, or describe people as hopeful, what do we really mean? In common usage, we often mean either cheerful optimism, or a vague longing for good things to happen. But hope, according to positive psychology, involves more than a vain dream of the future. The Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) identifies hope as one of the 24 human character strengths. This means we all have hope, it is morally valued, and it exists in degrees, relative to our other strengths.

We are now starting to understand the real the centrality of hope, arguably more than the other strengths, to our psychological well-being. Using an *Animal Farm* analogy, one of the foremost researchers in hope declares that, "All strengths are equal, but some strengths are more equal than others" (Snyder, 2004, p. 624). He is recognizing that although all strengths are valued in their own right, there are some that are more robust predictors of our life satisfaction and levels of achievement and happiness. Hope is one of those. Hope belongs with other strengths of transcendence such as humour and gratitude (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Together they allow individuals to "transcend", or forge connections with the larger universe and, in so doing, shape meaning in their lives (Peterson, 2006). In this way, transcendent strengths reach outside of the individual. Hope, for example, connects someone directly and optimistically to the dreamed-of

future (Peterson, 2006; Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Before exploring the modern definition and components of hope, let us consider *why* it is so important.

We are starting to understand, firstly, that hope has a robust relationship with our life satisfaction and overall well-being. Hope, together with love, gratitude, curiosity and zest are the character strengths whose levels share the strongest relationship to our subjective well-being (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006; Buschor, Proyer & Ruch, 2013). Subjective well-being is a holistic judgement based on high scores in positive emotion and satisfaction with our life, and lower scores on our negative emotion (Diener, 2000). So, hope is among those strengths with the strongest relationship to our positive and negative emotion *and* our satisfaction with our lives. In youth as well as adults, studies have revealed that the character strengths of hope, caution, zest, and leadership predict well-being on several measures of both life satisfaction and happiness. Notably, there was one strength which was a robust and reliable predictor on *all* scales: hope (Toner, Haslam, Robinson & Williams, 2012). Hope not only predicts *present* levels of happiness, but *future* ones as well. A longitudinal study of middle school students, for example, found that the presence of hope as a strength at the beginning of the year was related to increased levels of life satisfaction at the end of the school year (Park & Peterson, 2006).

Studies are also revealing that, in addition boosting our levels of desirable psychological correlates, use of our character strengths can *lower* levels of depression (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Again, there are certain strengths that can act as a buffer against the negative affects of stress and trauma (Park, 2004). Hope, again, is one of these. It is believed that people who are hopeful are particularly resilient against setbacks (Peterson et al., 2007).

Hope not only serves as a robust predictor of psychological outcomes, it is also proving key in other areas, particularly relevant to the young people we teach. A comparison of strength profiles for youth and adults in the United States revealed that hope, teamwork and zest were *more*

common in youth than adults (Seligman et al., 2005). This means that youth are not only easy to engage around hope, but that this unit may capitalise on a higher strength many already possess. Character strengths seem to be a telling predictor of satisfaction with school experiences. For example, the strengths of hope, zest, persistence and curiosity play a key role in healthy and ambitious work behaviour (Gander, Proyer, Ruch & Wyss, 2012). Character strengths seem particularly relevant for academic self-efficacy. Recent research indicates that specific aspects of good character, such as hope, are particularly relevant for context-specific self-efficacy as well. This means that self-efficacy related specifically to school is impacted by character strengths (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Character strengths are also associated with other positive school-related outcomes such as positive classroom behaviour and improvement in grades (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Hope is one strength – together with perspective, gratitude, self-regulation, teamwork – that distinguished between students who demonstrated *improved* versus *decreased* grades during the school year (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Hope is one of the most potent predictors of success of our youth because it is also linked to attendance, perseverance and academic achievement. For example, hopeful middle school students have better grades in core subjects and achieve higher scores in tests (Snyder et al., 1997). Even when controlling for examination scores, prior grades and self-esteem, hope is a powerful predictor of success (Snyder, 2000).

Research in character strengths is yet to reveal exactly *why* hope, or any other strength for that matter, is such a reliable predictor of well-being or academic achievement. There is a view that hopeful thoughts must precede self-esteem. That is, the degree to which children perceive that they *can* successfully attain their desired goals serves to guide their self-worth (Snyder et al., 1997). This would suggest that we should spend more of our efforts helping children to attain their goals rather than working tirelessly to raise their esteem, per se (Snyder et al., 1997). Goal attainment and the resulting hope it fosters, according to this theory, is a more likely route to

enhanced self-image. This relationship of goals to hope is one that underpins much of the literature that seeks to define and operationalize hope.

b) What is" hope"?

In the field of positive psychology, there are a number of approaches to hope, stemming from different theories and constructs of it. Snyder, mentioned above, is one researcher whose model we will return to in a moment. But let us begin with the Values-in-Action (VIA) Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), from which we draw the 24 character strengths. Hope - and the related term of optimism in the VIA - are a "cognitive, emotional and motivational stance towards the future" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 570). We sometimes use words like hope and optimism synonymously but there are some differences when it comes to the psychological constructs (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Although the overlap is considerable, some distinctions between hope and optimism are good to explore at the outset.

First, a brief recount of the development of our understanding of hope might be helpful. The VIA conceptualisation of hope is not entirely new. It is based, at least in part, on previous work done on hope. The Judeo-Christian tradition has hope as one of the pivotal virtues, along with faith and charity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It has connotations of a kind of emotional yearning for a desirable future. Christians believe that their yearning is not in vain; they are looking forward to something that is very much real and tangible. This looking toward a larger, future goal, and its innate connection to something bigger than themselves, gives their present lives meaning and purpose. This helps us to see why hope might have been categorised as a strength of transcendence. More contemporary explanations of hope also include something about *agency*, in other words that good events can be made more likely through *actions* of the individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). We will return to this in a moment.

Optimism, as the expectation of good things, is relatively newer on the scene. Optimism is more of an *expectation* or a positive way of thinking about the future; perhaps it is helpful to think of its opposite, pessimism, where we do *not* expect good things to happen. Recent work on optimism has fallen into two categories. As a future-oriented approach, *dispositional optimism* is

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Is there a difference?

Hope = determination that *goals* can be achieved coupled with beliefs that a successful *plan* can be generated to reach the goals. Sometimes described as more emotional, rather than expectational.

Optimism = mood or attitude associated with the *expectation* of a desirable, advantageous or pleasurable future. (Peterson, 2006)

---

defined by our *expectations of the future*, and motivated by a model called expectancy-value (Carver, Scheier, Miller & Fulford, 2011). We behave according to what we see as the *value* of our goal and the degree of *expectancy* that we can achieve it (Carver et al., 2011). As an alternative *optimistic explanatory style*, is how we explain the *causes* of events that happen to us. Peterson & Steen (2009) trace the development of this topic from early work on *learned helplessness*; that is, motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits in the wake of perceived uncontrollability of situations. In essence, people's explanation of why things have happened to them in the past sets the parameters for subsequent behaviour when adversity strikes. So what positive psychology means by "optimism" is largely about a thinking style, one of the future (dispositional) and the other of the past and present (explanatory).

Hope is a little more involved, though optimism is certainly related to it. The VIA defines hope as *expecting* the best in the future, akin to optimism, but then also *working* to *achieve* it. According to the VIA definition, there are several components of hope;

1.   There is the *thinking* about the future and *expecting* that the desired outcomes will occur.

2.   There is the *motivational* component, whereby we *act* in ways believed to

make the desired outcomes more likely.

3.   There is the *emotional* component; we feel confident that, given

appropriate *efforts* to sustain good cheer, our goal-directed actions *will*

reap rewards (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

So, the VIA concept of hope as a character strength is the culmination of cognitive,

motivational and emotional processes. We said at the start of this definition section that the

VIA construct comes from previous theories and work done on hope and that contemporary

hope theories include something about human agency or action. This agency, and hope more

broadly, hinges on *goals* for the future and one's belief that successful planning and *action*

might make that goal achievable. Agency, then, is reflected in components 2 and 3 above.

What we want to do with this unit of work is to help students understand hope and learn

how to cultivate it. But understanding "expectation", "motivation" and "emotion" might be

challenging for students. So what if, for the purposes of our literary study and the cultivation of

hope in our students, we could shape a model of hope that broke down the thinking, action and

self-efficacy into tangible parts? Thankfully, this has been done for us. We return here to the

work of Snyder, with whom we ended the first section of this introduction. Snyder's hope

theory (et al., 1997) conceives of hope as working towards a future *goal* by bringing together

agency thoughts (those that reflect the perception that we can initiate and sustain action toward

a desired goal) and *pathway thoughts* (those that reflect our perceived capability to produce

routes to those goals). Hope is therefore a combination of agentic and pathways thinking

(Snyder, et al, 1997). An absence of hope, we can see then, is a *lack* of knowing and feeling

that goals can be achieved through our own action. It is this particular model, rather than the

VIA definition, that nicely lends itself to our approach to literature in this unit of work. This

operationalizing of hope – into goals, agency and pathways – is something that is tangible for students and teachable through the literature (see *Figure 1* for the model).

Figure 1 - HOPE THEORY

Adapted from Rand & Cheavens (2009)

Some other interesting aspects of hope and optimism, potentially helpful for the study of literature and the robust discussion in the classroom include;

- The extent to which hope or optimism needs a reality basis - the only well-documented down-side to this strength is that of optimistic bias in risk perception (Peterson, 2006), leading to what we might call false hope, or blind hope.

- Potential positive and negative outcomes of hope – is it always good?

- The way in which hope can be domain-specific – are we more hopeful in one context over another, and possible reasons for that?

c) Can we help build more hopeful students?

We do know that character strengths, through targeted interventions, *can* be enhanced. In fact, hope is one of the strengths on which there is, arguably, more research and theory than any other. Here is a brief summary of some of the recommendations for the fostering of hope coming out of the psychological research:

- the explicit teaching of hope should be considered a pivotal element in any intervention aimed at enhancing happiness and life satisfaction in youth (Toner, Haslam, Robinson & Williams, 2012).

- There are enabling and inhibiting factors when it comes to the development of hope (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

- Although not shown in research yet, Peterson & Seligman (2004) argue for the importance of modelling by teachers, parents and even the media.

- There are some specific interventions shown to enhance hope. McDermott & Hastings (2000) explored the effects of school-based interventions using hopeful narratives (cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

- A pre-therapy intervention consisted of instructions in setting goals and planning how to achieve them. Initial levels of hope predicted good outcomes, as did changes towards more hopeful ways of thinking (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

- hope enhancement is best achieved through an integrated combination of solution-focused, narrative and cognitive-behavioural interventions (Snyder, 1999 and 2000). This means that we need to help students shape clear goals, generate numerous pathways to achieve them, and summon the motivation to act, even in the face of obstacles.

- the articulation of goals stimulates hope (Snyder, 1999).

- participants who completed a life coaching intervention reported significant increases in agency, pathways and total hope (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007).

- Interventions of a cognitive-behavioural nature offer problem solving skills, help us to become aware of beliefs that underlie responses and explore the links between these beliefs and the consequences of them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

Using the construct of hope as outlined above, plus what science is telling us about fostering hope, the purpose of this unit of work is three-fold;

1. To build students' understanding of hope and provide a structured way to discuss the concept of hope - opening up the conversation on questions such as: What is it? What does it look like? What does its absence look like? Is modern hope different to, say, Christian hope? Is it always positive? Where can we see evidence of hope in people around us, or how does it manifest? How does its existence affect people? As a character strength, how might it help us? How might it interact with other strengths, for good or ill?

2. To foster students' strength of hope through, for example: exploring narratives (Snyder 1999); discussing characters in the literature; students' own goal-setting (Snyder, 2000); writing down goals for the next week, month, and year; then making concrete plans for accomplishing these goals (Peterson, 2006); identifying pathways and having students recognising their own agency thoughts (Green et al., 2007) and thinking of past disappointments and the opportunities those made possible (Peterson, 2006). This fostering is modelled on what science is telling us about how to build hope.

3. To provide an innovate lens through which to study literature in our English courses. It becomes something *more* than a mere character study, a thematic focus or an analysis of literary features. It is a rich fusion of all three, combined with a robust discussion of positive psychology concepts.

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The thing with feathers… :

Hope & Literature for Year 10/11 English

Pre-reading activities

1. <u>Poem</u> : Students form small groups and are given the following poem to consider.

Hope

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

Emily Dickinson

1. What does this poem suggest about the nature, power and impact of hope?

2. Dickinson uses the extended metaphor of a bird to describe hope. In what ways might a bird be an effective choice?

3. Each person in the group share with the others a time when they felt hopeful. When was it, what were you hopeful about, and how did this feeling of hope affect you physically and emotionally?

2. <u>Class discussion (or student journaling to start the process) on "hope".</u> Questions for consideration should include ;

   a) What is it? How is it different from "optimism"? What might we mean when we describe someone as "hopeful"?

   b) What does "hope" look like day to day?

   c) Is modern hope different to, say, Christian hope?

   d) Is it always positive? What might be some downsides of hope?

e) How does its existence affect people – both those who are hopeful and those around them?

f) As a VIA character strength, how might it help us? How might it interact with other strengths, for good or ill?

3. <u>Hopeful people</u> :

Note : It is important that this step is done <u>after</u> the discussion in point 2 above. This will ensure that students have some sense of what we might mean by "hope" and examples of where we might see it in people.

Step 1 : Students come up with 2 people they would describe as being full of hope. They should choose one "celebrity" or public figure (living or dead) and someone in the student's life, that they know personally (eg relative, friend, youth worker, employer, community leader, sports coach, etc). This should be someone still living, with whom the student is (or could get) in contact.

- *Note : Although the students are <u>not</u> to know this yet, at the end of the unit, students will be asked to write to the figure they know personally to communicate the ways in which the student views them as full of hope. It becomes a personal interaction, a form of a gratitude letter. It ought to be a wonderful moment for that person, and the student who gets to share it. Instructions for this appear at the end of the unit but it is helpful to have it in mind as you supervise students completing this stage of the task, particularly in naming someone they are in contact with.*

Step 2 : Students will prepare a presentation, or a poster on their chosen figures. As a source of inspiration they should, where possible, be displayed in the classroom for the duration of the unit. It is important that the students identify;

a) Who are the people? (relative, friend, celebrity, community volunteer, etc)

b) In what ways/contexts are those people hopeful?

c) Using some examples of particular interactions, moments, behaviours, describe what "hope" looks like in those people. In other words, offer concrete evidence for answer (b).

> *Note: At this stage, students do not know about elements of hope such as goals, agency and pathways. This is intended. After the students have studied the literature and completed the unit, they will return to these figures (more particularly, the one they know personally) and try to identify goals and evidence of agency and pathway thoughts in that person. Students can communicate this in their correspondence with them. The task becomes a form of assessment, in that teachers can see if the students understood these component parts and can identify them in others at the end of the unit.*

Core Text Study : *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

CHAPTER 1

A) Read the opening page down to "into the opening by the green pool". Give students a copy of the passage on paper (see below), for annotating.

- Annotating exercise: ask students to highlight the use of colour; references to animals; noun groups describing the natural world. Then discuss observations.

- What sort of atmosphere do the above devices achieve?

- What impression do we have of the place, particularly humans' use of it, from paragraph 2?

- Introduce students to the Biblical overtones here – particularly the Garden of Eden.

- Whilst reading the rest of the chapter, students can note other, peaceful, idyllic descriptions of this landscape. Also may note other devices like use of verbs, interaction of animal & landscape, etc. For example, on p. 5 : *The flame of the sunset lifted from the mountaintops and dusk came into the valley, and a half darkness came in among the willows and the sycamores. A big carp rose to the surface of the pool, gulped air and then sank mysteriously into the dark water again, leaving widening rings on the water. Overhead the leaves whisked again and little puffs of willow cotton blew down and landed on the pool's surface.*

Chapter 1 passage for annotation :

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees- willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white,

recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep

and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on

the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spreadpads

of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from

the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in

the evening to jungle-up near water. In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile

made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.

Evening of a hot day started the little wind to moving among the leaves. The shade climbed up the hills toward

the top. On the sand banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray sculptured stones. And then from the direction

of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for

cover. A stilted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was lifeless, and

then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool.

B) Read the remaining of the chapter, focusing particularly on;

- The characterisation of George and Lennie (descriptions of them, what sorts of things
  motivate/interest them, how they relate to each other)

- What we learn about these men – their past, the nature of their work, where they are
  going

- Look closely at their dream, from p.7 from, *Lennie spoke craftily, "Tell me- like you
  done before."* (see below).

Chapter 1 passage from page 7 onwards …

Lennie spoke craftily, "Tell me- like you done before."

"Tell you what?"

"About the rabbits."

George snapped, "You ain't gonna put nothing over on me."

Lennie pleaded, "Come on, George. Tell me. Please, George. Like you done before."

"You get a kick outa that, don't you? Awright, I'll tell you, and then we'll eat our supper...."

George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before.

"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no fambly. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to."

Lennie was delighted. "That's it- that's it. Now tell how it is with us."

George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us."

Lennie broke in. "But not us! An' why? Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!"

"You got it by heart. You can do it yourself."

"No, you. I forget some a' the things. Tell about how it's gonna be."

"O.K. Someday- we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and-"

"An' live off the fatta the lan'," Lennie shouted. "An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George."

"Why'n't you do it yourself? You know all of it."

"No...you tell it. It ain't the same if I tell it. Go on... George. How I get to tend the rabbits."

"Well," said George, "we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof- Nuts!" He took out his pocket knife. "I ain't got time for no more." He drove his knife through the top of one of the bean cans, sawed out the top and passed the can to Lennie. Then he opened a second can. From his side pocket he brought out two spoons and passed one of them to Lennie.

- o Have students note how George describes to Lennie what their place is going to look like physically (pigs and cows, windmill, rabbits, stove), emotionally (implied stability, joy &

pride in the life, independence) and <u>relationally</u> (can have friends to come and stay, they have each other, absence of loneliness, etc)

o   How might the description of the fire towards the end of the chapter be significant for the conversation? Look particularly at the final paragraphs of the chapter.

o   Are there any clues in this chapter as to the likelihood of the dream becoming reality? Do you think this matters for the men? In what ways might this hope be helping them?

o   What about for us as readers (good chance to talk about narrative conflict)? What does the hope do for the narrative?

C) <u>HOPE THEORY</u> – using the material in the teachers' introduction, talk to students about the definition of hope (and how it may differ from optimism); main approaches to hope & optimism, culminating in Snyder's construct. Discuss how goals, agency and pathway thoughts might relate to each other. Using concrete examples will be important here – such as academic goals, sporting goals and so forth.

D) Then re-consider Chapter 1 of the novel, searching for the following. It would be useful for students to have a table to complete. We will return to this periodically, and have some reflecting to do on it later.

GOALS of George & Lennie	AGENCY thoughts	PATHWAY thoughts
(what are they striving for?)	*(determination or self-efficacy and acting to make it happen)*	*(that successful plans can be put in place to achieve the goal)*

CHAPTER 2

Setting

George and Lennie's dream in Ch 1 happens in something of an outdoor, natural paradise. The start of Ch 2 sees a different setting. Everything is square, man-made, black and white once they arrive indoors. Note;

a) the differences in language

b) differences in mood in these opening pages of the chapter

c) the "reality" of the working life of the men

The bunkhouse was a long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets and the other three showing their burlap ticking. Over each bunk there was nailed an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves for the personal belongings of the occupant of the bunk. And these shelves were loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. And there were medicines on the shelves, and little vials, combs; and from nails on the box sides, a few neckties. Near one wall there was a black cast-iron stove, its stovepipe going straight up through the ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on.

At about ten o'clock in the morning the sun threw a bright dust-laden bar through one of the side windows, and in and out of the beam flies shot like rushing stars.

The wooden latch raised. The door opened and a tall, stoop-shouldered old man came in. He was dressed in blue jeans and he carried a big push-broom in his left hand. Behind him came George, and behind George, Lennie.

Hope

Continue adding to the table on goals, agency and pathway thoughts started in Chapter 1.

The novel's context

Of Mice and Men is set in the United States in the 1930's, a period of time known as the Great Depression. It was a decade of economic and social crisis when millions across the country (and world, for that matter) lost their jobs as industry came to a standstill. Prices rose, banks foreclosed on loans and many families struggled to survive. For many, the only answer was to hit the road in search of work out west, in the rural areas. With no state system to provide relief for families or supplement income, itinerant work was the only hope. Adding to this problem in the early 30's was a series of droughts, resulting in crop failure and landowners having to literally walk away from their land.

If the students are interested, you may like to have them research particular aspects of this context. It is not necessary, though.

a) What evidence can you find in this chapter of the social and economic context in which Steinbeck has set his novel?

b) In what ways might this setting be significant, surprising, or entirely appropriate for a novel about hope and dreams?

CHAPTER 3

This is the second key passage (see below) where George and Lennie discuss their dream. Several aspects to pay particular attention to here;

a) the goal, agency and pathway thoughts … (add to the table from Ch 1 and 2)

b) the descriptions of George and Lennie in between the dialogue. What impact does this dream, and the telling of it, have on the men? For example, "George's hands stopped working the cards. His voice was growing warmer" or "Lennie watched him with wide eyes".

c) The impact on Candy – and the way in which he becomes part of the pathway and agency thoughts

d) The way in which this episode ends : "*They fell into a silence. They looked at one another, amazed. This thing they had never really believed in was coming true. George said reverently, "Jesus Christ! I bet we could swing her." His eyes were full of wonder. "I bet we could swing her," he repeated softly.*" (p. 29)

Chapter 3 passage …

Lennie drummed on the table with his fingers.

"George?"

"Huh?"

"George, how long's it gonna be till we get that little place an'live on the fatta the lan'- an' rabbits?"

"I don't know", said George. "We gotta get a big stake together. I know a little place we can get cheap, but they ain't givin' it away." Old Candy turned slowly over. His eyes were wide open. He watched George carefully.

 Lennie said, "Tell about that place, George."

"I jus' tol' you, jus' las' night."

"Go on- tell again, George." "Well, it's ten acres," said George. "Got a little win'mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a

chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots, nuts, got a few berries. They's a place for alfalfa

and plenty water to flood it. They's a pig pen-"

"An' rabbits, George."

"No place for rabbits now, but I could easy build a few hutches and you could feed alfalfa to the rabbits."

"Damn right, I could," said Lennie. "You God damn right I could."

George's hands stopped working with the cards. His voice was growing warmer. "An' we could have a few pigs. I

could build a smoke house like the one gran'pa had, an' when we kill a pig we can smoke the bacon and the hams, and

make sausage an' all like that. An' when the salmon run up river we could catch a hundred of 'em an' salt 'em down or

smoke 'em. We could have them for breakfast. They ain't nothing so nice as smoked salmon. When the fruit come in

we could can it- and tomatoes, they're easy to can. Ever' Sunday we'd kill a chicken or a rabbit. Maybe we'd have a

cow or a goat, and the cream is so God damn thick you got to cut it with a knife and take it out with a spoon." Lennie

watched him with wide eyes, and old Candy watched him too.

Lennie said softly, "We could live offa the fatta the lan'."

"Sure," said George. "All kin's a vegetables in the garden, and if we want a little whisky we can sell a few eggs or

something, or some milk. We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. There wouldn't be no more runnin' round the

country and gettin' fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no

bunkhouse."

"Tell about the house, George," Lennie begged.

"Sure, we'd have a little house an' a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an' in the winter we'd keep a fire goin' in it.

It ain't enough land so we'd have to work too hard. Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn't have to buck no

barley eleven hours a day. An' when we put in a crop, why, we'd be there to take the crop up. We'd know what come

of our planting."

"An' rabbits," Lennie said eagerly. "An' I'd take care of 'em. Tell how I'd do that, George."

"Sure, you'd go out in the alfalfa patch an' you'd have a sack. You'd fill up the sack and bring it in an' put it in the

rabbit cages."

"They'd nibble an' they'd nibble," said Lennie, "the way they do. I seen 'em."

"Ever' six weeks or so," George continued, "them does would throw a litter so we'd have plenty rabbits to eat an' to

sell. An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid." He looked raptly

at the wall over Lennie's head. "An' it'd be our own, an' nobody could can us. If we don't like a guy we can say, 'Get

the hell out,' and by God he's got to do it. An' if a fren' come along, why we'd have an extra bunk, an' we'd say, 'Why

don't you spen' the night?' an' by God he would. We'd have a setter dog and a couple stripe cats, but you gotta watch out them cats don't get the little rabbits."

Lennie breathed hard. "You jus' let 'em try to get the rabbits. I'll break their God damn necks. I'll... I'll smash 'em with a stick." He subsided, grumbling to himself, threatening the future cats which might dare to disturb the future rabbits.

George sat entranced with his own picture. (pp. 27-28)

CHAPTER 4

Structurally, it is interesting that following from the previous chapter, readers are now introduced to Crooks. Read the chapter and think about, from a narrative structure point of view, what is gained by these chapters occurring in this order.

As with other chapters, the attention to detail in the setting is important. His room reflects his character – he has a broken back, and a broken spirit. He is much put-upon as a black man who lives in the harness room off the barn. Everything in his room is broken :

Crooks, the Negro stable buck, had his bunk in the harness room; a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn. On one side of the little room there was a square four-paned window, and on the other, a narrow plank door leading into the barn. Crooks' bunk was a long box filled with straw, on which his blankets were flung. On the wall by the window there were pegs on which hung broken harness in process of being mended; strips of new leather; and under the window itself a little bench for leather-working tools, curved knives and needles and balls of linen thread, and a small hand riveter. On pegs were also pieces of harness, a split collar with the horsehair stuffing sticking out, a broken hame, and a trace chain with its leather covering split. Crooks had his apple box over his bunk, and in it a range of medicine bottles, both for himself and for the horses. There were cans of saddle soap and a drippy can of tar with its paint brush sticking over the edge. And scattered about the floor were a number of personal possessions; for, being alone, Crooks could leave his things about, and being a stable and a cripple, he was more permanent than the other men, and he had accumulated more possessions than he could carry on his back.

Crooks possessed big alarm clock and a single-barreled shotgun. And he had books, too; a tattered dictionary and a mauled copy of the California civil code for 1905. There were battered magazines and a few dirty books on a special shelf over his bunk. A pair of large gold-rimmed spectacles hung from a nail on the wall above his bed.

This room was swept and fairly neat, for Crooks was a proud, aloof man. He kept his distance and demanded that other people keep theirs. His body was bent over to the left by his crooked spine, and his eyes lay deep in his head, and because of their depth seemed to glitter with intensity. His lean face was lined with deep black wrinkles, and he had thin, pain-tightened lips which were lighter than his face.

- Is Crooks a man of hope (goals, agency and pathways)? What evidence might exist in this description, either way?

- Note the two times in the chapter where he applies ointment to his sore back … a symbolic reminder of his ailments and "broken" life.

- Look at his response to George and Lennie's dream:

  p. 36 : "You're nuts." Crooks was scornful. "I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkin' about it, but it's jus' in their head."

  p. 37 "But I get to tend 'em," Lennie broke in. "George says I get to tend 'em. He promised."

  Crooks interrupted brutally. "You guys is just kiddin' yourself. You'll talk about it a hell of a lot, but you won't get no land. You'll be a swamper here till they take you out in a box. Hell, I seen too many guys. Lennie here'll quit an' be on the road in two, three weeks. Seems like ever' guy got land in his head."

  Candy rubbed his cheek angrily. "You God damn right we're gonna do it. George says we are. We got the money right now."

  "Yeah?" said Crooks. "An' where's George now? In town in a whore house. That's where your money's goin'. Jesus, I seen it happen too many times. I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand."

- This is a good point to explore **pathway thinking**, as one element of hope theory. In the absence of clear goals and successful strategies for achieving something, does hope just become 'wishful thinking' or a vague dream?

  - The men appear to have plans. They know an old woman having an operation, so land is apparently being sold cheap. If they work hard to save a deposit, they can buy it. Candy, the janitor of the farm, hears them talking about it, so he offers his $350 in the bank, so that becomes a plan. The contrast is interesting.

  - When they tell Crooks he says that he has seen this before – a thousand guys like you with your head full of dreams – they claim they are different as they have the money and a plan.

  - So, as readers, whose side are we on here? Which is more likely? Evidence for that?

  - Have you ever had a conversation with someone like Crooks, who either mocks or criticises a dream of yours? Write about what happened and how it made you feel.

  - In what ways might conversations like this actually be beneficial to us in our hopes? (Eg, students think about how, at times, people who care about us may be wanting us to think carefully about pathways or, quite sensibly, have contingency plans. They help us to be realistically hopeful rather than naïve.)

- It is also a good place to discuss **language usage**, such as register, diction and syntax. Look at the contrast in language between George's descriptions of their future and Crooks'. For example, positive versus negative; connotative versus denotative; poetic versus colloquial.

- Again, look at the placement of this chapter in the narrative arc (or the 'arc of hope'). **Narrative structure** is in line with the plan; for a couple of chapters they are going to do

it & talk favourably about it. It seems to drive them. This chapter, as such, marks the turning point in the arc. George is in town with the other men; Crooks is much more pessimistic about their future; Crooks questions Lennie about what he would do if George left him alone; a new complication is introduced with the pups; a sense of foreboding as we see Lennie's temper; introduction of Curly's wife.

CHAPTER 5

The foreboding (and foreshadowing) builds. Lennie's interest in the rabbits, then mice, then pups).

Curly's wife

- Another character whose hope is worth discussing. What kind of hope does she/did she have?

- Her arc of hope existed in the past, but she is used in the book as someone for whom it has now all passed her by. She was going to be an actress, but married Curly and her identity as a young woman was tied up in that hope. It is so removed that she no longer has an identity, symbolised in the fact that she is only known as Curly's wife, never by her own name.

> p. 44 Curly's wife : She went on with her story quickly, before she should be interrupted. "'Nother time I met a guy, an' he was in pitchers. Went out to the Riverside Dance Palace with him. He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was a natural. Soon's he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it." She looked closely at Lennie to see whether she was impressing him. "I never got that letter," she said. "I always thought my ol' lady stole it. Well, I wasn't gonna stay no place where I couldn't get nowhere or make something of myself, an' where they stole your letters, I ast her

if she stole it, too, an' she says no. So I married Curley. Met him out to the Riverside Dance Palace

that same night." She demanded, "You listenin'?"

"Me? Sure."

"Well, I ain't told this to nobody before. Maybe I oughten to. I don' like Curley. He ain't a nice fella."

And because she had confided in him, she moved closer to Lennie and sat beside him. "Coulda been

in the movies, an' had nice clothes- all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big

hotels, an' had pitchers took of me. When they had them previews I coulda went to them, an' spoke in

the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent because I was in the pitcher. An' all them nice clothes like

they wear. Because this guy says I was a natural."

- Look at Candy's response to her death, as though she has shattered the dream;

    Old Candy watched him go. He looked helplessly back at Curley's wife, and gradually his sorrow

    and his anger grew into words. "You God damn tramp", he said viciously. "You done it, di'n't you?

    I s'pose you're glad. Ever'body knowed you'd mess things up. You wasn't no good. You ain't no

    good now, you lousy tart." He sniveled, and his voice shook. "I could of hoed in the garden and

    washed dishes for them guys." He paused, and then went on in a singsong. And he repeated the old

    words: "If they was a circus or a baseball game... we would of went to her... jus' said 'ta hell with

    work,' an' went to her. Never ast nobody's say so. An' they'd of been a pig and chickens... an' in the

    winter... the little fat stove... an' the rain comin'... an' us jes' settin' there." His eyes blinded with

    tears and he turned and went weakly out of the barn, and he rubbed his bristly whiskers with his

    wrist stump. (Ch 5, p. 47)

- Might like to note the chapter ends with the rattling of halter chains – also heard in the

    previous chapter when Curley's wife stormed out of the barn. Connection to her, or others,

    perhaps?

Lost dreams …

Curley's wife shares of the lost dreams of her youth. Crooks also reflects on his youth earlier in the novel, particularly how times were better for him then. Why do you think Steinbeck has so many characters in the novel with hopes and dreams? Ideas to ponder would include;

➢ How do these other characters add to our picture of hope, beyond George and Lennie's story?

➢ In what ways do these other characters enrich our understanding of the role of hope in people's lives?

➢ Does hope have to be realistic to have value?

This is a perfect opportunity to think about <u>past disappointments</u> in our lives.

➢ How often do we see people, such as these characters, washed up and bitter as a result of past losses or failed dreams?

➢ In what ways might past disappointments actually be a positive force in our lives? (such as an opportunity for learning or growth, opening new doors, protecting us from later harm, encouraging resilience, etc)

➢ Perhaps chat about public figures who have used past disappointments to re-frame, re-invigorate and grow themselves (such as sportsmen, politicians, entrepreneurs, etc)

CHAPTER 6

Again, **narrative structure** critical here. The chapter opens with the same Eden-like description of the outdoors we had in Ch 1. Why? Effect? For example;

• George & Lennie's hope exists when they are in this paradise. It opens with them sleeping by the river, imaging the farm and what it will be like. And it appears to end, sadly, here

too. As soon as they got to the bunk house, indoors and reality, the dream began to

evaporate.

The deep green pool of the Salinas River was still in the late afternoon. Already the sun had left the valley to go

climbing up the slopes of the Gabilan Mountains, and the hilltops were rosy in the sun. But by the pool among

the mottled sycamores, a pleasant shade had fallen.

A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the

length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak

lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved

frantically.

A far rush of wind sounded and a gust drove through the tops of the trees like a wave. The sycamore leaves

turned up their silver sides, the brown, dry leaves on the ground scudded a few feet. And row on row of tiny

wind waves flowed up the pool's green surface.

As quickly as it had come, the wind died, and the clearing was quiet again. The heron stood in the shallows,

motionless and waiting. Another little water snake swam up the pool, turning its periscope head from side to

side.

Suddenly Lennie appeared out of the brush, and he came as silently as a creeping bear moves. The heron

pounded the air with its wings, jacked itself clear of the water and flew off down river. The little snake slid in

among the reeds at the pool's side.

Lennie came quietly to the pool's edge. He knelt down and drank, barely touching his lips to the water. When a

little bird skittered over the dry leaves behind him, his head jerked up and he strained toward the sound with

eyes and ears until he saw the bird, and then he dropped his head and drank again.

When he was finished, he sat down on the bank, with his side to the pool, so that he could watch the trail's

entrance. He embraced his knees and laid his chin down on his knees.

The light climbed on out of the valley, and as it went, the tops of the mountains seemed to blaze with

increasing brightness. (p. 50)

AND …

p. 52

The little evening breeze blew over the clearing and the leaves rustled and the wind waves flowed up the green pool.

And the shouts of men sounded again, this time much closer than before.

George took off his hat. He said shakily, "Take off Lennie. The air feels fine."

Lennie removed his hat dutifully and laid it on the front of him. The shadow in the valley was bluer, and fast. On the wind the sound of crashing in the brush came to them.

Lennie said, "Tell how it's gonna be." George had been listening to the distant sounds. For a moment he was businesslike. "Look can almost see it." Lennie turned his darkening slopes of across the river, Lennie, an' I'll tell you so you head and looked off across the pool and up the the Gabilans.

"We gonna get a little place," George began. He reached in his side pocket and brought out Carlson's Luger; he snapped off the safety, and the hand and gun lay on the ground behind Lennie's back…

The novel's ending

Surprising, shocking, cruel, apt. Ask the students for their responses to the ending. Focus on aspects such as;

➢ The tragedy of the book is that George and Lennie (and Candy) are so close to their goal, in many ways, then Lennie kills Curley's wife.

➢ Why does George have Lennie focus on the dream of their land as he shoots him?

➢ George ends the book heading off towards the town and the bar, frequently alluded to throughout the book as the alternative, less-desirable lifestyle for itinerant workers like them. It seems that is all he is now able to do, just as Crooks predicted would happen. What might this be suggesting about hope?

The foreshadowing in the novel is clever. For example to foreshadow Lennie's killing of Curley's wife there are the frequent references to his strength and having accidentally killed mice and pups by playing with them. Then, there are those moments that foreshadow his demise, such as descriptive details likening him to an animal, for example;

> a) Lennie avoided the bait. He had sensed his advantage. "If you don't want me, you only jus' got to say so, and I'll go off in those hills right there- right up in those hills and live by myself. An' I won't get no mice stole from me."

George said, "I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus somebody'd shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. (Ch 1, p. 7)

b) Lennie's face wrinkled with apprehension. "I don' know. Say, what you doin' anyways?" he cried. "This ain't true. George ain't got hurt."

Crooks bored in on him. "Want me ta tell ya what'll happen? They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog." (Ch 4, p. 35)

FINAL ACTIVITIES

1. Return to the table on goals, agency and pathway. Discuss hope in the novel by exploring each of the components:

- How realistic were the goals? (NB, even though the novel does not end happily, we want students to see that there might have been nothing *wrong* with their hopes. Aspects of them were realistic, though the ease/speed of them may not have been. Unfortunate circumstances can derail our goals, but re-goaling and have alternatives can be important at such times. This is a powerful teaching point).
- How did George and Lennie perform in terms of agency?
- Were the pathways clear and achievable?

2. What does this novel have to say about hope? For example, how might hope differ from optimism, wishful thinking or naivety? What does it offer to people who have it?

3. Enabling and inhibiting factors of hope : explain what these are, and how they affect our sense of hope. Ask students to identify examples of each from the novel.

POEM ANALYSIS : The Brook by Alfred Lord Tennyson

1. Give out copies of this poem (see next page) to the students for annotation. A guided *colour-marking* of the passage is a good way to start the study. Ask students to take out 4 different coloured pencils, pens or highlighters. Use a different colour for each of the following;

a) put a circle around each punctuation point (commas and colons) and a forward slash at the end of each sentence. How many syllables are in each line? Is there a pattern? What do you notice about the punctuation? How does it, and the rhythm, affect the pace and flow of the poem?

b) Underline all the verbs in the poem that describe the movement of the water. What do they suggest about its movement?

c) Circle the use of the person pronouns. Effect?

d) Highlight all the examples of alliteration and onomatopoeia you can find. Choose 3 you particularly like and explain why each is effective. Why do you think sound techniques are so prevalent in this poem?

2. Then, the questions below can be completed. These questions can be done in groups, submitted as a reflective task for grading, or discussed as a class.

1. Would you consider Tennyson's poem hopeful? Justify your answer with reference to the language of the poem.

2. What do you think, "But I go on forever" means?

3. In what ways might this poem connect to the ideas or the features of *Of Mice and Men*?

The Brook

I come from haunts of coot and hern,
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorpes, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

Till last by Philip's farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I chatter over stony ways,
In little sharps and trebles,
I bubble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

With many a curve my banks I fret
By many a field and fallow,
And many a fairy foreland set
With willow-weed and mallow.

I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I wind about, and in and out,
With here a blossom sailing,

And here and there a lusty trout,
And here and there a grayling,

And here and there a foamy flake
Upon me, as I travel
With many a silvery waterbreak
Above the golden gravel,

And draw them all along, and flow
To join the brimming river
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I steal by lawns and grassy plots,
I slide by hazel covers;
I move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.

I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,
Among my skimming swallows;
I make the netted sunbeam dance
Against my sandy shallows.

I murmur under moon and stars
In brambly wildernesses;
I linger by my shingly bars;
I loiter round my cresses;

And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

STUDENT GOAL SETTING

This can be done after the novel, or later in the unit of work after studying additional texts.

Work on personal **goal setting** with students. Students can write down a goal for the next week, month, and year. It is important to guide them through this, in line with what we know about the power of good goal-setting for hope. Goals should be singular, realistic, measurable, and something they will feel proud of if they can achieve it. Examples might be to improve their grades in maths, earn a spot in the top sports team, foster a better relationship with a person in their life, and so forth.

Then help them to make concrete plans for accomplishing these goals by;

- identifying a variety of pathways – people, activities, processes – that will help with achieving the goal

- having students recognising their own agency thoughts – what kinds of things might they say to themselves about it? How can they motivate themselves? What actions might they take? Throughout the process they can keep a journal of thoughts and actions on their goal in the weeks ahead.

HOPEFUL PEOPLE : TEXT PRODUCTION

During the pre-reading activities, students produced a short presentation or poster on 2 people who they consider as full of hope. For this final task, they are going to focus on the one they know personally (such as the relative or youth worker).

At the time of the pre-reading task, students did not know a lot about the components of hope – namely, goals, agency and pathway thinking. They did offer concrete examples of their chosen person being hopeful, though.

Now, to both assess and apply the learning, students are going to **write to this person in the form of a personal letter**. To provide shape to the letter, it should contain the following;

a) a brief explanation of why they are writing to the person – eg, we have been studying hope through literature in English and, as part of the unit, we had to share details of a person we know who we think in full of hope. It becomes an introduction to frame the letter.

b) a brief explanation of the components of hope they have studied – ie, that it is comprised of goals, agency and pathway thinking.

c) a description of the ways in which the student views the person as hopeful, citing specific examples. This should be connected to the goals the students see the person as having, examples of their agency and pathway thinking that the student has seen or heard about.

d) a thank you or personal reflection on how the recipient of the letter has affected the student.

Assessment of the task;

Teachers are able to use this piece of personal writing in a number of ways;

➢ to assess the degree of understanding of the construct of hope

➢ to assess students' application skills – how effectively and accurately can the student apply the theory to a real-life example?

➢ to assess other literacy skills such as written communication and use of the letter form

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. For human beings to have hope we need a clear goal, a sense of agency and pathways to achieve the goal. Using this definition of hope, how hopeful are the characters in *Of Mice and Men*?

2. "I doesn't much matter whether we *achieve* our goals; the *hope* is what is important". Based on your reading of the novel, to what extent would you agree with this statement?

3. We often feel more sorry for people who try but fail, than for those who simply give up. How does John Steinbeck use a range of literary features in Of Mice and Men to create sympathy for the plight of George and Lennie?

Connecting Additional Texts

When choosing texts to pair with *Of Mice and Men* to further explore hope, it is important to select those which will expand the students understanding of the construct: what it is, what it looks like in people, what its absence looks like, how to cultivate it, what impact it has, enabling factors, and so forth. This pairing exercise is an opportunity to tailor the unit of work to the ability levels and interests of your class. Below are some suggestions about how to do this most effectively.

1. <u>The choice of text is important</u>. A highly effective point of comparison, for example, would be to choose a text with a different arc of hope. Rather than, as is the case in *Of Mice and Men*, having characters who have hope but sadly never realise it, select a text where, for example,;

  o a character has little hope at the outset but through a series of enabling factors, such as other people, develops a sense of hope by the end (such as the films, *The King's Speech* or *Good Will Hunting)*;

  o the characters' strong hope inspires others (such as Shakepseare's *Henry V*; the film, *Invictus*; Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Louis de Berniere's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin;* political and historical speeches such as from Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela

  o where characters' sense of hope is either misplaced or delusional (for example, Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*; Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*; Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*);

o hope as a defining characteristic of humanity - some texts imply an absence of hope to show a loss of humanity (such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Frazier's *Cold Mountain*; *No Country for Old Men*; war poetry such as Wilfred Owen);

o how might religious hope be of interest/compared with secular concepts of it? It can be explored through Biblical passages and Psalms, or poetry such as John Donne's sonnets.

2. A workable approaches to <u>pairing</u> of texts, requires teaching of the second text through the lens of the themes and techniques of the core text. In essence, teach the text through the lens of hope, <u>making links</u> back to *Of Mice and Men* where possible. Questions to ask of the second text might be;

- How is the arc of hope different in this text?

- How does this text use different literary devices to explore similar ideas?

- How are the characters similar or different (in function, nature, degree of hope, etc) to those in the core text?

- Does studying the second text illustrate some interesting features of the first one?

3. The unit of work should culminate in an <u>integrated assignment</u>. You may decide to have them write an essay, or work on multimedia presentations in groups, or present their findings in some other way. The assessment should require explicit comparing and contrasting of the texts, their key literary features and the representation and development of the construct of hope.

<u>An example of a question for this integrated assignment might be</u>:

Hope is much more than optimistic thinking. In what ways, and for what effect, has this been shown in the texts you have studied?

Assessment criteria are as follows;

Knowledge and Understanding

- o of the ideas of the individual texts

- o of the nature and impact of hope, as shown in the texts

Analysis

- o of a range of textual features and their effect

- o of the nuances of hope

Communication

- o effective use of form to present the assignment

- o use of accurate, varied and fluent language in communicating ideas