**Positive Psychology, Positive Music Lessons**

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**The Positive Movement in Psychology, Education  and Applied Studio Music Instruction**

Until a decade ago, the field of psychology mostly focused on diagnosing negative issues in people, relationships, cognitive abilities, etc. There's been countless theories and ideas on how to "fix problems". As cited in Gable, S. L., & Haidt, J. (2005): "For example, clinical psychology has made excellent progress in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses and personality disorders (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 1994)". However, there is an imbalance because psychologists have not looked into the flip side of the coin as much.  Researchers haven't really explored positive emotions (happiness, love, passion, things that actually make life worthy) as frequently, if at all, up until 5-10 years ago. Likewise, in the field of education, many different approaches aimed to make students simply "more successful" and most information out there focuses on accomplishments such as SATs/grades.  The focus was on the more traditional skills in school settings, instead of seeing the whole personality and unique characteristics of the students. Studies looked at how to strengthen their weaknesses, including aspects such as time management, self-discipline etc. They always seemed to start at the bottom skills and wanted to build the student upward. However, influenced by Positive Psychology, the idea of Positive Education also arose. In Positive Education, the main goal is to not only embed traditional skills, but also it believes that students can build the skills for well being and happiness. Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009) also talk about this in their article:

"There is substantial evidence from well controlled studies that skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning can be taught to schoolchildren"(p.293).

Just like Positive Psychology doesn't disregard the negative feelings of humans, positive education also does not say "let's not focus on accomplishment and discipline". Rather, it just adds on top of it, and strives to build an environment where students can learn how to use their strengths to aim for more meaning and happiness in their lives".

Education does not have to be specifically in school settings. There are increasing numbers of private lesson instructions happening these days. Music, for instance, is one of the common activities people all around the world enjoy. A lot of people take one-on-one private lessons, whether it is to pursue it as a hobby or professionally. Music lessons, especially alone time with a music teacher at a studio can be a great time to both build and also apply skills of well-being. On the other hand, the field of music education has also been evolving towards a more constructive outlook (more schools and private instructors are trying to center their lesson plans around students' interests and needs, and strengths), and the master-apprentice situation is slowly disappearing. Uprising teachers of today are still searching for a good balance on how to improve students weaker skills (both technically and performance-wise) without being discouraging. What is the balance, then? Teachers are now aiming to create a more positive experience for students while giving all that feedback.

Take singing lessons, for example. Singing can be a very delicate thing to work on since your body is your instrument. When the teacher is "fixing" the issues, people can truly feel vulnerable. However there are ways we can make singing lessons a more positive and comfortable environment if we can be inspired by the theories and applications of Positive Psychology, therefore Positive Education.

The relationship between positive psychology and music making in the applied studio environment is a two-way street. Just like music lessons can be a space to practice and enhance the well being of one, positive psychology can also aid better outcomes in music lessons and performances, if we can use some of the positive psychology theories and practices as a pedagogical approach in our teaching. So, what are some applicable ideas and exercises one can incorporate?

Unfortunately there is very limited resources and research directly addressing how we can use Positive Psychology tactics in music instructions, but here are some general approaches and attitudinal suggestions to start with.

**A "Parallel Thinking" Approach Suggested**

In general, positive Psychology looks at what works, what is right and what is improving (Sheldon, K. M., & King, L. 2001), just like we should do in our voice lessons. Often, when a student walks in, we immediately want to detect what's missing from the voice, what is wrong with it that I can fix? It is not to say that we should disregard what is not working and why, but we must have a balance, just like Positive Psychology encourages. Starting with what is right and working, and moving on from there is an exciting beginning to the lesson. Having a mindset that focuses primarily on your student's strengths can make a very positive impact on the mood of the lesson.

Human "strengths" can be discussed under many different topics. For this paper, let's group strengths in two categories: musical strengths and "character strengths".

For instance, if a student has a strong sense of rhythm (a musical strength), and is creative (personality strength), however she isn't great at matching pitch, we must try to use her stronger capabilities to "fix" her issue. We may assign vocal exercises that allow her to use her sense of rhythm.

Just like Positive Psychology urges for psychologists to adopt a more open and appreciative perspective regarding human potential motives and capacities (Sheldon, K. M., & King, L. 2001), we can urge music educators to do the same, regardless of the student arriving to the lessons to "improve their weaknesses". We shall not just improve our students' struggles, but also work on their flourishment, and independent growth. We must believe that they can go beyond their traditional skills, and flourish.

As Mariana Pasha (2016) covers in her online blog, here are two fundamental ideas that can activate this sense of flourishing (there are more concepts, but we will stick to these two for now) applied in positive education. They are : PERMA and VIA Character Strengths.


**Character Strengths**

Character strengths have been one of the most popular concepts within Positive Psychology, also recently applied in Positive Education[1]. Character strengths are formed by six general virtues and 24 characteristics classified by Peterson and Seligman (Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. 2005). Some of these strengths, as can be found on the VIA website[2], includes: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, authenticity, bravery, zest and more. We can guess how easily these traits could be tied with learning music

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[1] See https://www.internationaljournalofwellbeing.org/index.php/ijow/article/view/250/358, for instance.
[2] https://www.viacharacter.org/www/

and studying voice one-on-one. There's especially more room in contemporary styles of music and singing (such as pop and jazz for one to explore creativity, curiosity, open mindedness, and authenticity as it allows for more personal interpretation). Niemiec, R. M. (2015) says that:

"Character strengths are therefore defined as positive personality traits that contribute to personal fulfillment and benefit of others. Each person is viewed to have a unique constellation of character strengths that best represent their positive identity and are most authentic, natural and energizing for that person"(p.22).

Furthermore, Hodges, T. D., & Clifton, D. O. (2012) looked at the impact of people's awareness of their own strengths. They discuss how in the workplace strength-based approach created an increase in employee engagement and also more satisfaction with life. Tying these proven theories back to studio instruction: If we also help our students identify their character strengths, we could see more engagement during lessons.

Although this is a non-scientific, not proven theory of mine, most likely, a small activity of having our students write down three character *and* musical strengths or talents they've shown during the lesson could have a huge impact on their work objectively and also could change how they perceive themselves. As discussed by Patston, T., & Waters, L. (2015) :

"It is important to stress that a character strength is different to a talent (Seligman 2002). A young musician may have a very good ear and the ability to mimic others (talent), but lack the character strengths such as curiosity, love of learning, and persistence to develop skills in sight reading."

This idea, of course, is subject to more research in the field. It may be helpful to come up with a "musical strength" list and see if  applying those as a  "flourishing-through-character-strengths-

technique" kind of way would have the same effect as core regular character strengths does on well-being in general. In my personal opinion, musicians also have "core strengths", musically speaking.

Furthermore, Patston, T., & Waters, L. (2015) published one of the only articles written directly on the relationship between music in the studio and positive psychology and came up with a pedagogical model that we can look upto: Positive Instruction in Music Studios (PIMS).

The PIMS model outlines four key ways that can facilitate a more positive instruction experience and foster greater learning. As pinpointed in the original article itself by, here are the four pillars of this method:

- **Positive priming** (talking about what went well in the previous practice, or during the week, starting with activities the student would enjoy)

- **Strength Spotting/Signature strengths** (encouraging the student to use their signature strengths, creating opportunities during the lesson)

- **Positive pause** (stopping the process to appreciate the positive outcomes the students produces)

- **Process Praise** (praise not just the outcome but also the effort and process)

**PERMA**

Additionally, Seligman (2010) maintained that the elements of well-being consist of "PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Croom, A. M. 2014). We can then aim to be more conscious about creating a space of well being in our lessons

by consciously incorporating elements of PERMA. Lee, J., Krause, A. E., & Davidson, J. W. (2017) claim that:

> "This model has been applied to the fields of education and music; for example, Noble and McGrath (2008) developed a positive educational practices framework that adapted the PERMA well-being model to students' well-being in the school setting".

Sometimes, in private lessons,  all these elements are already expected to experience in music lessons since they naturally occur: music is engaging, requires interaction, and during lessons you try for accomplishment. It is not surprising. It is now general knowledge that music enhances well being. Again stated in the Lee, J., Krause, A. E., & Davidson, J. W. (2017) article, "There have been a variety of studies on the different types of musical activities that produce well-being impact (Greaves & Farbus, 2006; Hays, 2005)". But how can we use core elements of well being and let the lessons benefit from it as well?

Teachers could simply think about making students more aware of these moments, it can be a great way to open the door for the students to be more conscious about these positive emotions as they experience it. They may start building more consciousness towards the smaller accomplishments in their lessons as well as the more general positive feelings that may go unnoticed other-wise, and feel gratitude for them.

For instance voice teachers can encourage students to keep track of their own positive emotions through bi-weekly journals. These can be a way to positively intervene within your students' educational journey.  Encourage them to ask questions such as "Which activities made me the happiest (**P**ositive emotion triggering)? When was I most interested/engaged (**E**ngagement)? How is my relationship with my teacher (**R**elationship)? How is that helping me

(relating, **M**eaning)? What outcomes were meaningful? What are some things that make me feel accomplished during the lesson (**A**ccomplishment)?

Answering these will let your student access and build their positive emotions and thoughts, as well as help you keep track of what may be working for them. According to Brown, N. J. L., Sokal, A. D., & Friedman, H. L. (2013) the "broaden and build" theory suggests that positive emotions expand repertoires of thought and action, and in turn we build resilience against future emotional set-backs. (p.1).

Since singing can be very emotionally involving, it is important to build that resilience through encouraging a more positive environment that allows the student to access positive thinking. As Fredrickson, B. L., & Losada, M. F. (2005) also summarize the current available literature, positive feelings can widen the scope of the attention, increases intuition and creativity, and more. These are very important skills to use during music and voice lessons.

Thus, positive interventions can be also very helpful within lessons. An easy, applicable suggestion is  that teachers can even create moments of unexpected positivity for their students with a high five, or clapping for them, etc.

Last but not least, we can also "prime positivity" for pre-performances. The one-on-one music/singing lessons are often very private, behind doors, and the student only is used to singing for one teacher. Thus, as soon as performance time arrives, it can be a very nerve-wracking and a negative experience, especially if it doesn't go well. Hoping that broaden and build theory is building that resilience as we go, we could also use strategies such as coming up with positive trigger words. A study by Broomhead, P., Skidmore, J., Eggett, D., & Mills, M.

(2012) that looked at "the effects of a positive mindset trigger word pre-performance routine on the expressive performance of junior high age singers" concluded that :

"1) use of positive mindset trigger words in a pre-performance routine may bring immediate improvement in expressive performance for junior high age singers,

(2) junior high age singers may possess higher levels of expressive performance skill than they or teachers recognize, and

(3) review and repetition likely are needed for junior high age students to retain the intervention benefits."

**Discussion and Concluding Implications**

To sum it all up,  including theories that derive from positive psychology can be not only helpful in general educational settings but also in applied studio instruction of music, such as voice lessons (and more). Music can be a great activity to enhance well-being, however, we could also use more methods, approaches and character strengths that sparks well-being, and apply them in our private lessons. As research is starting to build a stronger connection between positive psychology and positive education, teachers and researchers can start testing the efficiency of adapting various theories, ideas, approaches by building pedagogical methods. More research is needed in this area to support all of the ideas and connections presented in this paper. Since character strengths seem to be crucial for Positive Psychology, perhaps, further research could look into also combining it with awareness of musical strengths. A list specific to musical strengths and talents could also be built. "At the most fundamental level, questions need to be asked about what similarities and differences there are between musical activities, and

whether or not there are specific types of music-making that promote well-being outcomes"[3], as well as what practical practices of well-being can improve the mood, confidence and satisfaction within the student during the making of the music and voice lessons, a much more positive and efficient space for growth. To begin, trying to shift towards a more positive intervention-like approach using some of the suggested exercises above may be a good start!

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[3] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1321103X17703131

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