

Character Education to Improve Students' Sense of Relatedness: Preliminary Findings from the Positivity Project

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Abstract

Sense of relatedness is a key component of students' social-emotional learning, as it captures the degree to which students' feel they have quality relationships with others in school. The purpose of the current pilot case study is to measure students' sense of relatedness and assess the degree to which a new character education social-emotional learning program based in positive psychology – The Positivity Project (P2) – is having a positive impact on students. Results from the two case studies including 108 elementary school students and 154 middle school students indicate positive associations between P2 implementation and increases in self-reported sense of relatedness.

Keywords: character education, positive psychology, sense of relatedness, relationships

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning*

The social, emotional, and behavioral components of schooling are receiving increased attention due to the rise in students' mental health struggles and the recognition that social skills and competence are more important to long-term success than academic achievement alone (Jeynes, 2019). Meta-analyses of social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions have demonstrated wide-ranging immediate and long-term benefits for students' academic, behavioral, emotional, and social outcomes (Luo et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Especially in the wake of the inequitable teaching and learning conditions brought on by COVID-19, school leaders need direction from experts on how to deliver high-quality SEL experiences for students (Gimbert et al., 2021). One SEL competency that has been especially damaged during the pandemic is students' ability to form and build positive relationships with peers and teachers (Chu, 2020; Deolmi & Pisani, 2020; Zhou, 2020).

1.2 *Sense of Relatedness*

One construct often used to measure students' feelings of relationship quality with others is known as *sense of relatedness* (Connell, 1990). Specifically, students' sense of relatedness refers to their generalized views of themselves in relationships with others (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969) suggests secure attachments to others are critical to child development because these attachments act as secure bases from which children are free to explore and engage in challenging activities (Bowlby, 1973; Hirschfeld, & Gasper, 2011). Extant research on students' sense of relatedness indicates positive associations with their academic and behavioral engagement, as well as academic achievement (Anderman, 1999; Furrer & Skinner, 2003), and these findings were corroborated in a recent meta-analysis of 69 independent studies with 196,743 participants examining the relationship between student engagement and academic achievement (Lei et al., 2018).

Sense of relatedness is also a key component of students' feelings of self-determination. Self-determination theory suggests people are more intrinsically motivated to perform a task and/or pursue a goal when they have feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In school-based research, self-determination positively predicts students' SEL and academic outcomes (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Specifically, Sheldon and Ryan (2011) suggest interventions based in positive psychology foster self-determination in students by allowing students agency in having a say in the work they do; focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses; and supporting cooperative learning (e.g., project-based learning [PBL]).

Students receive mixed messages in school about the importance of cooperation (Shankland & Roesset, 2017). On the one hand, they are told it is good to get along with their peers, but they are also implicitly taught that competition and bettering one's peers is valued through comparisons on items such as grades in a class. Cooperative learning through PBL is a way to change the framing of schools and encourage cooperation more than competition (van Ryzin

& Roseth, 2018), which then promotes self-determination (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). Recently, a new character education (CE) SEL program – The Positivity Project (P2) – that is based in positive psychology and uses PBL has been developed and is experiencing significant uptake in schools across the United States. At its core, P2 has a strong focus on improving students’ relationship quality with others.

1.3 Character Education through The Positivity Project

Character is a multidimensional psychological construct enabling one to be an effective member of society (Johnson, 2020; McGrath, 2018). The best CE programs address those values that are common across humanity and not specific to any one particular culture (Jeynes, 2019). Many states now mandate or encourage school-based CE programs or curricula (Johnson, 2020; Seligman et al., 2009). Furthermore, CE is often viewed as a form of SEL (Elias, 2011; Elias et al., 2007; Humphrey, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Jones & Doolittle, 2017), in that character strengths are intrinsic values and ways of behaving and thinking that promote positive relationships and goal attainment (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which overlaps to a large degree with the definition of SEL by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015).

Research points to the promise of focusing on character strengths in children (Jeynes, 2019; Peterson & Park, 2006). The initial review of the CE school-based literature was conducted by Berkowitz and Bier (2007) as a project entitled, What Works in Character Education (WWCE). The WWCE project involved a quality summary of statistically significant findings within empirical research on CE (73 studies) from 1945 to 2004. The report concluded that CE improves students’ academic and social-emotional functioning if implemented with fidelity and that programs implemented in elementary school show lasting effects for participants into high school and beyond. Jeynes (2019) meta-analysis of the CE literature reviewed 40 journal articles and dissertations published from 1970 to 2014, which included pre/post, correlational, and cross-sectional studies (Jeynes, 2019). Significant combined (Cohen’s *d*, beta weights) overall effects were found for academic achievement (.29), behavior (.30), reading (.45), math (.42), science (.32), social studies (.36), and social skills (ranging from .25-.73).

The Positivity Project (P2) is a web-based professional development (PD) program focused on teacher’s use of PBL and a Tier-1 (i.e., universal) student CE curriculum that provides educators and students with tools to support socio-emotional skills through daily, 15-minute learning modules across the school year. The program is experiencing a dramatic increase in national uptake, having begun with just 1 school and 480 students in 2015-2016, to an enrollment of more than 750 partner schools and 418,000 students in 27 states through the 2021-2022 school year. Social validity data are strong (see <https://posproject.org/impact/>), with 92% of surveyed partner school teachers indicating they would recommend P2 to other schools. According to the P2 developers (personal communication, 2021), participating teachers state key benefits include: (a) low-prep materials and 15-minutes of daily direct instruction saves teachers’ time, (b) student self-reflection, (c) common vocabulary around character strengths promotes a stronger classroom and school community, (d) age-appropriate

content engages students, and (e) P2 is applicable to the “whole student” and benefits them outside of the classroom with a focus on relationship building.

1.4 Positivity Psychology and P2

The P2 program is grounded in positive psychology. Traditionally, school-based mental health has viewed students’ struggles through a problem-based approach (Terjesen et al., 2004). However, positive psychology is about finding those unique features within human beings that work and to understand what happens when things go right, rather than wrong (Sheldon & King, 2001; Waters, 2011). Instead of focusing on assessment and intervention on pathology, the focus in positive psychology is helping the individual maximize their unique positive character traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & Ryan, 2011). Character strengths are “pre-existing qualities that arise naturally, feel authentic, are intrinsically motivating to use and energizing” (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010, p. 151). Positive psychology asserts that without good character, students may not have the desire to engage in activities to learn new skills (Park & Peterson, 2009). When maximized, students’ positive traits (e.g., optimism, hope, resilience, kindness, honesty) can help buffer against the risks inherent to their psychological or environmental challenges (Terjesen et al., 2004). The P2 program targets the 24 unique and malleable character strengths (e.g., perseverance, enthusiasm, optimism, self-control; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) established in positive psychology. In addition to taking a positive approach to intervention and the promotion of positive behaviors, the P2 program was designed to provide teachers’ with the autonomy they need to meet their students’ individual needs, while also taking the guess work out of content delivery. By allowing teachers to tailor content to their individual students, P2 claims to foster the teacher-student relationship because students feel their teachers are offering content that is relevant to them.

1.5 Purpose and Research Questions

Although theoretically-informed and experiencing massive uptake by schools across the nation, there is no empirical evidence to demonstrate what effects, if any, P2 may have on student outcomes. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between elementary and middle school teacher’s implementation of P2 with their students’ self-reported sense of relatedness?
2. To what extent, if any, do teachers and students report positive or negative feelings about use of P2 in the classroom?

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Setting

Participants included 108 elementary school students (grades 3-5) in one urban school in the eastern United States and 154 middle school students (grade 6) in one rural school in the mid-eastern United States. Among the elementary students, demographic information included the following: 54.6% female, 49.1% White, 24.1% Black, 12% Latinx, 7.4% Asian,

4.6% multi-racial, 2.8% Other racial identity, 24.1% students with disabilities, and 10.2% English language learner students. Among the middle school students, demographic information included the following: 51.6% female, 81.2% White, 6.5% Black, 3.9% Latinx, 3.3% Asian, 2.6% multi-racial, 2.6% Other racial identity, 10.4% students with disabilities, and 2.0% English language learner students. Elementary students were in classrooms with 4 teachers and middle school students were in classrooms with 5 teachers. Administrators for both schools were contacted via email by the developers of the P2 program. The middle school previously expressed the desire to measure P2's impact and the elementary school applied for and received a full "P2 Scholarship" for the 2021-22 school year.

2.2 Materials

The P2-school partnership involves online delivery of all PD training and materials. Both schools were provided online access to the P2's digital resources, training, and implementation strategy playbook. This included staff-wide access to 32 weeks of grade-level differentiated slide presentations for daily, 15-minute lessons. Also included are 30 PBL lessons, digital files for print, and P2 apparel to distribute at the school (included in program cost, which typically ranges from \$1,995 to \$3,995 per school).

During the PD training at the beginning of the school year, school staff used the P2 100 online video to lead a 3-hour staff-wide training that prepares educators to teach students about the 24 character strengths from positive psychology (e.g., integrity, kindness, fairness, perseverance). Use of PBL is explained as an instructional delivery model that allows students to explore authentic, real-world tasks and challenges. The project units are divided into two categories: school-wide projects and class-based units. The school-wide projects can be used to celebrate people in the community, bring awareness to the importance of character strengths and positive relationships, and/or to foster a school culture where students across grade levels focus on a common theme. The class-based units allow teachers to enable students to apply individual character strengths – and perceive the synthesis of multiple strengths – while making rich, authentic connections to school subject material. Included on the P2 website are links to all resources teachers need to deliver the PBL model in their P2 implementation. There is also a P2 Project Library for teachers to explore pre-developed available projects, all of which are differentiated by grade band (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12) for scale, depth, and rigor.

The P2 program was designed with a boots-on-the-ground approach (i.e., the belief that teachers know their students' needs and should be free to modify curriculum as needed) to promote teachers' uptake and delivery of the content. However, the creators of P2 designate consistency as the must-do of implementation. In their words, "Educators instill character strengths vocabulary and concepts through explicit teaching of each strength for at least 10-minutes per day, 5-days per week. Schools will typically dedicate a week to each strength to help students understand these concepts through definitions, examples, discussions, and exercises" (personal communication, 2021). Choices related to content being implemented are built in so teachers can engage their students as needed within the bounds of the

curriculum. Although adherence is important, equally important is engaging the students in the content.

The P2 content is delivered using PBL in a five-step process. Figure 1 contains a detailed breakdown of what happens in P2 partner classrooms. During Engage, students are exposed to an authentic challenge of helping other people better understand the importance of character strengths and positive relationships. The challenge offers personal connection, relevance, and choice. During Inquire, students explore the topic by gathering information and researching in a variety of ways. Graphic organizers are used to support student research and help teachers formatively support students. During Create, students make or propose a unique solution that synthesizes what they learned. The product may be a variety of options set up by the teacher or class. During Reflect, students go through structured opportunities to reflect on their work, both formatively and in a summative manner. Students are encouraged to use feedback to improve the quality of their product. Finally, during Share, students share their products with an audience. The audience ranges from peers, other classes, school leaders, parents, professionals, and community members.

What happens in P2 Partner Classrooms?		
Resource	Teachers...	Students...
Weekly Character Strength Slideshows are aligned with best practices in SEL programming and include transformative elements, focused on three sequential components: UNDERSTAND, ENGAGE, REFLECT	...pull up the weekly slideshow to provide 15-minutes of daily character strength instruction using weekly P2 slide presentations	... understand, engage with, and reflect on each character strength through definitions, examples, discussions, and exercises.
UNDERSTAND		
Slideshow Days 1 & 2	... introduce the character strength and its definition; share a quote or video clip to reinforce meaning ; conclude with discussion questions to formatively assess students' understanding build understanding of the weekly character strength; engage in whole group discussion with the teacher to clarify and demonstrate understanding .
ENGAGE		
Slideshow Days 3 & 4	... engage students with an activity centered around the weekly character strength;	... engage in an individual or group activity centered around the weekly character strength;

	conclude with discussion questions to formatively assess students' understanding.	participate in partner, small group, or whole group discussion to clarify and demonstrate understanding.
REFLECT		
Slideshow Day 5	... review character strength using a quote, video clip, or read-aloud and discussion questions. Provide students time to reflect on what they have learned about the weekly character strength.	... participate in a whole group discussion to clarify and demonstrate understanding of weekly character strength; individually reflect for ten minutes by writing or drawing pictures about the weekly character strength in their reflection journal.
Character Strength Word Wall consists of the 24 character strengths and serves as exposure to a common language and a valuable reference throughout the day.	...access and print the Word Wall PDF in shared P2 Visuals file; posts all 24 character strengths in the classroom; regularly refers to the Character Strength Word Wall throughout the day to promote a common language.	...regularly refer to the Character Strength Word Wall to support their own dialogue and their reading and writing
Character Cards provide a one-page, detailed look at each character strength	...print and post in the classroom; share as a web link or PDF on class website or in Google Classroom; print and send home to parents	...refer to Character Cards to support own understanding of the character strength; post a copy at home and share with parents
Project-Based Learning (PBL) Units provide students with additional opportunities to apply individual character strengths — and perceive the synthesis of multiple strengths — while making rich, authentic connections to school subject material. The P2 PBL process focuses on five sequential components: ENGAGE, INQUIRE, CREATE, REFLECT, SHARE.	... choose a unit from an online library of 30+ differentiated PBL Units; customize the unit to best meet the needs of their students ; pull up the selected unit's slide presentation to access all the necessary resources to successfully implement the unit.	... engage in an authentic, real-world task; take opportunities to research and inquire ; create a unique solution; focus on reflection and feedback; share their solution with an audience.

ENGAGE		
PBL Slideshow	<p>...engage students in an authentic challenge or task; pique students' interest and activate background knowledge; guide students in the creation of a "Need to Know" list</p>	<p>...engage in an authentic challenge; activate prior knowledge by viewing pictures, videos, and responding to thought-provoking questions to identify what they "need to know"</p>
INQUIRE		
PBL Slideshow	<p>...provide descriptions of Inquiry and examples of different ways to gather information</p>	<p>...explore the topic through inquiry by gathering information and researching in a variety of ways</p>
CREATE		
PBL Slideshow	<p>...determine options to create their solution based on available resources, time, curricular connections, student interests and opportunities for growth, etc.</p>	<p>...Students will create a solution to the original problem that synthesizes what they learned. Examples include: Presentations, debates, websites, TED Talks, apps, social media campaigns, PSAs, plays, exhibits, visuals, etc.</p>
REFLECT		
PBL Slideshow	<p>...create structured opportunities for students to reflect on their work and possibly go back and make changes</p>	<p>...go through structured opportunities to reflect on their work, both formatively and summatively; engage in self-reflection; provide peer feedback</p>
SHARE		
PBL Slideshow	<p>...establish an audience; establish routines for students share presentations with the audience</p>	<p>...practice communication and presentation skills; share their products with an audience; engage in active listening; provide feedback</p>

Figure 1. Positivity Project Classroom Activities

2.3 Procedures

In the first week of the 2021 school year, students in both schools completed an online survey answering questions about their sense of relatedness (see Measures). Both schools offered in-person instruction throughout the study. In December, students completed the same online survey to assess the degree to which students' feelings had changed. Students and teachers also completed separate online surveys in December where they were asked to reflect on their feelings about P2 and its implementation.

2.4 Measures

The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSNF; Chen et al., 2015) is a self-report measure of self-determination, which has been validated for use with school-aged children (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015). The 24-item scale measures the satisfaction (four items per need) and the frustration (four items per need) of the three psychological need constructs of self-determination (i.e., autonomy, competence, and sense of relatedness). Each question is scored using a five-point Likert-type scale with scores of 1-5 reflecting children's agreement with statements ranging from Completely Not True to Completely True. Total satisfaction (12 items) and total frustration (12 items) scores are available. A composite score of each need is achieved by reverse-scoring the frustration items and averaging them with the satisfaction items (Baard et al., 2004). Reliability for the subscales in previous research ranges from $\alpha = .76-.84$ (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015). In the current study, we used student responses for the relatedness subscale and reliability was acceptable for both elementary school ($\alpha = .81$) and middle school ($\alpha = .80$) students. To assess teacher fidelity, teachers self-reported in online surveys the percentage of available P2 materials they utilized during the study period. To assess social validity, students and teachers answered questions about their likes and dislikes of P2.

2.5 Design and Analysis

A pre/post case study design was used in this pilot study, as the intention was to gain an initial understanding of the effect P2 had on students and teachers in their respective settings (Yin, 2002). Separate analyses were run for elementary school students and middle school students, as collapsing them into one group was not a statistically sound approach. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SAS 9.4 and dependent sample *T*-tests were used to measure levels of change in students' self-reported sense of relatedness scores from August to December. Cohen's *d* ($M_1 - M_2/\sigma_{pooled}$; Cohen, 1992) was calculated for an effect size estimate.

3. Results

On a scale of 1 to 5, elementary school students ($N = 108$) self-reported the following sense of relatedness at pretest: $M = 4.01$ ($SD = 0.58$). At posttest, students' overall scores were as follows: $M = 4.23$ ($SD = 0.58$). Results from the dependent sample *T*-test indicated that from pretest to posttest, students experienced an increased sense of relatedness, which was

statistically significant, $t(214) = 2.68$, $p = .008$, and represented a small to moderate effect ($d = 0.36$).

On a scale of 1 to 5, middle school students ($N = 154$) self-reported the following sense of relatedness at pretest: $M = 4.17$ ($SD = 0.66$). At posttest, students' overall scores were as follows: $M = 4.39$ ($SD = 0.63$). Results from the dependent sample T -test indicated that from pretest to posttest, students experienced an increased sense of relatedness, which was statistically significant, $t(306) = 2.97$, $p = .003$, and represented a small to moderate effect ($d = 0.34$).

Regarding teacher fidelity, elementary teachers on average reported using 71% of the available P2 lessons/content during the study period. Middle school teachers on average reported using 75% of the available P2 lessons/content during the study period. As a measure of social validity, all five elementary school teachers and two middle school teachers reported they were *very likely* to continue using P2 moving forward. One middle school teacher indicated they were *likely* to continue using P2 and another indicated they were *not at all likely* to use the program. The one criticism of the program offered by the latter teacher was that the videos felt “too cheesy for middle schoolers.” When asked to identify their favorite thing about P2, 100% of elementary school students and 94% of middle school students identified a positive aspect of the program. The most common response across both groups of students was that P2 helped them to feel better understood by other people.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to assess the degree to which participation in a CE program based in positive psychology – P2 – was associated with an increase in elementary and middle school students' self-reported sense of relatedness. Results indicated that for both groups of students, exposure to P2 was related to significant increases in sense of relatedness, with small to medium effect sizes. This case study offers preliminary evidence in favor of P2, as related to one specific component of SEL. These findings are important because P2 is experiencing massive uptake in schools across the United States, with over 400,000 students enrolled in 27 states. Schools are required to use evidence-based practices when delivering instruction to students and although one study does not make a practice evidence-based, the current study does begin to make the case for P2 as a research-based approach to improving students' sense of relatedness, a key SEL skill for school-age youth.

4.1 Implications for Practice

Based on the positive results of this study related to students' sense of relatedness, we cautiously recommend schools consider use of P2 as a character education/SEL program because it appears to have positive effects for students' relationship quality with others. Teacher-student relationships, in particular, are a critical component of students' educational success.

The quality of relationships between students and teachers is strongly associated with students' academic, social, and behavioral success (Baker et al., 2008; Flückiger et al., 2018; Garwood & Van Loan, 2019; Roorda et al., 2011). Early formation of high-quality relationships (i.e., low conflict, high feelings of trust and closeness) with teachers places students on a trajectory for optimal cognitive development and healthy behavioral functioning well into their secondary years (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd & Burgess, 2001). On the other hand, relationship stress, or conflict, can exacerbate behavior problems and hinder social-emotional and academic growth (Meehan et al., 2003; Van Loan & Garwood, 2020a). Roorda and colleagues' (2011) meta-analysis indicated significant omnibus correlations between positive relationships and engagement and achievement. Furthermore, the most recent meta-analysis of intervention studies targeting teacher-student relationship quality demonstrates the power of relationships to improve students' behavior and academic achievement (Kincade et al., 2020).

Some researchers suggest that positive teacher-student relationships are the foundation of successful SEL programs (Gunter et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As teachers buy into the SEL curriculum and become more socially and emotionally skilled themselves (because of uptake of the content), they are better able to build relationships with their students (CASEL, 2007; Poulou, 2017a). Another possible mechanism is that as students experience the program, their social-emotional skills improve and they elicit more positive interactions from teachers (CASEL, 2007, 2010; Voegler-Lee & Kupersmidt, 2011). Poulou (2017b) found a significant and positive association between elementary teachers' delivery of SEL and teacher-student relationship quality. As students and teachers in schools attempt to move beyond the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational experiences, including fractured relationships with others, P2 may be a viable option for schools to consider.

4.2. Future Directions and Research Limitations

The current case study must be interpreted in light of research limitations, which can inform future research efforts focused on P2. First, students were not divided into treatment and control groups; rather, students served as their own controls in the case study approach. The gold standard for establishing evidence-based practices is use of randomized controlled trials to examine intervention effectiveness (Cowen et al., 2017). Future studies would benefit from random assignment of students' to intervention or control conditions, and to include an examination of multiple educational outcomes (e.g., academic, behavioral, social) for students. Second, reliance on teacher self-report of fidelity of implementation, although common in educational research (King-Sears & Garwood, 2020), is open to self-report bias and should be complemented by live or video observations of teachers' implementation practices. Third, P2 is designed to be a year-long intervention and future studies should examine the degree to which greater effects may be found if measurement is carried out across an entire school year. Finally, a larger sample size would allow for examination of differential effects for subgroups of students (e.g., based on racial/ethnic background). Although much is known about the effect of SEL in schools, there is a considerable research

gap on whether character education programs produce differential effects for students of color (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020; Rowe & Trickett, 2018).

A recent critique of SEL and its associated competencies is that it has traditionally adopted a color-blind ideology that does not consider systemic racial inequities in schools (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Griffin et al., 2020). Some researchers have questioned whether the value systems underlying most SEL programs currently used in schools are as relevant for racial and ethnic minority students as it is for their white counterparts (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jones et al., 2020), even questioning whether it may in fact be harmful (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Ethnic, language, and racial minority groups often experience reduced positive psychological outcomes because of prejudice, discrimination, and racism in society in general, and in schools (Dixon et al., 2020; Ponterotto et al., 2006). The next generation of SEL research is said to be in need of a transformative approach, meaning SEL needs to help mitigate the educational and post-secondary inequalities in society related to the nation's history of racialized oppression (Jagers et al., 2019). Transformative SEL is aligned with the mission of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) movements taking place across the United States (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). These conversations surrounding overlap between SEL and DEI are very much fluid in nature and shifting in real time, but they do call for an exploratory focus on the degree to which SEL programming supports marginalized students. The use of PBL, a cooperative learning approach used in P2, is one way of addressing SEL with a transformative lens, as it provides an opportunity for students “to work together to synthesize and cultivate critical academic, social, and emotional competencies, to include an iterative cycle of action, reflection, and refinement of strategies they enact to realize collective well-being in the broader national and international contexts” (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 179).

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