PSYCHOLOGY for TEACHERS

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⑤SAGE

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION: DEVELOPING APPROACHES

Chapter Objectives

- Develop an understanding of developing psychological perspectives that are influencing education, specifically positive psychology and transpersonal psychology.
- Consider the relationship between humanistic psychology and the branches of positive psychology and transpersonal psychology.
- Appreciate the contribution of 'flow' and the conditions to promote flow.
- Evaluate how developing perspectives of psychology relate to education.

Teachers' Standards		
A teacher must:		
4		Plan and teach well-structured lessons
	d.	Reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching
5		Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils
	b.	Have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn, and how best to overcome these
	c.	Demonstrate an awareness of the physical, social and intellectual development of children, and know how to adapt teaching to support pupils' education at different stages of development

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Consider the message from Chapter 1: there are a number of perspectives, or ways of looking at things. Additionally, although no one perspective provides the 'full picture', we tend to adopt a perspective that resonates deeply inside of us. Sometimes what resonates inside one person may not resonate with another and a 'tension' is formed. For example, consider popular approaches to discipline for younger children (often advocated on the television): 'the naughty step' or 'time out cushion' may well bring about a desired result through a behaviourist approach. However, such an approach may diminish a child's sense of self, if they perceive that their core being is being ignored, that they have to conform and suppress what makes them unique, that they will be a clone with a diminished sense of self (functionalism). If just one such incident becomes suppressed in the subconscious this in turn can be a foundation for a neurosis (psychodynamic theory). If a child has been 'punished' for talking out of turn about an exciting discovery they have made within their learning, being told to 'keep quiet', this could for example cause the child to progress into an adult who never really expresses what they feel, or is afraid to speak in front of others.

These previous fields of psychology have developed since 1887: Myers (2000) analysed over 100,000 abstracts published in 'Psychological Abstracts', suggesting that 90 per cent of these focused on psychopathology, the treatment of mental illness, for example, depression and anxiety, while the remaining articles focused on the positive aspects of psychology, such as altruism, life satisfaction. An assumption has been made that, if individuals are treated for existing problems through clinical practice, this will in turn lead to optimal levels of wellness (as discussed by Greenspoon and Saklofske, 2001). However Frisch (1999) questions this, reporting that many adults continue to experience dissatisfaction long after they have been treated. Consequently, Huebner and Gilman (2003) suggest an inclusive approach, where psychopathology is supported through research which helps to understand the factors that contribute to, and enhance, positive psychological well-being.

The enhancement of positive psychological well-being has a tradition of research within psychology. Indeed, a group of psychologists, notably Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, highlighted the negative effect that teaching can have on the individual, advocating humanistic psychology as a way of enabling the positive attributes within the individual. It is these positive attributes, and how to facilitate a positive approach to enabling these within the individual, which provides the focus for this chapter. Specifically, this will be achieved through analysing two further psychological perspectives: positive psychology and transpersonal psychology.

2.2 POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

What is it?

Maslow (1954/1987) first used the term positive psychology (which he also called 'orthopsychology') as an approach focusing on fully functioning and healthy

human beings. However, the term has become associated specifically with the work of Martin Seligman, since the turn of the millennium, as research in the area has burgeoned (Gillham et al., 2002; Hart and Sasso, 2011; Wong, 2011). Indeed, according to Yen (2010), positive psychology is the most popular course at Harvard University. Despite this recent reinterpretation and development of positive psychology, Beaver (2008) suggests that the interpretation is informed by many decades of previous research and in essence the concept is not necessarily new. Indeed, the focus of this interpretation of positive psychology still resonates with the work of Maslow and Rogers, in that it focuses on the positive features of human beings, and the experiences that make life worth living. Hart and Sasso (2011), however, warn that positive psychology has become as much a popular culture movement as it has a fledgling academic subject, which in turn has caused individuals to consider the field as 'happiology' or the science of happiness. Consequently, a more refined, academic definition is provided below to define the field further.

Many attempts have been made to define positive psychology, which suggests that the term remains a lucid concept with a variety of definitions (Linley et al., 2006). For example, Sheldon and King (2001: 216) suggest it is 'the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues', a definition similar to Engler's (2006) assertion that it focuses on the positive features of human beings that make life worth living. Such positive features are classified by Robbins (2008) as positive subjective experience (including flow, joy, optimism), personality traits of thriving individuals (character strengths and virtues) and enhancing social institutions to sustain and develop positive subjective experience (Cowen, 2000; Rich, 2001; Robbins, 2008). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) refer to these areas as the *three pillars* of positive psychology, each of which should serve as a foundation from which research in the field should develop. These are summarised in Figure 2.1.
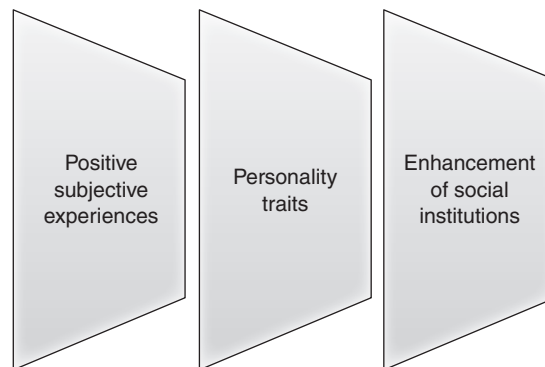

Figure 2.1   The three pillars of positive psychology

Further attempts at defining positive psychology have focused on the range of con-structs central to the field. Such an attempt is provided by Huebner and Gilman (2003) who suggest the following areas: self-concept, hope, socially responsible behaviour and emotions, flow, emotional competence, life satisfaction and positive school attitudes. Hart and Sasso (2011) conducted further analysis of definitions to examine how positive psychology had been interpreted and redefined over the pre-ceding decade. From their research, they conclude that the majority of research has focused on the first two pillars, (i) positive subjective experience and (ii) personality traits, with limited research into the third pillar of enhancing social institutions. Indeed, the third pillar appears to be the most problematic given the lack of research to support it (Gable and Haidt, 2005; Martin, 2006).

From this brief introduction to positive psychology, the area can be summarised as aiming to enhance individuals and institutions, specifically focusing on enhancing our natural resources as opposed to addressing deficits. Needless to say, as teachers, focusing on the positive is central to our practice.

Reflection

Consider positive psychology applied to the classroom.

- What are the positive experiences children have demonstrated in one of your lessons?
- What are the positive attributes you would see in a child who is enjoying your lesson?
- What are the positive attributes demonstrated by a teacher who enjoys teaching?
- What character attributes would you expect to see in a positive learner?
- What makes a happy classroom?
- What makes a happy school?

Reflection

What would you deem to be the positive qualities fundamental to the growth of children?

2.3 SCHOOL-BASED RESEARCH WITHIN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

One of the core features of positive psychology is the focus on empirical research: specifically Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) asserted that research is required to ensure the field is a scientific contribution to psychology as a subject, while also distancing positive psychology from humanistic psychology, which they claimed lacked a research tradition.

Many research studies have been reported adhering to the different pillars of positive psychology and associated themes and concepts outlined above. As an indicative example of such research findings, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) reported that optimistic or happy people perform better, are less depressed, have fewer health problems and have better relationships. Danner et al. (2001) noted that people who report more positive emotions tend to have longer, healthier lives. Additional research into the subjective experiences of flow, optimism, and happiness have similarly reported positive results (Carr, 2004; Linley and Joseph, 2004; Snyder and Lopez, 2007).

In reference to children many researchers have advocated positive psychology as a significant approach for future development. Specifically, Gillham et al. (2002) observe that interventions to promote inner strengths within children have long been sought by parents, teachers and community leaders, to ensure children are more resilient to a variety of problems associated with modern life such as depression, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour or violence. Despite their assertions about promoting such strengths, Gillham et al. (2002) comment that the majority of research focuses on remediation of existing problems as opposed to the development of positive qualities in children. Furthermore they comment that such research produces varied findings, with the effects of various studies seldom being replicated.

There are four strands that unite the research on the positive development of school-aged children, identified through existing literature (Baker et al., 2003; Noddings, 2003; Park and Peterson, 2003). These are:

- Resilience (the process of adapting positively to adversity);
- Developmental assets (developing positive relationships, competencies, self-perceptions and values to succeed);
- Social-emotional learning (promoting social and emotional well-being);
- Subjective well-being (the individual's experience of the positive qualities of their life).

Although various authors have suggested that research is limited within the third pillar of positive psychology, enhancing social institutions (Gable and Haidt, 2005; Hart and Sasso, 2011; Martin, 2006), a number of publications have sought to address this criticism through conducting research to strengthen this pillar (Donaldson and Ko, 2010; Delle Fave and Bassi, 2009; Korunka et al., 2009). Specifically within education, for example, Baker et al. (2003) suggest that schools can function as psychologically healthy environments if they address and in turn challenge children's developmental needs.

2.4 FLOW

One significant area of positive psychology is Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 1996, 2000, 2002), which he defines as 'a panhuman,

species-specific state of positive psychic functioning' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 364). What does this actually mean? (And how do you pronounce Csikszentmihalyi? Working backwards, thankfully the man himself informs readers of his books that his name is sounded as 'chick-sent-me-high-yi'.) As for his definition of flow, it would be worth asking you to consider a time when you have been lost in the moment while engaged with an activity: this is a state of 'flow'. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) characterises flow as a state where one is absorbed, where there is a sense of control but loss of self-consciousness, where action and awareness merge and a transformation of time occurs.

By being able to recognise flow within your own life, in turn, this should enable you to help others experience flow. Although flow appears to happen spontane- ously, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) provides a model which provides the 'anteced- ents' or conditions for flow, the behaviour or characteristics of being in the state of flow and the consequences or outcomes of flow. These are summarised in Figure 2.2.
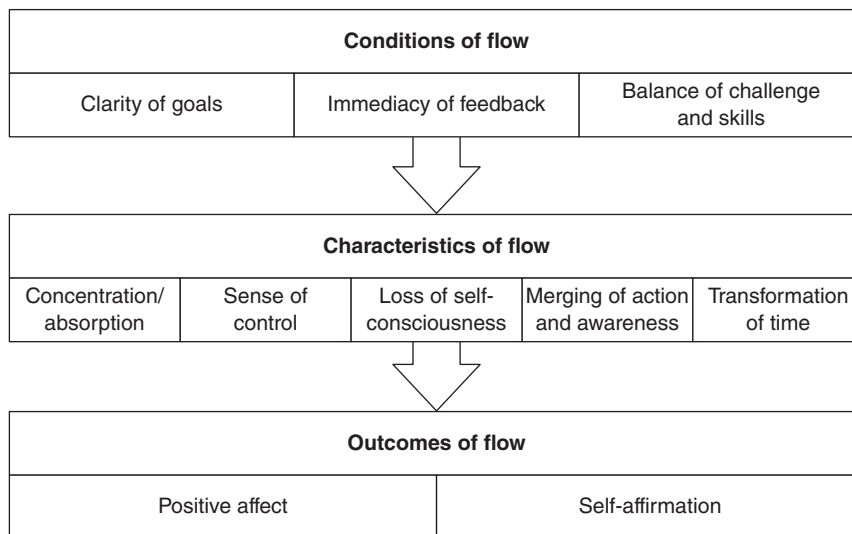
Conditions of flow		
Clarity of goals	Immediacy of feedback	Balance of challenge and skills

Characteristics of flow				
Concentration/ absorption	Sense of control	Loss of self- consciousness	Merging of action and awareness	Transformation of time

Outcomes of flow	
Positive affect	Self-affirmation

Figure 2.2   The conditions, characteristics and outcomes of flow (adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)

Looking through these characteristics, consider a time when you were totally lost in an engaging activity, where time seemed to slow down (a common feature in a staff meeting!) or speed up (how quickly does Monday morning come after a Friday afternoon?). Such an example could be when driving on an open, undulating

stretch of road, being lost in a computer game or some other sport or hobby, perhaps even when a lesson you have been teaching has gone really well and all the elements just came together. Such states of flow can occur in a multitude of contexts as described, and indeed, 90 per cent of people recognise the flow experience, an experience which is intrinsically motivating and enjoyable, and an experience which has an end in itself rather than some other end product (Boniwell, 2006).

What is the 'purpose' of this state? Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988: 367) report that 'the function of flow … seems to be to induce the organism to grow … fulfilling the potentialities of the organism'. Additionally Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988: 367) discuss that the outcome of flow is pleasure; that 'pleasure ensures that the organism will be motivated to repeat the behaviour necessary to maintain its homeostatic balance'. Consequently, if you can recall one lesson which went perfectly, you are likely to want to bring about that feeling again and again, developing and refining your teaching to bring about such optimum conditions. This concept of continually wanting to make improvements relates to reflection, as discussed in Chapter 5.

2.5 DEVELOPING FLOW IN THE CLASSROOM

There will be times when you can recognise the flow state within the children you work with, when they are so engrossed in an activity that they do not appear to be engaged in the lesson or their wider surroundings. Many a female teacher has experienced being called 'mum' by a child fully engaged with their work: indeed, this is a widely reported phenomenon amongst colleagues we have worked with. However, do you allow the child to continue in this state, or do you end it abruptly because you need to move on with the lesson?

By ending the lesson abruptly for that child, you are robbing them of a fundamental experience which may be pivotal to their education: an experience which in years to come they may still remember as their most wondrous learning experience. What if they have been 'robbed' of such an experience and realise that their learning is not intrinsically motivated and that they have to be continually answerable to what the curriculum demands at that point of time on a Thursday afternoon? This in turn creates a dilemma for the teacher in what they consider to be the purpose of teaching: is it to facilitate the curriculum to the best of their abilities; alternately, is it to engage children with the joy of learning, and through so doing equipping them with an insatiable thirst for further study?

In recognising the state of flow in a child, as a teacher you can thus aim to ensure that you provide the antecedents or conditions to encourage the flow state, not only for one child but for the class. By working through Csikszentmihalyi's model, specifically the three conditions of flow, it is possible to structure lessons which facilitate the flow experience.

(i)   Clarity of goals

What are the objectives for the lesson? Do the children know exactly what they have to do? Do they have the right resources to engage? What are the children expected to do? Do they know (and understand) what they need to do?

(ii)   Immediacy of feedback

How does a child know that they are correctly engaged with the lesson? How do they know that they are advancing, or getting things right? Being able to provide immediate feedback is the optimum condition here; this is not easy when you have thirty in the room. As such, consider activities that either have no right or wrong answer, or activities that implicitly enable the child to know that what they are doing is correct.

(iii)   Skill/challenge balance

This is perhaps the hardest condition to establish given the multitude of individuals in the class. There are four potential scenarios of ensuring the skills of the child meet the challenge of the lesson as demonstrated in Figure 2.3.

		Skills	
		Low	High
Challenge	High	'It's too difficult!' or 'I don't think I can do this!' (Anxiety)	'This is great!' or 'I'm really enjoying this!' (Flow)
	Low	'Why do we have to do this again?' or 'Why should I bother?' (Apathy)	'This is too easy!' or 'I'm bored with this!' (Boredom)

Figure 2.3   The skill/challenge balance (adapted from Whalen, 1998)

Although the skill/challenge balance appears to be an important element in facilitating flow, according to Voelkl et al. (2003), the skill/challenge balance has been overemphasised in research and other factors may account for higher incidents of the flow experience.

In addition to these criteria, Shernoff et al. (2003) discuss three further conditions for flow: concentration, interest and enjoyment. In relation to *concentration*, flow experiences are developed through setting a learning context which requires deep absorption in an activity. As Shernoff et al. (2003) report, gifted and talented teenagers

concentrate more than their peers during learning activities, but less while watching television or when engaged in social activities. They suggest that being able to concentrate for more complex mental tasks upon demand may in turn lead to achievement and talent development.

Additionally, *interest* in an activity is a characteristic to promote flow, which in turn provides a foundation for continued motivation and the subsequent engagement with learning. In relation to self-determination theory, if a learner is interested in an activity, they will invest more resources to develop their learning, through self-directed study (for example, reading around the subject, working with others, discussing the subject). Finally, *enjoyment* is fundamental in promoting flow. If a learner enjoys their work, this promotes feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment, which in turn encourages the learner to engage further with their learning (Shernoff et al., 2003).

Consequently, there are six areas as discussed above to promote flow in the classroom. These are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1   Conditions to promote flow

Teacher	*Student*
Clarity of goals	Concentration
Immediacy of feedback	Interest
Skill/challenge balance	Enjoyment

To what extent are all of these elements the responsibility of the teacher? Can you be responsible for promoting concentration, interest and enjoyment within your learners? Surely interest and enjoyment are subjective aspects: we are all interested in different things, and we all enjoy different things. However, this is a superficial statement. As a teacher, within our practice we should ensure that we aim to provide interesting and stimulating lesson content, perhaps taking the driest of topics and finding a way to make these as engaging as possible. Taking science as an example, specifically the force of gravity, a number of activities can be introduced into a lesson. For example:

- Making paper helicopters and comparing how the wing span affects gravity through the increase of air resistance (equal and opposite forces). This could be extended through adding varying numbers of paperclips to the helicopter and predicting, then recording, what happens.
- Illustrating how the centre of gravity operates through using a 'plumb line' with different two-dimensional shapes, before progressing to make a balancing parrot, and perhaps extending the lesson to see if the learners can make different balancing animals (for example, a monkey balancing from its tail, a snake and so on).

- Encouraging the learners to sit upright in a chair, with their back touching the back of the chair, their feet on their floor and their arms crossed, then asking them to stand without leaning forwards. This reinforces where the centre of gravity is in ourselves, and could be extended with trying to balance in different ways in a gym class.
- Experimenting with a ball of malleable material (Blue-Tak or Plasticine) to make an object that floats, thus demonstrating a different opposing force to gravity, that of upthrust.

There are countless other examples you could consider with gravity, and the same can apply to any aspect you are responsible for teaching. Obviously developing such creative lessons demands time for planning and obtaining the resources, yet the reward for the learners, and in turn, the teacher, outweighs such demands. In addition, the third element listed in Table 2.1, enjoyment, may be a by-product of such engaging lessons.

How can the teacher promote concentration? This is an aspect addressed fully in Chapter 7, although in brief, if mental fitness is the same as physical fitness, both need to be trained with increasing demands. By concentrating fully on one stimulus (such as breathing), concentration can be improved. This relates to the concept of 'mindfulness', which is discussed below.

2.6 CLASSROOM STUDIES ON FLOW

A number of studies have been conducted in relation to flow in the classroom. According to research flow has been shown to promote learning and development among secondary school learners (Parr et al., 1998; Whalen, 1998). Egbert (2003) investigated flow states in a secondary language classroom, and although she highlighted that flow can and does exist, she could not fully explain why flow existed. She was unable to report whether one element is more substantial in promoting flow than other elements. Egbert (2003: 517) adapted a previous questionnaire to assess flow states which is reproduced here.

Perceptions Questionnaire

Participants responded to each of the following items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Questions 3, 4, 10 and 12 were reverse-scored.

   i.   This task excited my curiosity.
  ii.   This task was interesting in itself.
 iii.   I felt that I had no control over what was happening during this task.
 iv.   When doing this task I was aware of distractions.
  v.   This take made me curious.
 vi.   This task was fun for me.
viii.   I would do this task again.

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viii.   This task allowed me to control what I was doing.
  ix.   When doing this task, I was totally absorbed in what I was doing.
   x.   This task bored me.
  xi.   During this task, I could make decisions about what to study, how to study it, and/or with whom to study.
 xii.   When doing this task I thought about other things.
xiii.   This task aroused my imagination.
 xvi.   It would do this task even if it were not required.

According to Meyer and Turner (2006), flow integrates cognition, motivation and emotion. Their research indicates that learners are likely to report more non-flow experiences when the lesson does not engage them fully, and the teacher dominates most of the lesson through talking as opposed to the learners actually being engaged in activity. Such non-flow activities are characterised by apathy or boredom. In addition, their research indicated that, where learners' skills outweigh the demands of the lesson (culminating in boredom), learners actually reported higher levels of happiness, although they did not report pride in their achievements. This is an important highlight, in that lessons that have a high degree of challenge and a high degree of learner involvement do not necessarily equate to positive learning experiences for learners.

Many of these studies outlined above focus on secondary-school pupils and there appears to be a limited range of literature relating to flow in the earlier years of education.

2.7 THE FUTURE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY RELATED TO EDUCATION

By the very nature of teaching, and the sense of inherent and integral professionalism, teachers are seldom 'happy': there is always something else they could have done, should have done or would have done, if they had the time or more resources. Arguably, such self-criticism (or reflection) spurs teachers to achieve their best within the classroom, yet a fine balance needs to be sought to prevent over-reflection where the teacher is unable to operate effectively due to self-doubt. Consequently, if a group of inspectors told you (and your setting) to be 'happier', or indeed measured your happiness with suggestions on how to improve, how would you react? If the following day everyone was wearing fixed smiles, and telling you how wonderful you look, would you feel that this was sincere, or the outcome of the inspection?

Indeed, this scenario demonstrates one of the fundamental criticisms against positive psychology, that it has an inherent value system which calls into question the impartiality of the empirical research tradition advocated within positive psychology (Held, 2002; McDonald and O'Callaghan, 2008; Miller, 2008; Sundararajan, 2005). Furthermore, the ideals of positive psychology have been discussed as being

ethnocentric, with the suggestion that positive psychology is informed through American ideals which may not be equally shared by other cultures (McDonald and O'Callaghan, 2008).

McDonald and O'Callaghan (2008: 128) similarly discuss how positive psychology has produced and defined what is a 'positive' human experience. In turn they suggest that positive psychology has established a prescriptive set of constructs, which in turn can refute alternative perspectives within psychology. Additionally, Miller (2008) questions whether one's life should necessarily be governed through setting and achieving goals, and whether a person's traits, emotions, thoughts and feelings can be consciously managed or controlled through the approaches advocated by positive psyhology. If flow is taken as an example, Boniwell (2006: 28) warns that the pursuit of flow may not necessarily be desirable, that 'activities in which flow is found can be morally good or bad', specifically highlighting addiction to flow. Take, for example, the workaholic who never spends time with family or friends because they enjoy working so much to bring about the 'flow'. Consider compulsive gambling, serial killers, or indeed any activity taken to extremes which may harm oneself or others. Consequently, as opposed to the field of 'positive psychology', such hedonism could actually be deemed to be a 'negative psychology', where growth is not the ultimate goal, yet the thrill of the flow experience is.

Furthermore, Martin (2006: 308) questions whether positive psychology is actually any different to educational psychology, commenting that both focus on 'creating conditions for optimal human learning and development'.

Finally, Leontiev (2006: 50) states that 'positive psychology today is an ideology rather than a theory … There is no unified theoretical explanatory model behind them at this moment.' Perhaps analysis of other related disciplines within psychology can help provide such a unified theoretical model.

Consequently, although positive psychology may continue to receive attention, the reader should be critically aware of some of the tensions that exist in the field and possible future directions. Among these future directions, Linley et al. (2006) suggests that the field may be embedded within different areas of psychology, in turn redressing the balance of the predominant focus psychology has previously had on the negative side of human beings. Alternately, it may revisit earlier psychological perspectives, such as humanism, and analyse these earlier perspectives through a new lens. Additionally, positive psychology may engage with a more active dialogue with other academic disciplines (such as sociology, economics, science). Needless to say, further work in relating positive psychology to education is similarly required.

2.8 TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Transpersonal psychology can be dated to Maslow's writings *c*.1966, suggesting that the former humanistic psychology should be part of the field of transpersonal

psychology. However, Daniels (2011) suggests that the actual field of the transpersonal dates to William James and his Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1901–2, which culminated in the publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*. Since its inception, transpersonal psychology has remained relatively obscure, despite its many inherent themes dating back to the foundation of psychology's conception (Daniels, 2005; Fontana, 2005).

What is transpersonal psychology? Simply defined, the transpersonal has been interpreted as 'beyond the person' (Daniels, 2005; Ferrer, 2002; Fontana and Slack, 2005), although this is a limited definition which does not really convey the focus of the field. Some suggest that the field is the psychology of spirituality (Daniels, 2005); others that it is a combination of elements blending Western psychology with Eastern contemplative traditions (Ferrer, 2002; Fontana and Slack, 2005; Miller, 1991). Indeed, perhaps the greatest criticism of transpersonal psychology is the multiplicity of definitions and the conceptual uncertainty about the content of the field; it has come to mean different things to different people (Cunningham, 2006).

Through an analysis of thirty-five years of research into transpersonal psychology, Hartelius et al. (2007) identified three encompassing themes: beyond-ego psychology, integrative/holistic psychology and the psychology of transformation. Taking these in turn, beyond-ego psychology relates to examining the ego (the realistic sense of the 'self', or the part of the mind which controls behaviour through perception, cognition and memory, as discussed in Chapter 1), the aspects that can impact on the ego and exploration beyond the ego. Integrative/holistic psychology relates to the development of a single, unified field of psychology which examines the whole person, for example, explaining how our thinking, emotions and physical self, relate to one another. The third theme is concerned with understanding how we can cultivate growth as individuals and as communities. Hartelius et al. (2007) respectively refer to the themes as the content (the actual transpersonal states), the context (through which human experience is studied, for example, the beliefs, attitudes and intentions) and the catalyst (where such growth relates to personal and social transformation), as demonstrated in Figure 2.4.

Succinctly defined, the field of transpersonal psychology examines what it means to be an integrated, fully functioning human, while seeking to continually improve and refine ourselves (individually and collectively) through a process of personal transformation (Hartelius et al., 2007). Areas within transpersonal psychology range from meditation, intuition, inspiration, altered states of consciousness, compassion, developing a moral code, promotion of inner harmony (Fontana, 2003); creativity, peak experience (Rowan, 2005); states of absorption or experiences of deep connection (Daniels, 2005); through to examining values and beliefs about the meaning of life and the nature of reality (Jankowski, 2002): in other words, a sense of transcending the individual's sense of everyday reality. How can such an approach relate to education?
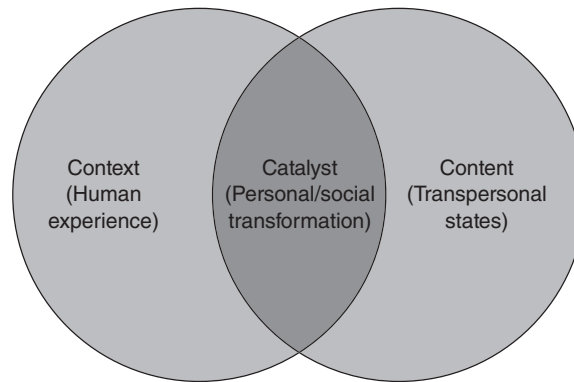
Figure 2.4 The themes of transpersonal psychology (based on Hartelius et al., 2007)

Hartelius et al. (2007) assert that the themes within transpersonal psychology can be applied to many areas, including education, to promote a more inclusive society, for example through promoting social action. At a time of exponential global change, being centred and in control, while working for the greater good of ourselves and humanity, may indeed be a vision for the future to tackle the problems caused by greed or anger. Indeed, certain authors advocate that education is perhaps the most significant area of future inquiry and exploration within the field of transpersonal psychology (Cunningham, 2006; Rothberg, 2005); however the area has remained significantly dormant. Indeed Maslow's writings seldom discuss education, despite every learner teacher being aware of how the 'hierarchy of needs' relates to motivation. To date, only two books have been written on the subject, both of which date back to the 1970s, although Buckler has made an attempt to ignite further debate in this area, revisiting the themes within existing research and revisioning them for the present day (Buckler, 2011a, 2012, 2013).

2.9 TRANSPERSONAL EDUCATION

Transpersonal education may be deemed as an approach to education that explores three interacting domains, where a domain is an area of 'development' and these domains develop at different rates. So, the cognitive (intellectual), affective (emotional) and psychomotor (physical) domains combine to facilitate personal transformation to enable the child to become a healthy, self-actualised or indeed, self-transcended adult, in turn transforming society (Buckler 2011a).

Taking the component parts of this definition further, an integration of the various personal domains have been promoted by a variety of authors to promote healthy development of the individual (Moore, 1975; Roberts and Clark,

1976; Rothberg, 2005). The concept of personal transformation relates to personal change and development to elevate the individual beyond their self-centred existence towards a more satisfying, or valuable condition (Daniels, 2005). Through the process of transformation, the individual can achieve their highest potential (self-actualisation) and even progress beyond this, achieving greater heights of being (self-transcendence). The term self-transcendence has lacked a clear definition (as discussed by Daniels, 2005; Friedman, 2002), although Buckler (2011b) has referred to Maslow's original interpretation, which is characterised by the themes of developing a sense of calmness or serenity, mindfulness and an appreciation of the interconnectedness of life, while appreciating one's own mortality. Consequently, the concept of self-transcendence can be seen as an awakening, similar to the themes often portrayed in the 'Hero's Journey' (Campbell, 1949/2012), displayed in such films as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. To illustrate this concept further, Bach (1977/1998: 134) writes, 'What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.' As a result of such personal transformation, the individual can make a more positive contribution to society, and subsequently, the more individuals can work together beyond their personal sense of self, the greater the development of the society.

How should such an educational approach be developed practically? Ralph Tyler identifies four fundamental areas in his principles of curriculum design:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (Tyler 1949: 1)

In essence, these can be summarised as relating to the *policies* (which identify and establish the purpose of the curriculum), the *principles* that inform how the curriculum should be organised and the *practices* that inform the educational experiences which enable the curriculum to be fulfilled.

In relation to the *policies* governing transpersonal education, the original definition previously discussed provides the justification: that the focus should be on integrating the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains to facilitate personal transformation. The focus shares a similar emphasis to the areas of humanistic and positive psychology, that of personal growth, yet whereas the former areas do not make direct reference to educational practices, transpersonal education has educational practice as the foundation from which to develop the integral dimensions of the child.

In facilitating such transformative practices, Maslow (1971/1993) asserts the need for both parents and teachers to continue with their own personal development in order to prevent their own patterns of behaviour being conveyed to the child. For

example, if a parent feels that their toddler is 'testing the boundaries' by dropping food on the floor, rearranging the furniture, removing cushions, throwing objects, along with a multitude of other such behaviours, the parent may get cross with them, perceiving the child to be 'naughty', and therefore enforce a range of discipline measures (for example, the 'time out' step as discussed in the introduction to this chapter). Yet the behaviours exhibited by the toddler are all examples of 'play schemas', or patterns of play, where the child is exploring and making sense of their world (Nutbrown, 2011; Wood and Attfield, 2005). For example, dropping food or throwing objects relates to the trajectory schema, rearranging furniture can be explained through the transporting, positioning or enclosure schema. Understanding schemas explains the developing child's behaviour, consequently, if a parent gets cross with a child for such behaviour, aiming to diminish rather than encourage the pattern of play, the child is being denied a chance to develop and make sense of their world.

A further example of how a parent's behaviour may be conveyed to a child is through driving: if a parent is precious about the stretch of road they are currently driving on and the driver in front is going too slowly, the parent may display signs of frustration. Or perhaps a minor misdemeanour from another road user manifests in the parent providing a sign of agitation, for example some form of gesture. The child travelling in the car may in turn believe that it is fine to lose their temper with others in an aggressive way. Yet if the parent does not feel threatened by other road users and is in control of their cognition (how they perceive other road users), their emotions (whether or not they feel personally threatened by other road users) and their subsequent psychomotor displays (whether they indicate the error of another road user's ways through some form of gesticulation), then the developing child can see a calm and collected adult as a model for their own behaviour.

☁ Reflection

Consider how teachers you have experienced in the past may have limited their learners.

How should transpersonal education be organised? In other words, what are the guiding principles central to such an educational approach? Buckler (2012, 2013) asserts that there are a series of general themes that can be derived through the transpersonal psychology literature; themes which may resonate with educational practitioners as they serve as models of effective practice. For example, one such principle is that learning should be joyful (Maslow, 1971/1993; Moore, 1975); that learning should be promoted through developing the learner's intrinsic curiosity (Maslow, 1971/1993); that the learner should

develop as an autonomous learner through a process of self-discovery (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Kirchschenbaum, 1975; Rogers, 1961). Furthermore, such an educational approach should be value-free and promoted by the teacher in the role of a facilitator (Maslow, 1971/1993; Kirchschenbaum, 1975; Rogers, 1961) and education should promote lifelong learning (Maslow, 1970). These are summarised by the outer circle on Figure 2.5.

There are similarly a number of specific principles which outline the operational considerations for transpersonal education. One central feature is that education should relate to the discovery of the inner depths of the individual, in an attempt to explore the essential human nature (Maslow, 1970). Indeed, this theme resonates throughout transpersonal psychology: what does it mean to be human, and how can we develop our own and others' inner resources to become the best we can be? In addition, such an educational approach should encourage the consideration of the interconnectedness of various elements (Moore, 1975; Rothberg, 2005), as such, what Maslow (1971/1993) calls a 'unitive experience'. An example of this theme is illustrated by O'Brien (2008) in her discussion of 'sustainable happiness' and how this relates to education. O'Brien (2008) asks the reader to consider drinking a cup of coffee: the process of drinking the coffee and the direct relationship to this process can be related to mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2001, 2004),
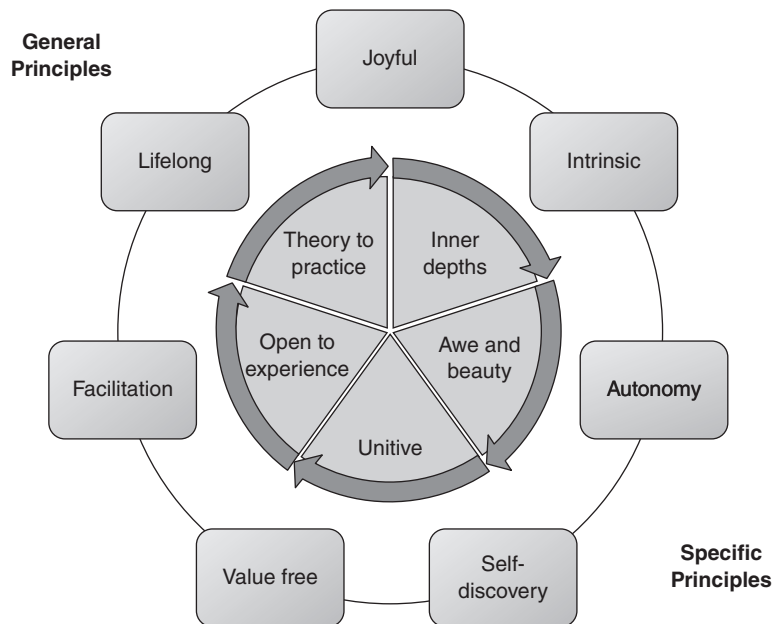

Figure 2.5   The principles of transpersonal education (Buckler, 2011a)

although the wider relationship to the process should also be considered. For example, is the coffee Fair Trade (where the coffee plantation has been grown with respect to the environment, the workers on the plantation having been paid fairly), in other words, the emotional impact at the expense of drinking the coffee with regard to other people and the environment? Taking this further, did the person who boiled the kettle use just enough water to make the cup, or was energy 'wasted' through overfilling the kettle?

A further specific principle of transpersonal education is that of the importance of experiential learning (Rogers, 1961; Roberts and Clark, 1976). Being open to experience means that learning is contextualised and brought to life; learning does not just exist in the classroom environment but in our wider surroundings. The development of 'Forest Schools' and the 'Outdoor Curriculum' are testament to how such a principle is currently being put into practice. A final associated principle suggests that theory should be linked to practice whenever and wherever possible, again to contextualise the learning (Rothberg, 2005).

Although the guiding policies and practices of transpersonal education have been outlined, what are actual *practises* to promote the transpersonal? Buckler (2011a, 2013) provides a representative series of practises which he warns are indicative and not meant to be an exhaustive or prescribed list.

One area which has received a lot of attention in recent years is the development of 'mindfulness', this relates to any practice where a person concentrates fully on a physical task, such as breathing, eating, drinking, exercising or a cognitive task, for example watching one's thoughts without judging them, just allowing them to arise without any subsequent attention. Such mindful practise is an attempt to synthesis the mind and body to be here in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2001, 2004; Rothberg, 2005). Arguably, mindfulness is not a new concept: the effects of other practises, such as meditation, have an established research tradition (Roberts and Clark, 1976), indeed mindfulness has its roots in various Eastern and Western contemplative practises.

Mindfulness research with school-aged children is currently gaining momentum. For example, mindfulness has been used as a form of therapy with children (Bell, 2009) while mindfulness-based cognitive therapy has been discussed by various authors (Lee et al., 2008; Wisner et al., 2010). In addition, further studies have used mindfulness as a way of reducing stress in primary teachers (Gold et al., 2010).

Roger Walsh has also identified a series of 'perennial practises' which he suggests are found globally to promote transpersonal development. These practises are summarised as: redirecting motivation, transforming emotions, living ethically, developing concentration, refining awareness, cultivating wisdom, practising service and generosity (Walsh, 1999).

In summary, the *policy* central to transpersonal education is that it should unite the cognitive (intellectual), affective (emotional) and psychomotor (physical) domains to facilitate personal transformation to enable the child to become a healthy, self-actualised or indeed, self-transcended adult, in turn transforming society.

The *principles* behind a transpersonal education should be value-free and joyful, promoting learner autonomy through a process of self-discovery. Additionally, transpersonal education should encourage exploration of the essential human nature and the way in which the person relates on a larger scale to other people and nature, whereby a sense of awe and beauty can be promoted. Such experience should capitalise on linking theory to practice through experience.

In *practice*, a transpersonal education can be promoted through a range of practises advocated by Walsh, for example, developing concentration through mindfulness. How could such a transpersonal education be utilised within the education context? Moore (1975) provides three suggestions: (i) apply the transpersonal to existing subjects; (ii) select activities and studies which lead to an awareness of the transpersonal; or (iii) incorporate many new areas into the curriculum.

2.10 CONCLUSION

The themes identified above are not new: arguably many of the individual elements have been advocated and utilised within education previously, for example, Rudolf Steiner considered the role of spirituality within education and the interplay between the cognitive, emotional and behavioural development of children (McDermott, 2010). Yet transpersonal education attempts to synthesise such past and present elements into a coherent framework for the 21st century. Such a framework has been absent from alternate perspectives on psychology, such as positive psychology, although many of the themes discussed within this chapter demonstrate how positive psychology and transpersonal psychology overlap. Indeed, Kantor (1975) suggested that a thorough investigation of our inner world is required to rival and surpass space exploration in interest and importance: given the current monumental social, economic and political changes, one could question the exponential budgets invested in particle accelerators and the theoretical musings of the edges of the universe at the expense of the wonder of being human.

This chapter has however sought to provide an indication of how education may develop in the coming years and to keep an open mind about such developments: can we really still adhere to a curriculum model which provides the same 'diet' of subjects as prescribed in 1905 yet, in England and Wales, was only formalised in 1988? How do you see the curriculum developing over your lifetime as a teacher (which could be another forty or more years)? What changes would you like to implement to ensure that the children of today are equipped to be the adults of tomorrow?

Having progressed through the first two chapters which provide the theoretical basis for various psychological perspectives, the following chapters focus on the practicalities of using psychological approaches within your practice. Fundamental to your teaching is you, and although this chapter has discussed themes of personal growth, what are the core attributes of a successful, or effective teacher? This will be explored in Chapter 3.

2.11 Further reading 📖

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000) *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

This summarises Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and how it may be applied in different contexts.

Grenville-Cleave, B. (2012) *Positive Psychology: A Practical Guide*. London: Icon Books.

This book provides a clear, coherent overview of positive psychology and how it may be applied.

Hartelius, G., Caplan, M. and Rardin, M.A. (2007) 'Transpersonal psychology: Defining the past, divining the future', *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 35 (2): 135–60.

This research paper provides an overview of transpersonal psychology including the defining trends within the area.

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