



## Book Review

# The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education By M. L. Kern and M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds). Palgrave Macmillan. 2021. \$59.99. ISBN: 978-3-030-64536-6

Caitlin Donnelley-Power and Vanessa Dominguez

Loyola University Chicago

### ORCID

Caitlin Donnelley-Power: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5401-389X>

Corresponding Author: Caitlin  
Donnelley-Power; email:  
[cdonnelleypower@luc.edu](mailto:cdonnelleypower@luc.edu)

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In our current educational landscape, mental health and well-being have become an increasingly urgent focus of education research, policy, and practice as schools grapple with COVID-19, racial injustice, and the pressures of capitalism. Positive education, an emerging discipline that applies positive psychology in schools, is one response to the importance of well-being in child development. Positive education considers how learning environments can build “capability for wellbeing” for individual stakeholders and school communities as a whole (p. 8). It seeks to reconsider what education is for by challenging the tendency to equate academic success with happiness and instead focuses on well-being as central to child development. Positive education has been critiqued as a discipline for its lack of engagement with structural factors, which shifts responsibility for well-being onto the individual. Kern and Wehmeyer situate *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education* within “third wave” positive education literature that engages critically with the boundaries of positive education, including how positive education and wellbeing manifest for different cultures and embedding approaches to well-being in the community context. Across this volume, authors seek to engage with critical scholarship on positive education and offer readers an introduction to crucial problems, emerging questions, and areas of further exploration within the discipline.

The Handbook is broadly organized into three distinct sections, the first introducing various perspectives and approaches to positive education, the second focusing on positive education pedagogy, and the third engaging with positive education research across different cultures and populations. The first section situates the reader in the discipline by identifying positive psychology’s underlying assumptions and philosophy. In this section, Arguis-Rey (chap. 2) frames the central challenge of positive education



scholarship as being rooted in the need to move away from siloed, stand-alone practices and toward embedding contextualized well-being practices at all levels of the school community. Across this section, authors connect various approaches to positive education to critical issues in the discipline, including a lack of focus on teacher well-being,<sup>1</sup> lack of accessible, low-cost positive education resources,<sup>2</sup> and the need to consider schools as systems consisting of dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments.<sup>3</sup> Several authors in this volume describe a need for positive education as a discipline to engage with structural dynamics that impact student opportunities to build well-being skills. Brunzell (chap. 8) explores these intersections through a trauma-informed approach to positive education that critically examines the role of trauma in learning and capacity for well-being. This chapter makes a compelling case for trauma-informed positive education as a framework for students and teachers to engage with generational, institutional, and relational trauma that impacts perceptions of self-efficacy, agency, and the structurally informed opportunities youth have to develop and practice skills for well-being.

Part two of the Handbook, “Core Capabilities in Positive Education,” departs from broad approaches to positive education to consider the critical “capabilities” of well-being, where capability is defined as the “fluid, dynamic, and interwoven formation of skills, knowledge, opportunities, choices, and behaviors that emerge as a dialectic between a person and the environment” (326). According to Oades et al. (chap. 13), focusing on capabilities (as opposed to competencies) provides a framework for examining the confluence of individual agency, growth, and structural opportunities. Capabilities addressed in this book include well-being, literacy, coping, and resilience, among others. Buchana and Greig (chap. 20) offer a compelling argument in their chapter “Shifting Mindsets: Transforming Self, School, and Society,” in which they explore the relationship between individual mindsets and the “unfolding of human potential”(494). A commitment to a mindset shift, coupled with a deeper analysis of social relationships and care for the community as a whole, has the capability to transform and heal the root causes of trauma. In doing so, educators are committing “to transform [their] way of seeing and being in the world towards a more caring, inclusive, and interdependent perspective that is wide enough to include the wellbeing of all” (503).

The third and final part of the Handbook titled “Diversifying Positive Education” is primarily concerned with how the meaning of “well-being” shifts depending on the student and their socio-political position and experience in the world. Joshanloo et al. (chap. 26) highlight that the vast majority of existing scholarship on well-being has been

conducted by Western researchers, where much of it privileges conceptions of well-being based on an individualistic perspective. Interpretations of well-being however vary significantly across cultures, and as such, a limitation of existing literature is the lack of a broader conceptualization of well-being.

Although several authors describe the need for positive education to grapple with the relationship between student well-being and systemic power and oppression, a deep analysis of such structural forces, including xenophobia and racism, is largely beyond the scope of this volume. Moving away from the hyperfocus on individualism and well-being toward a focus on environmental, socio-political, and community factors that influence well-being will further the potential for the discipline to be a catalyst for educational transformation. As a praxis, positive education would benefit from a deeper social, political, and relational analysis, considering the well-being of students *in* schools is highly dependent on their well-being *outside* of school. Without a deep analysis of structure, this text is limited in its capacity to present strategies for the educational transformation and liberation necessary for student, and teacher, well-being. Despite these limitations, this Handbook adeptly captures important premises, debates, and areas for further analysis within the discipline. Most importantly, it identifies pathways and practices for school systems to support and cultivate the well-being of their students and community within existing structures, making it a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and other school stakeholders.

**Caitlin Donnelley-Power**

Loyola University Chicago

**Vanessa Dominguez**

Loyola University Chicago