Positivity in Action: Character Education through the Positivity Project

Justin D. Garwood

University of Vermont, United States.
Email: justin.garwood@uvm.edu

Abstract

Recently, a new program – The Positivity Project (P2; https://posproject.org/) – has been developed to address key implementation challenges for teachers. P2 is a professional development program focused on teacher's use of project-based learning and a universal student character education curriculum that provides educators and students with tools to support socio-emotional skills through daily, 15-minute learning modules across the school year. In this article, we (a) explain the theory informing P2, (b) detail key implementation components, (c) include real-life accounts from students and teachers using P2 across K-12 and alternative settings, and (d) provide suggestions for evaluating the impact of P2 for those schools considering implementation. The P2 program is informed by positive psychology, a strengths-based approach to instruction that is well-suited to support students with disabilities. Currently, there is promising evidence of P2 effectiveness that could be classified as practice-based evidence (see https://posproject.org/). Schools wishing to explore use of P2 may wish to consider the best ways to measure the effectiveness of the program. One option is the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth, which was developed to assess the 24 character strengths from positive psychology and has been translated into multiple languages.

1. Positivity in Action: Character Education through The Positivity Project

The social, emotional, and behavioral components of schooling are critical to students' overall educational success (Jeynes, 2019). Social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions produce both immediate and long-term benefits for students (Luo, Reichow, Snyder, Harrington, & Polignano, 2022; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). School leaders are in search of high-quality SEL experiences for all students (Taylor, 2021); however, the research-to-practice gap between what empirical studies show as effective and what teachers implement in the classroom is problematic. Only about half of all teachers implement SEL interventions as designed (Low, Smolkowski, & Cook, 2016; Low, Van Ryzin, Brown, Smith, & Haggerty, 2014). Struggles related to ease-of-use, adaptability to different school contexts, and teacher buy-in are common barriers to high fidelity (Han & Weiss, 2005). Recently, a new program – The Positivity Project (P2; https://posproject.org/) – has been developed to address these key implementation challenges for teachers. P2 is a professional development (PD) program focused on teacher's use of project-based learning (PBL) and a Tier-1 (i.e., universal) student character education curriculum that provides educators and students with tools to support socio-emotional skills through daily, 15-minute learning modules across the school year. In the 2021-22 school year, P2 had an enrollment of 760 partner schools and over 418,000 students in 26 states. According to P2 developers (personal communication), teachers enjoy using P2 because (a) of low-prep

materials designed for 15-minutes of direct instruction saves time, (b) of student self-reflection, (c) a common vocabulary around character strengths promotes a stronger classroom and school community, (d) age-appropriate content engages students, (e) P2 is applicable to the "whole student" and benefits them inside and outside of the classroom with a focus on strengths and relationship building, and (f) students become intrinsically motivated to look outside themselves and positively impact other people.

2. Character Education and Positive Psychology

Character is a multidimensional psychological construct (McGrath, 2018). Many states now mandate or encourage school-based character education programs or curricula. Character education is often viewed as a form of SEL (Elias, Parker, Kash, & Dunkeblau, 2007; Humphrey, 2013; Jones & Doolittle, 2017) because character strengths are intrinsic values and ways of behaving and thinking that promote positive relationships and goal attainment (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These outcomes (e.g., achieving one's goals, building social relationships) are of paramount importance to all students, especially those with emotional and behavioral difficulties who struggle with prosocial skills (Garwood & Adamson, 2022). For much of history, emotional and behavioral difficulties have been treated as a disorder to overcome or a disease to be cured. The deficit model of education placed undue stigma on many students, which is why more and more schools are embracing three-tiered models of support, such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS). However, PBIS does not specifically address students' character education. Behaviorism represents the underlying theory informing much of the work done in PBIS, but there are other theories that also adopt a positive lens to students' education. For example, positive psychology is the study of optimal human functioning and wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In fact, positive psychology provides a framework for using a strengths-based approach to serving students because rather than looking to identify and remediate struggles, positive psychology suggests the first question should be, "What is *right* with the student?" (Raley, Shogren, & Cole, 2021). 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). When maximized, students' positive traits (e.g., optimism, gratitude, perseverance, kindness, honesty) can help buffer against the risks inherent to their psychological or environmental challenges (Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiusseppe, 2004). A common critique of positive psychology is that it pays little attention to the negative experiences of a person's life (Held, 2004; Lazarus, 2003). On the contrary, positive psychology, which is separate and distinct from growth mindset ideology, does not ignore the negatives, but instead suggests the most effective way to overcome difficulties is to build on the strengths one already possesses rather than focusing exclusively on the problem (Diener, 2009). Positive psychologists are not attempting to replace other field's paradigms or theories of addressing wellbeing; rather, they simply offer an alternative and supplemental approach (Niemiec, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2017). "The ability to identify areas of strength can provide researchers and practitioners with important information to design interventions, engage in instructional planning, and support students' social, emotional, and academic needs" (Raley et al., 2021).
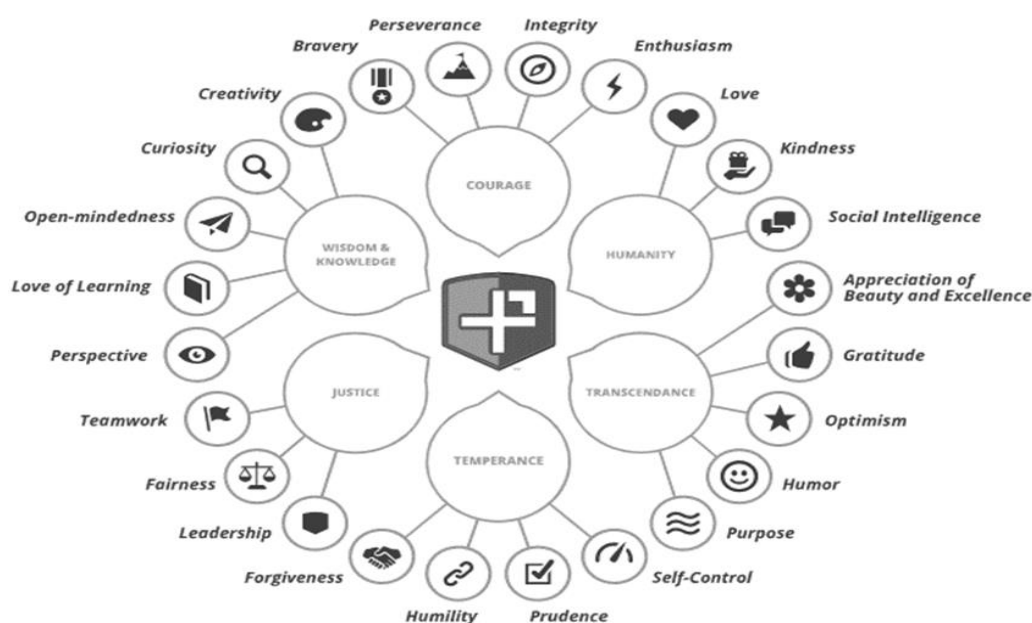

Figure 1. 24 Character strengths from positive psychology within P2.

3. The P2 Program

The P2 program is grounded in positive psychology and it targets the 24 unique and malleable character strengths (e.g., perseverance, enthusiasm, optimism, self-control; (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) established in positive psychology to help all students become their best selves (see Figure 1 for all 24 character strengths delineated in positive psychology and included in P2). In addition to taking a positive approach to intervention and the promotion of positive behaviors, which increases teacher buy-in and fidelity (Owens & Waters, 2020) the P2 program creators claim it was specifically designed to provide educators 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 discussion of the content to their individual students, P2 also aims to foster the teacher-student relationship because students feel their teachers are offering content that is relevant to them. A positive relationship between teacher and student is said to increase fidelity during interventions (Sutherland, McLeod, Conroy, & Cox, 2013). P2 resources, which are differentiated by grade levels PreK-12, provide teachers with zero-prep tools to teach character building and relationship skills. P2 provides Partner Schools with detailed lesson plans and weekly slide presentations that teachers use for 15-minute daily character strength instruction. Through its implementation strategy playbooks, differentiated for elementary, middle, and high school, P2 also provides Partner Schools with tools and recommendations for school-wide implementation, classroom implementation, and connecting P2 to students' homes.

The only empirical study of the P2 program involved a case study pre/post design and results indicated a correlation between P2 implementation and positive change in students' self-reported feelings of relatedness to others (Garwood, 2022). Although non-experimental, the study did provide pilot data regarding the potential of P2's effect on students with and without disabilities in a demographically diverse sample. The P2 program is available for use with students grades PreK-12, and includes grade-level differentiated materials. It has been used in many school settings, from general education classrooms to juvenile justice facilities. Below, a testimonial (see *Note* at end of the article) is provided from a principal of an elementary school that recently adopted the P2 program in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking to the strengths of P2 in teaching life skills.

P2 was introduced to our students mid-year last year and changes in classroom dynamics and communication among students were immediately apparent. Students did more talking and less shouting. They became problem solvers as conflict situations arose. Team building ideas were suggested by students based on what they had seen other students do in the P2 videos and stories. Of course, the decision was made to continue P2 for the 2021-2022 school year.

For some classes, the Positivity Project is part of the morning meeting. For others, it is linked to social studies or part of the settling down process after recess. The students look forward to this time of their school day. In addition to the character-building content of the lessons, students are learning how to effectively share their thoughts while actively and respectfully listening to the ideas of others. This is a life skill that our students are in need of. Our youngest learners are incorporating character trait vocabulary into everyday conversation. When asked about the character traits that have been introduced, students express themselves in concrete ways that show practical understanding. When a kindergartner was asked what being present meant to her, she responded with words and accompanying hand motions, "Your eyes are on your teacher, focus and listen. Have your bottom sit criss-cross applesauce. No talking voice."

Creativity resonated with the second graders. The week was filled with original doodles and indoor recess creations. One student was proud to share a creation he had made at home using the back of a used coloring sheet. A P2 story that was shown in class the day before was his inspiration. One student gave an explanation of animation as an example of creativity. During a science exploration of forces of motion, a student used colorful paper clips to create "a weave" on a magnetic head. Students had never thought of linking the paper clips before. Soon there were suggestions of how to create braids with long strands and other elaborate hairstyles, creating a collaboration that was not part of the original lesson plan but certainly just as valuable. Older students were able to give insightful encapsulations of the meaning of creativity. One student described creativity as making your imagination come true.

Open-mindedness week inspired a bulletin board in third grade. Students expressed their willingness to try new things. Some of the experiences that were shared included flying in a plane, going to a museum, and pie-ing someone in the face. New foods were included such as sushi, macaroons, and black licorice. One student would like to live in the same house for three years.

Our school is rural and small and our students have experienced challenges in their homes and communities. As a result, the school climate is much like an extended family. It is a place where students can feel safe and respected. P2 has provided a routine structure for showing our students they have limitless potential to make a difference. The delivery of the program is engaging, mindful of student attention spans, well suited to fit into the school day, and elicits thoughtful responses. We have found that P2 aligns perfectly with the mission of our school to break the cycle of generational poverty by providing education and resources and supporting our focus on vital life skills.

The P2 program was helpful for this rural elementary school serving mostly low-income students. However, it has also been shown effective when used with adolescents with emotional and behavioral struggles being served in a juvenile justice facility. Below, a testimonial is provided by the principal of a juvenile justice center.

Every year our administration reminded us that we must teach character education to the students in our care at the Detention Center. Every year we received resources for teaching character education, and every year we struggled to figure

out how to implement the videos, articles, and "ideas" we received. To be honest, I just didn't feel connected to any of the ideas we were getting. Of course, there are many reasons for teaching character education in schools, such as developing good citizens and helping students get along with others, but I always felt that there was something we weren't doing that was key to the whole character education effort. Then my PE teacher came to me one day about four years ago and said, "I've found this new program called The Positivity Project. I think we should check it out." He sent me information on the program, and I watched the introduction videos. We talked about it, and decided this was what we were looking for: a research-based, positivity-focused program that is well-defined and serves an easy to identify purpose – to build better relationships. We have been using P2 for about four years now; we were even able to continue using it during the pandemic when teachers were at home sharing lessons via the computer.

The first thing I appreciate about The Positivity Project is the body of research that reinforces the power of the twenty-four character strengths and #OtherPeopleMatter. If you've ever been asked by a student, "Why do we have to do this?" you can appreciate research-backed ideas! When you ask kids what they think will provide them the most happiness in life, they never say "good relationships." The Positivity Project reinforces that idea with solid information in a format that is meaningful and shareable with students. This is how we start our P2 program every year. I repeat it many times throughout the year as well as a point of focus because our population changes all the time, and it's just a great starting place for answering, "Why do we do this?"

The second aspect of The Positivity Project I appreciate is its ability to blend seamlessly with our behavior management system. About ten years ago our facility took a hard look at what we were doing with our kids to manage behavior. As you can imagine, a juvenile detention facility has its share of behavior problems. People trained in corrections have a certain mindset that is based on safety, security, and often, punishment. While we have to maintain safety and security, our superintendent also felt that we have to consider the welfare of our youth in detention, and to that end, she brought in a team to help us shift our behavior management program to PBIS, or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Once our program was designed and the staff was trained, the benefits we saw were immediate. Placing the focus on a positive outcome for detainees completely changed how people interacted with kids and one another. The number and length of consequences dropped drastically. When I examined The Positivity Project, I saw immediately its connection to the framework of what we were already doing here. In fact, we were able to blend the #OtherPeopleMatter ideas right into our classroom rules that focus on Respect for Self, Respect for Others, and Respect for the Environment. Likewise, we are able to tie in the weekly character strength to our behavior management system as well as our curriculum.

The third appreciation I have for P2 is its well-defined purpose. This goes back to that original question of "Why do I have to do this?", we often hear from kids. "What's in it for me?" can be answered by simply stating that identifying, strengthening, and using your own positive characteristics to approach life will lead to a happier life. We have watched kids transform again and again, from disrespectful to respectful, from challenging to cooperative, and from ungrateful to grateful, just by modeling appropriate behavior, sharing learning experiences, and using character strengths to build relationships. My only male teacher uses our weekly discussion to talk to our boys about societal expectations. He shares insights and ideas with them and tries to help them understand that gestures such as showing kindness and practicing forgiveness are not signs of weakness, but of immense strength. I stand in awe of the conversations he has with these young men some days.

I can honestly say I have never felt so good about a character education program in my teaching career. I can actually see this program working every day. Each week that we touch on new strengths, we are all reminded of our potential to be better human beings. We have truly seen a transformation in our program since we began using The Positivity Project.

4. Implementation of P2

The P2-school partnership, which is initiated by schools using the P2 website, involves online delivery of all PD training and materials. During the PD training at the beginning of the school year, school staff use the P2 100 online video to lead a 3-hour staff-wide training on teaching students about the 24 character strengths from positive psychology. Schools are provided online access to the P2's digital resources, training, and strategies. This includes staff-wide access to 32 weeks of grade-level differentiated slide presentations for daily, 15-minute lessons. The slide decks provide teachers with ready-to-go materials for each day of the school year. Each slide package includes a 3-5 minute opening activity (e.g., a video to watch, a short group exercise), following by a discussion about the specific character strength. The discussion is facilitated by the teacher using guiding questions provided in the slide deck for each day. These off-the-shelf materials ensure consistency across classrooms and schools in delivery of P2 content. Although teachers are not allowed to edit the specific slides or P2 provided resources (e.g., videos), teachers do have the autonomy to extend the content from the lessons. For example, teachers can create bulletin boards to reinforce character strengths and the Other People Matter theme of the program, as well as holding assemblies on character or even extending the ideas from these lessons into service-learning projects to serve community needs.

In one rural high school, students and staff created a Positivity Club, with a mission to make a difference in their community. Their mission was put into action through creation of a food pantry. Detailed on the P2 site, one student explained the project.

Looking back at where we started, you could have asked me if I thought that this market would become what it is now, helping our school, senior citizens, and our entire community. I probably would have told you, "Maybe, but that probably won't be for at least 2 years or so". The amount of growth that we've had shows the difference that we've been able to make. Not just for the students and families in our community, but the difference that it has made for those of us who work in the food market. When we are packing the orders, critiquing our systems, even restocking our shelves, this is making a difference in us, too. It shows us how helpful our food market is to people in our community. Our mission with the food market is to maintain a sustainable direction so that we can continue to provide food for anyone that needs it. We do this by building relationships with our local businesses, community members, and continuing to do what we do best- helping other people. At the beginning of the year, we sent out donation lists with items for the food market. Within a week of having posted the lists, we received donations from people within our school, community, and from local businesses. The most important part of maintaining this food market is continuing to build our relationships with our community. With their support, we are able to sustain the food market. Continuous support will allow us to grow, so we can expand and offer more.

In a rural middle school, the principal explained how P2 has impacted the school community and its culture. *I cannot imagine our school without The Positivity Project. We have found P2 to be a perfect fit for middle school students' developmental and social-emotional needs. But the impacts of P2 have reached beyond students. P2 has also shaped the experiences of the adults in our building – and played a critical role in developing our identity and culture as a school. At this point, if I were to start a school year by announcing that we would no longer be doing P2, I think there would be a revolt; it has become such a fundamental part of what we do and who we have become.*

The P2 program was designed with a boots-on-the-ground approach (i.e., the belief that teachers know their students' needs and can be trusted to extend discussion of the content beyond the scripted slide decks) 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 dedicate a week to each strength and Other People Mindset element to help students understand these concepts through definitions, examples, activities, and discussions" (personal communication). Additionally, a morning meeting is a time where a classroom comes together to engage in activities that promote positive relationships within the classroom community. It provides opportunities to practice citizenship skills and a safe classroom community.

In addition to the daily slide decks, P2 provides schools with 30 PBL lessons, P2 for Families, and digital files for print that allows schools to create P2 apparel and signage to distribute at the school (included in program cost, which ranges from $2,995 to $3,995 per school). Table 1 contains a highlight of P2 resource features. 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 P2 mission, 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 level for scale, depth, and rigor.

The optional PBL component of P2 is delivered in a five-step process. During Engage, students are exposed to an authentic challenge of making the world a better place – through the lens of improving themselves, others, and the community. 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.

P2 is aligned with best practices in SEL programming (Humphrey, 2013). It is a universal program aimed at promotion of social-emotional skills and includes teachers delivering lessons that last all year and thus may have greater effects on student learning and development. Finally, it adopts a bottom-up approach that allows teachers flexibility regarding which lessons to teach and the context in which they are taught.

Table 1. Features of the positivity project resources.

Teachers...	Students...
...help students maximize their unique positive character traits.	...learn to recognize and maximize their unique positive character traits.
...take a positive approach to intervention and the promotion of positive behaviors.	...learn to use positive character strengths to help buffer against the risks inherent to their psychological or environmental challenges.
...have the autonomy they need to meet their students' individual needs.	...engage with relevant content.
...foster strong teacher-student relationships.	...develop strong student-teacher relationships.
...provide 15-minutes of daily character strength instruction using weekly P2 slide presentations that are aligned with best practices in SEL programming.	...build character strengths and better able to build relationships with others.
...instill character strengths vocabulary and concepts through explicit teaching of each strength, focusing on three sequential components: understand, engage, and reflect.	...understand, engage with, and reflect on each character strength through definitions, examples, discussions, and exercises.
...enable students to apply individual character strengths – and perceive the synthesis of multiple strengths – while making rich, authentic connections to school subject material.	...apply individual character strengths - and demonstrate an understanding of the synthesis of multiple strengths - by making rich, authentic connections to school subject material.
...have unlimited access to the P2 Project-Based Learning Library's optional, pre-developed units, all of which are differentiated by grade level for scale, depth, and rigor.	...explore authentic, real-world tasks and challenges while developing a system for thoughtful problem-solving.
...have the option to deliver P2 content using project-based learning units that focus on five sequential components: engage, inquire, create, reflect, share.	...advance their understanding and application of the 24 character strengths and the Other People Mindset through the five sequential components of PBL: engage, inquire, create, reflect, share.
...promote and foster a shared language by posting Character Cards and Character Strength Word Wall in the classroom.	...refer to Character Cards and Character Card Word Wall to support own understanding of the character strength; post a copy at home and share with parents.

5. Will P2 Work for Your School?

Is P2 considered an evidence-based program? To date, no, it is not. Experimental research on the program is not yet available. However, there is promising evidence of effectiveness that could be classified as practice-based evidence (see https://posproject.org/). Schools wishing to explore use of P2 may also wish to consider the best ways to measure the effectiveness of the program. In other words, monitoring the progress of this Tier-1 character education program on the ability to improve students' emotional and behavioral development is likely of importance to any school considering adoption. One option to consider is the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) which was developed to assess the 24 character strengths from positive psychology and has been translated into multiple languages (Raley et al., 2021). The 24 strengths are organized into six virtues (e.g., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence). The VIA-Youth contains 96 items (4 for each of the 24 character strengths); takes approximately 30 minutes to complete; and when used with students with and without disabilities ages 10-22 years, it has demonstrated strong reliability (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lang, Niemiec, & Seo, 2017). Items (e.g., I am always kind to other people [Kindness], I get excited when I see there is something new to learn [Love of Learning], I have a lot of patience [Self-Control]) are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale assessing how similar the characteristic is to the student ranging from 1 (Not Like Me at All) to 5 (Very Much Like Me).

Of course, there are many ways to measure effectiveness and impact of a program (e.g., comparing academic proficiency levels year to year, counting changes in behavior data such as office discipline referrals and suspensions/expulsions, rates of absenteeism). It is up to each school staff to decide what works best for them. Regardless of which program evaluation metrics chosen, we do encourage schools considering use of P2 to visit the P2 website and explore the testimonials from school staff and students of all ages who have experienced the program.

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