# Educational Leadership through Positive Education - Reigniting Imaginative Curiosity in Language Teacher Training

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## Abstract

*The concepts in this paper link to wider socio-economic and technological trends and to the emerging realities and opportunities of an ever-more connected planet. The future will see the transformation of the teacher into a guide, mentor, critical voice, evaluator and pioneer of what is possible. This is intimately connected with leadership paradigms. A key aspect of fostering such innovative educational leadership will be the integration of Positive Education principles and techniques. This paper therefore looks at the key factors in undertaking this. It refers to extensive work with language teachers internationally undertaken by the authors and the issues identified in working at the forefront of change. A critical task is to re-appropriate a sense of strategic direction in altered landscapes. There is a profound revolution occurring in educational systems all over the world. In an environment of escalsting crises and development of pervasive advanced technologies, many challenges to traditional teaching models are evident. In addition, levels of stress and anxiety among teachers are reaching unprecedented levels. The emergence of many negative feelings in schools and among teachers creates the need for a more comprehensive, professional teacher profile - as one who facilitates learning through humanity and simply delivering lectures. Teachers are at the forefront but many are stressed and overwhelmed by fears and problems. There is a need to recapture passion, curiosity and human values.*

**Keywords:** *Pl Leadership; Positive Education; Change Management; Educational technology.*

## 1. Overview

Education can be broadly conceptualized as a process of socialization achieved through transmission of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In this broader perspective, a range of social agents and institutions (family, peers, media, workplace, political, religious and other civil society organizations), as well as formal and non-formal education systems, are all involved in this process of socialisation. Education, whether formally or informally constituted, is part of a matrix of learning systems designed to facilitate transition to social autonomy, engagement and participative involvement in society. While formal education is by no means the only, or even the most important, channel for such socialization, educational systems and schools remain key to this process. They act as key formal agents that articulate explicit public policy into the learning paradigm intended to maintain and reproduce society and its relationships. In general terms this leads us to two key conceptual formulations. One is the role of *leadership*. The other is *power*. And in the world of formal education and structure, these two dimensions engage powerfully with wider notions of identity and expectations for the maintenance (or transformation) of stratified social relationships.

Educational systems are therefore intimately connected not only to wider systems of identity and authority as understood and expressed in the State, but are also subjected to the more general stresses and tensions in the socio-economic system. As schools have been compelled to become part of the economic system, subject to its rationale, they have also been subsumed into business models of operation where monetary efficiencies outweigh all other factors. This creates new paradigms of social relationships and behaviors within the school system. However, beyond socio-economic development rationales, national education systems also have fundamental social, civic and political functions related to the formation of citizenship (and to the strengthening of national cohesion and identity). This is especially so in the teaching of languages. In doing so, schools have a crucial role in promoting the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to enable learners:

- to develop a sense of shared destiny through identification with social, cultural, and political environments.
- to become aware of challenges posed to the development of their communities through an understanding of issues related to patterns of social, economic and environmental change.
- to engage in civic and social action in view of positive societal participation and/or transformation based on a sense of individual responsibility towards their communities.

This places a focus on the need for renewed and invigorated educational leadership in a transformed world. It means a rediscovery of the joy and potential of openness and creativity in looking at how language learning (and other subjects) relates not to an assumed world of standardized 'normality' but rather to other identified areas in the matrix of globalization and intercultural competence. This new orientation opens the possibility of alliances, methods and strategies based on human rights, evidence-based best practice, autonomy, Artificial Intelligence, collaborative teaching/learning and a global approach to meaningful inclusion.

## 2. Leadership, Motivation and Global Contexts

All current school reform efforts aim to improve teaching and learning. But there are huge differences in how this is done. All approaches, however, depend on the motivations and capacities of leadership. Leadership essentially concerns itself with organizational improvement. In more precise terms, leadership concentrates on establishing widely agreed, valued and worthwhile directions (both strategic and tactical) for the organization and implementation of everything that is required to stimulate, motivate, guide and support people to move in those directions (Fullan, 2016). A generic definition of leadership – especially impactful and effective leadership – is quite elementary: it is about direction and influence. Thus, if *stability* could be described as the goal of what is called "management", it can be said that *improvement* is the goal of leadership.

Teachers work with students at a time of profound change. This change is partly at personal level with students who are discovering themselves, learning about personal responsibility, and finding their place in the world. Partly the change is at school/structural level where education is exciting, challenging, and endlessly shape-shifting. Knowing what the issues are - for students, teachers, parents, society and policy makers – requires collaboration to achieve optimal outcomes for all involved in the learning process. And partly the change is at policy level where significant issues impact. These can include:

- Uncertainty regarding the school mission and values
- Restricted government financial support, coupled with increased oversight
- Lack of meaningful strategic planning
- Weakened linkage with expected outcomes, especially in terms of employability
- Uncertainty manifested in disruptive behavior and absenteeism.

At such a time, teachers and administrators need to define clearly the principles guiding their institutions and their responsibilities to the community and to society. With the dizzying transformation of pedagogy, teachers require more professional support and development. The pace of change demands significant levels of creativity, flexibility, agility, and advocacy. It is also critical to realize that the external environment in which education exists and functions is changing profoundly. The rate of this change is actually accelerating and all schools face pressures and external factors that will transform the environment completely over the coming decades.

Education in today's world represents a powerful and evolving set of relationships, a networked web of public, private and social factors that respond to an ever-increasing set of change factors. From being the most visible element in the assertion of rank, hierarchy and power in past centuries, education now is a market of competing ideas and visions concerning its the role in the communities of which it is part. Schools increasingly search for scarce resources among other competing interests. In this context, schools face the importance of the critical role of partnerships, linkage and strategic joint ventures to achieve shared goals in a transformed external environment.

Globalization and the impact of ever more sophisticated information and communications technologies means that students and teachers can discuss, encounter and contact each other over vast distances instantaneously. It also means that the reach and scope of such technologies is now available across the planet. Such a transformation, in such a relatively short time, poses huge challenges for traditional structures and institutions. People can now compare and contrast issues, debate and contrast situations and have access to examples of diverse approaches and standards rapidly.

Throughout all Member States of the EU - and indeed in countries all around the world - there is growing concern about the capacity of traditional education systems to change, adapt and provide an appropriate foundation for lifelong learning. It has become urgent for governments to review the ways in which schools are organized, the content of curricula, modes of delivery, design and location of places of learning and the integration of advanced information technologies into the overall educational structure. In such an environment, it is important to evaluate and re-assess the role and function of schools in our society and the relationship between education and families, employment, business, enterprise, culture and community.

### 3. Towards Positive Education

Developing an assertive positive approach is transformative for teaching methodologies, inclusion and teacher motivation. The Positive Education approach and value-system instills not just optimism but purpose. And purpose - like motivation - is the foundation for all learning. This will be illustrated with many concrete examples and model strategies. In this paper we have referenced workshops, seminars and training sessions conducted internationally since 2020 where issues around teacher needs have been linked to new opportunities based on affirmation and support in a pioneering series of structured events. Giving hope and encouragement is a first step in advancing a new model of teacher training that values validated competence in contexts of meaningful and sustainable transformation.

All the data and information above come together in one single affirmation and confirmation: only being a teacher with a certain level of academic skills who delivers a lesson and checks his/her task list without aspiring or trying any schemes of continuous professional development is not a profile that works in the demanding school, educational context of today. Educators need to move beyond and become mentors, coaches, educational leaders, motivators, and catalysts. They must challenge by example as well as facts anything that may obstruct learning and its natural evolution.

Positive Education is not simply a trend or a mindset but a new scientific field which stemmed from Positive Psychology after years of research, implementation and experiments. Dr Suzy Green and colleagues define Positive Education as "applied Positive Psychology in education" (Green et al.,2011, p. 16). It looks like Dr. Martin Seligman (the founder of the Positive Psychology movement) knew very well that Positive Psychology would be in a way "redundant" if it were to remain as just another "academic subject or science." Positive feelings are useless if they cannot be conveyed, generated or shared, and that is, perhaps, the main reason why Dr Seligman stayed for almost nine months at Geelong Grammar School in Australia, where he was invited to find implementations of Positive Psychology practices in school classrooms. The school staff and the teachers became the leading evangelists of positive ideas within classrooms, leading to the creation of many PosEd (Positive Education) programs worldwide. The director of studies at Geelong Grammar School at that time, Justin Robinson, epitomized all the above ideas and concepts in one phrase: "Positive Education is not taught! It is caught"! (The Positive Education Podcast).

Transitioning from educating to "positive educating" requires personal and professional change, development and, sometimes, even growth. It is a process that may be long or short but requires minimum personal interventions and sufficient training from any teacher who decides to follow it. If we are to simplify but accurately approach the meaning of the process above, we could affirm that an educator does not need a university degree to be kind and zestful (one of the virtues and character strengths as defined by Positive Psychology). Still, teachers need scientific training to know how kindness and zest can benefit their students and how they can help them find these. Below, we attempt to analyze the changes needed for educators personally and professionally. It is important to stress that the personal transition should precede the professional transition.

The personal transition for any prospective positive educator starts from three pivotal individual steps.

- **SELF REFLECTION** - An ongoing, personal, individual process which helps educators realize where exactly they stand regarding the concept of Positive Education and if they would like to follow it. One of the frameworks which can be used as a point of reference is the "Reflective Cycle" by Richard Gray, which describes the three basic steps of this never-ending, ongoing and consistent procedure. Educators become receptors of information and input; they reflect on it and then introspect by filtering and judging it according to their standards, thoughts, experiences or goals. The result of this process can yield the first conscious, individual decision for an educator to go or not go down the positive education pathway.
- **SELF-INTERVENTION** - Once the educator decides consciously to follow the PosEd pathway, it is essential to realize that his credibility, passion and confidence for implementing positive practices lies in his own experience with all these practices. Thus, the PosEd practitioner must apply many, if not all, of these practices to himself before practicing with others. The educator needs to test the effectiveness of positive practices, boost his competency in applying them and regularly reflect on their improvement. The Positive Educator needs to practice what he preaches.
- **TAKING ACTION AND BECOMING THE EMBODIMENT OF POSITIVE EDUCATION -** Reece Coker defined the importance of practice through embodiment regarding Positive Psychology practitioners in his diagram "3 Pillars of Practice" (Index 2). The practitioner and the scientist must be fully updated regarding their scientific field of interest, constantly practice all the theories at the frontline and, above all, become the embodiment of their science. Imagine a "positive educator" who is rude to his students, shows no empathy for them, and his attitude creates stress and anxiety. No matter how many degrees, qualifications, or distinctions have on positive feelings and psychology, it is impossible to transmit positive feelings with negative attitudes.

## 4. Shaping Positive Education in Language Learning

As we mentioned above, the practices of positive Education in the classrooms can be long, and the ones above are indicative. However, a clear, sufficiently broad, thorough and relatively easily implemented framework for positive practices is the framework of character strengths and virtues, as defined by Peterson and Seligman in 2004. (Index 3) Anything practiced within this circle by the positive educator can promote the creation of positive feelings, help students appreciate reality around them, become more mindful and find sufficient motivation and encouragement.

The education reforms called for in 21st century education initiatives have been characterized as radical. International efforts to reformulate education for 21st century teaching and learning are well-funded initiatives by coalitions including governments, not-for-profit organizations, and large corporations. It is legitimate to put forward a critique of the emergence of 21st century learning showing that a preoccupation with competencies and skills can be interrogated for that to which 21st century learning gives voice, but also for that which it silences. The fundamental question of the purpose of education, or for what do we educate, is virtually absent in most discussions of 21st century learning. Values underline methods and the bridge between these can be the approach offered by Positive Education which affirms students in paradigms of continuous development. It is not only about a techno-optimistic belief in progress currently prevalent in the discourse of 21st century learning. We need to progress towards an ecological, humane and life affirming understanding that roots education in a life code of value and in a living community of relations large enough to embrace the multidimensionality, responsiveness, and responsibility at the heart of the pedagogical relation.

The last two decades have produced ample evidence of the extent to which ICT permeates social structures, economy and generation of knowledge itself. Social change is shaping our understanding of the role and potential of ICT – which can affect an emerging emancipatory dialectic. Historically, the teacher played a major part in this framework, given that these were the people who taught those that did not know. This 'banking conception' of education was one in which the student was an empty container that had to be filled with content, opposed to a candle to be lit (Freire, 1970). Traditional economic systems and market driven learning policies have undergone a fundamental challenge in terms of relevance and ability to meet the needs of individuals and communities. The 2008 crisis puts a new focus on innovation – this has a direct impact on learning for those working in inclusive

education, in particular disability. One of the central questions in international contexts is how to work with the needs of specific communities to create a new matrix of opportunities for inclusion. This affects learning specialists and educators in terms of professional training, best practice and standards in community diversity. Social inclusion and educational provision can provide a dynamic synergy of perspectives and possibilities.

Finally, Positive Education is a method based totally around not simply conformity to prevailing ideas of potential employment and the labour market with its bold new emphasis on skills and competence. It is about a technologically enabled voyage to the limits of the human experience wherein innovation is a core value and community a valued concept. It is about enabling students to encounter and re-appropriate the joy of imagination and curiosity by believing in themselves – and in the ability of their society to develop in more productive ways. This is how language learning takes on the rich contours of deep learning with communication, listening and that joyous enquiry at the heart of everything.

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