Proposal for ACLE conference

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Paper title: World's best education and its Lutheran origins: A fresh look at the theological foundations of the Finnish education system

Abstract:
The Finnish education system is considered to be the best education system in the world. The education system of Finland developed within a Lutheran context, with Finland a strongly Lutheran country since the Reformation. Is this juxtaposition of Lutheran theological background and excellence in educational practice an accident, or does the national Finnish ethos (including its strong Lutheran influences) have a bearing on the strong educational outcomes being achieved? If there is a formative connection, which the presenters will argue is the case, then how can Lutheran schools in other parts of the world (such as Australia) draw maximal benefit from the lessons of Finland? This paper will explore these issues from the perspective of best educational practice and the historical development of the Finnish educational system within the context of the religious influences which helped to shape it.

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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE SCHOOL

What does Lutheran theology have to say?

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1. Definition and short history of the positive psychology movement

Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of psychology. But it is not without its forerunners. Both Erich Fromm and Carl Rogers developed theories of human happiness and flourishing. And Abraham Maslow in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* devoted his last chapter to developing what he termed a 'positive psychology.' In the religious sphere, Norman Vincent Peale published his *Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952. The contemporary positive psychology movement, however, is generally dated to the 1998 publication of Martin Seligman's book *Learned Optimism* and his president's address to the American Psychological Association that same year in which he named positive psychology as the theme of his presidency. In 2000 Seligman co-wrote with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi the article "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," in *American Psychologist* (55:1). They stated; "We believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will arise, which achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families, and communities." They went on to define positive psychology as "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural and global dimensions of life."

In his 2011 book *Flourish*, Seligman tells the story of his own journey toward positive psychology. Frustrated with responding to and studying only those individuals who were not functioning well, Seligman felt there must be a way to scientifically assess and measure 'happiness' for the purpose of understanding and promoting those who were psychologically healthy and thriving. This led him to suggest in this 2002 book, *Authentic Happiness*, that there are three

elements to happiness: namely, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning and that each of these can be more carefully defined and measured than the generic concept of happiness. When Ed Diener developed an easy to use assessment mechanism for measuring satisfaction with life, and later a positive and negative emotions assessment mechanism, it became both practical and accepted to measure an individual's wellbeing.

Seligman's views, and the movement itself, have evolved since those early years. Seligman now feels that it is not happiness, but thriving, or wellbeing, which should be the focus of positive psychology. In his book *Flourish* he identified wellbeing as the main focus of the movement, and suggested that wellbeing has five component parts which are measurable. These often appear (in school programmes as well) under the acrostic: PERMA. They are 1. Positive emotion, 2. Engagement, 3. Relationships, 4. Meaning, and 5. Achievement.

The positive psychology movement, especially as it is manifest in school based programmes, is also associated with the concept of six virtues (Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence) and twenty-four character strengths, as indicated by the diagram on the screen.

With some early and generous research grants to get the movement started, first from Atlantic Philanthropies, and later from the Templeton Foundation, the movement gained momentum quickly, striking a chord with both many within the field of psychology, and also with the general public. Institutes, consultants, books, private practices and now school based positive education programmes have become commonplace, making positive psychology one of the fastest growing and most successful movements the field of psychology as ever seen. The movement is now represented by the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) with thousands of members from over 80 different countries.

2. Positive psychology in Australian schools

http://www.ggs.vic.edu.au/Positive-Education/Overview.aspx

In Australia, to the best of our knowledge, Positive Psychology originated with Geelong Grammar School when they began a partnership with Martin Seligman in 2008. They made significant investment with the training and resourcing of their staff. They have it so well embedded that they are now a training ground for others to come, see, and learn about positive education.

http://www.tps.vic.edu.au/positive-psychology.html

In 2011 on the other side of the bay The Peninsula School similarly invested in their staff and also have positive education well embedded.

http://www.knox.nsw.edu.au/positive-education

Heading north, Knox Grammar School, one of Sydney's elite, have jumped on board and are also hosting conferences.

http://about.churchie.com.au/content.cfm/Making-of-Men/674

http://www.msm.qld.edu.au/POS-ED/POS-ED.html

In the sunshine state, schools such as Churchie and Mt St Michael's College have also embedded it into their websites, and presumably into their programs. It's also in Qld where, to date, we find the only Lutheran School that has and is taking intentional steps to embed Positive Psychology into their program. They have developed a four year strategic plan which in turn has seen developments such as a Rationale and a mapping of the Character Strengths with the LEA Values and the IB Learner Profile.

http://www.faith.sa.edu.au/images/downloads/2013no13august29email.pdf

Heading to South Australia, Faith Lutheran College is publicly stating that they are considering the virtues and character strengths of Positive Psychology in their master planning, so they can provide learning environments that best allow for them to flourish.

http://www.scotch.sa.edu.au/wellbeing---positive-education.html

In the wider educations sector, Scotch College, Seymour College and Mt Barker High School have fully embraced Positive Psychology.

http://media.stpeters.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/using-positive-psychology-to-change-school-culture.pdf

http://media.stpeters.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/An-intersection-of-faith-and-science.pdf

But it appears that Saint Peter's College (Adelaide) is leading the charge. Like Geelong Grammar, they have invested significant funds into the training and resourcing of their staff, and were a major player in bringing Martin Seligman to South Australia earlier this year. Not only has Saints gone through the process of asking how Positive Psychology aligns with their theology, but how it can also be integrated throughout the curriculum.

http://jobs.designcrowd.com/job.aspx?id=112785

Saint's Principal, Simon Murray, at the recent "Journeys to Flourishing" conference (Seymour College, 7 Sept. 2013) told the story of how, as a result of a discussion of four passionate advocates of Positive Psychology, they decided to create a formalised national body. They sought the best Positive Psychology practitioners from each state and created Positive Education Schools Association. Their constitution was being tabled that same week, hence we haven't been able to sight it. But the brief given for the logo design reads, 'PESA, is a group of like-minded schools across Australia wishing to promote wellbeing in their schools using the science of positive psychology.' While they are a relatively new body, they are well-resourced, national and gaining momentum.

http://education.unimelb.edu.au/research/research_centres/positive_psychology_at_melbourne#courses

Within the tertiary scene, The University of Melbourne now offers undergraduate, graduate and post graduate studies in Positive Education. While other universities may not have specific courses in it, Positive Psychology is explored in education degrees alongside other educational theories such as constructivism and brain based learning theory.

http://www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/Thinkers/MartinSeligman/default.aspx

So even though Positive Psychology doesn't appear to be entrenched in Lutheran Schools yet, the evidence suggests that it is something which is gaining momentum in the education sector generally, and therefore something that we should be well versed in, and, from our Lutheran perspective, to be able to respond to it with an informed understanding.

3. Affirmations of positive psychology from a theological perspective

A Christian cannot spend long around those involved with positive psychology, or at a positive psychology conference, without thinking that there appear to be a lot of familiar themes within this movement. Indeed, there is much common ground between positive psychology and the Christian message. St Peters (Adelaide) chaplain Theo McCall in his *Dialogue Australia* article comparing Positive Psychology and Christian faith wrote; "There appears to be an alignment between Christianity, values and ethics education, and a Positive Education approach that aims to build the good in each individual and community by focusing on strengths and virtues."   We would like to briefly explore this alignment.

- **Correspondence with Christian thought: hope and striving for goals**

Positive psychology within school programmes often highlights the importance of hope and striving for goals. Each student must have some purpose or aim and some genuine hope that they can achieve their goals. This strongly relates to the 'A' in PERMA, namely achievement. Christians would concur. After all, doesn't the Apostle Paul admonish us to 'Strive (or press) toward the goal of

our heavenly calling' Philippians 3:14)? And when it comes to hope, that is a central theme of Christian faith. Our hope in Christ, our hope of salvation, our hope in the resurrection – we hope and not without reason or foundation. Without hope, we are nothing. We can easily see the importance of hope at every level, given its fundamental importance for our faith. Indeed, we would be forgiven for thinking that the positive psychologists, at this point, are speaking our language.

- **Correspondence with the gospel: well-being and sanctification**

There also appears to be a connection with what it means to grow in maturity of faith. Scripture tells us to 'put off the old self' and to 'put on the new self' (Ephesians 4:22-24), to have the same mindset as Jesus Christ in our relationships with one another (Ephesians 2:5). The church refers to this process as sanctification whereby having been justified before God, the Holy Spirit continues the work of empowering us to do good works and become more Christlike. Sanctification is not only about doing good works (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13), but about good attitudes (Romans 12:2; 1 Timothy 6:6). It is this process of striving to be more Christlike, both in our works and in our attitudes that appears to align very well with the Positive Psychology of improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Within the 'Vision for leaners and learning in Lutheran Schools' ten values are identified. These are the particular characteristics that Lutheran schools seek to develop within individuals as it seeks to bring together education and sanctification. One of the six Virtues within Positive Psychology is Courage. Within the 24 Character Strengths of Positive Psychology are Love, Hope, Humility and Forgiveness. Positive Psychology exercises such as "Three blessings" and "Letter of thanks" align with appreciation. Positive Psychology highlights the importance of Service which can easily be led to also include Justice and Compassion. With the Positive Psychology concept of Flourish, being the best you can be easily aligning with Quality, all ten of the LEA Values are covered by Positive Psychology. Once again, there appears to be a clear and obvious alignment between Positive Psychology and how the Lutheran school goes about sanctification.

4. **Some interrogative observations from the standpoint of Lutheran theology**

- **Focus on self versus focus on God as source and goal of well-being. Lessons from a theology of the cross**

When Luther began to question the theological assumptions and structures of the medieval church he did not begin by attacking indulgences. He was in fact surprised by the response to his 95 theses. It was his earlier 'Disputation on Scholastic Theology' from September 1517 that he thought was going to shake up the theological world when he delivered it at a conclave of Augustinian monks. He argued that scholastic theology with all of its clever syllogisms was wrong because it had too much confidence in what humans of their own accord could achieve. He called this a theology of glory. By contrast, he argued for a theology of the cross, which humbly focused on our need for God in Christ to enlighten us, and to set us free. A theology of the cross is more than simply a focus on the cross and suffering of Jesus, or on human suffering, though it embraces these points also. A theology of the cross is about focusing on God and our inability to achieve anything apart from God.

If Luther were to sit in on a positive psychology presentation I suspect this would be one of his first questions, and rightly so. Positive psychology has a strong focus on the self. What must and can I as the individual do in order to achieve happiness, life satisfaction, wellbeing. The Christian, embracing the many good elements within positive psychology, must be careful that the focus on self (which is not entirely wrong) does not supplant the focus on others and their wellbeing, and on God as the ultimate source of our wellbeing, the ultimate source of which each individual 'self' is able to achieve.

For example, when unpacking the Positive Psychology Character Strength of Hope, it is defined as,

> You expect the best in the future, and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something that you can control. (*VIA Survey of Character Strengths, 2010*).

It is interesting that this was later revised, downplaying somewhat the strong focus on the self from the original statement. It now reads:

> Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
> http://www.viacharacter.org/viainstitute/classification.aspx Sept. 2013

In Contrast, the *Vision for Learners and Learning in Lutheran Schools* defines Hope as:

> Hope enables us to look forward with expectation and confidence, placing our trust and faith in God's provision of the things we need to handle all kinds of situations and events that occur. Hope is open-ended, open to all possibilities and not limited by what we might wish for. Hope allows God to define our lives. (p. 14)

There is much to affirm in the focus on what we can and must do to achieve wellbeing. Christians are not against taking positive action to improve our situation or our spirit. But we must be careful not to begin to believe that we can do it all alone, or that we ourselves are the ultimate source of our wellbeing. Neither can we ignore that we may well have to deal with a number of negative experiences on the way to wellbeing, just as there is no shortcut to reconciliation with God that avoids the cross. A baptised version of PERMA will regularly point us to the importance of the wellbeing of others, and will not forget that God is the ultimate source of our wellbeing and achievements. It will remind us that when we begin to believe that our human programmes or our own individual un-aided self can achieve these things, then we have abandoned the theology of the cross and taken up a theology of glory. The results of such a swap, as Luther pointed out nearly 500 years ago, do not have the desired effect. The theology of glory is a misplaced hope and ultimately an illusion. Wellbeing, founded purely on our own efforts and focused on our own self, is not lasting.

- **Sin and the shadow side of strengths. Lessons from original sin and *simul iustus et peccator***

Another particular contribution Lutheran theology can make to wellbeing is how to deal with sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that goes against the will of God, usually from a selfish intent. Positive Psychology is fairly silent on how to deal with sin or inappropriate behaviour, mainly because of its philosophy to concentrate on the positive. For example, if someone's top two strengths were honesty and bravery, then there is a high chance that such a person they will be brave enough to be completely honest with you about your behaviour. Should they then become obnoxious or rude, their actions are described as an over-play of their strengths or the shadow side of their strengths. The response is for the individual to call upon their other strengths, such as Social Intelligence or Self-Regulation to temper their behaviour. But as has already been clarified, any attempt to base wellbeing purely on our own attempts is limited.

Genesis 1 says that we are created in the image of God and along with the rest of creation, he declares us to be good. As people who are inherently 'good' we would then have the capacity to fully adopt and embrace Positive Psychology as it stands. But if we were inherently good, then we would have no need of Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

The teaching of original sin means that following the first sin described in Genesis 3, 'Each person from conception and birth is in a state of sin… the sinful nature we inherit from our parents is not just neutral towards God; it is actively opposed to God'. [1]

Original sin is something that goes deeper than our thoughts, words and actions. Original sin is a state or a condition of who we are. Positive Psychology avoids discussing humanity in such a way because it is seen as unhelpful and limits a person's ability to flourish. The great blessing, however, that an understanding of original sin brings to wellbeing is that it highlights and underpins our absolute need for the grace and place of God in our lives – something that Positive Psychology cannot do of its own accord.

But doesn't God forgive us our sins? God forgives our sin, yes, but that is different from our sinful condition which remains with us this side of heaven. In a verse that is central to Lutheran

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[1] Bartsch, 2013, p.77.

theology St Paul highlights that, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:23-24). In Christ our sin is forgiven (i.e. we are justified), but our 'flesh' continues to be in conflict with God's Spirit (Galatians 5:16-18). Hence Christians live in a constant tension known as *simul iustus et peccator*; simultaneously justified and sinner, also known as saint and sinner. On the one hand we know we have been redeemed, made holy and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ-like, but on the other hand we forever have a sinful nature that wants to curve in on itself. In Romans St Paul describes his own ongoing struggle between a genuine desire to do what is good, but the sinful nature that leads him to do evil (Romans 7:14-25). Whilst this may appear to be the very opposite of wellbeing, it is because of this ongoing struggle that we are drawn back to God, back to his Word, back to our baptism and the Lord's Supper, back to worship, back to confession and absolution, back to prayer, so that we can receive God's grace, and, to be strengthened to become more Christ-like in our daily life.

It is within this framework of understanding our sinful nature and our justification, and our continual struggle between the two that Positive Psychology can provide processes and help us develop characteristics that are aligned with becoming more Christ-like.

- **3 blessings become three thanksgivings**

So how does all this theology apply to Positive Psychology? If we examine one of the common exercises from Positive Psychology, the 'What-Went-Well Exercise', also known as 'Three Blessings'. The philosophy is to train ourselves to focus on the positives and build satisfaction and happiness, rather than lamenting over the negatives which sets us up for anxiety and depression. The exercise is to spend ten minutes each night before going to bed recalling and writing down in a journal three things that went well that day and why they went well.[2] For example, tonight I could be writing, "My presentation went well today because people found it really useful and I was able to contribute to people's ability to remain authentically Lutheran should they embrace Positive

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[2] Seligman, 2011, p.33.

Psychology." That is where Positive Psychology would stop, and if we did indeed stop there, we limit our reflection to me and my world. In the example given, I may be happy that others are helped, but the reason I mention it (and the whole reason for doing the exercise) is because it makes me feel happy or worthwhile.

Lutheran theology certainly doesn't have a problem with people feeling happy or worthwhile, quite the opposite. The issue is that as saints and sinners we are unable to provide a full sense of happiness and self-worth for ourselves. It is only by the grace of God and the ongoing presence and strengthening of the Holy Spirit that we can do anything good. So an adaption to the exercise might be to take those three blessings and offer them up as a prayer of thanks to God, acknowledging him as the source of our wellbeing. Alternatively, the question itself might be reworded to, 'How has God blessed me today and why was that such a blessing?' Asked in this way we immediately place the source of our wellbeing back onto God.

5. **Lessons for Lutheran schools from the embedding of PERMA principles into school curricula and school communities**

   http://media.stpeters.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/teaching-of-english-literature.pdf

Stuart and I recently attended a schools PERMA conference. One of the most striking presentations of the day came from an ordinary teacher from a public high school which had embraced the PERMA approach. She talked about the importance of integrating these principles within all aspects of the school's life, the school community, and school families. She also talked about the importance of integrating PERMA principles into all parts of the curriculum. She gave examples from maths, English and science teachers who were asked and assisted to look at how they taught, how they asked questions, how they assessed work, how they worked with students, etc. to show how each of the five PERMA principles were manifested in their classes. The examples were impressive, and convincing. Here was a teacher saying that if these (PERMA principles) are our

values, then they should be integrated into everything we do, and not just stuck into some special programme or wellbeing classes.

The question that immediately occurred to us, is to what extent do our Lutheran schools integrate our values not just within our community life, but within all parts of our school curricula? What would happen if we asked our maths and science teachers, our history and English teachers, our PE and tech teachers to demonstrate how our core values came through in their classes – and to help them to do this if they were uncertain? Our suspicion is that not everyone would be excited by this. Many would argue that our core Christian values play no specific role in the teaching of Maths or English or PE, or that Christian Studies exists to deal with these things. But here were schools, including many public schools, embracing these principles in ways that truly embedded them within the whole curriculum.

As our Lutheran schools begin to embrace PERMA programmes, as surely will happen and is already happening, they will be seeking to make these values manifest across school life, across the school community, and across the curriculum. If this can be done, perhaps it is time to learn from the PERMA programmes and identify and develop a Christian and Lutheran version of PERMA incorporating positive values to which our schools already subscribe, and seek to integrate them into our programmes with the same passion and across the board commitment as the secular versions of PERMA. Our core values cannot be compartmentalised into Christian Studies and chapel if we really hold them as core, and if we really want to experience them as transformative.

Surely, if we are to have a Christian version of PERMA, then we will not only need to interpret its principles through the lens of the gospel, but we will need to add to it a focus on spiritual wellbeing. If, has Seligman has argued, we need to measure the wellbeing and happiness of children to see if progress is being made and our programmes are having an impact, then a Christian influenced version should also measure spiritual wellbeing to take on board the very points we have raised in this paper. But there really isn't a good Spiritual Wellbeing Indicator (SWBI) out there. So where to start? There is an excellent contribution by R. Emmons in the 2005 *Handbook of the*

Psychology of Religion in which he suggests there are four positive sacred emotions that have an impact on general wellbeing. These are 1. Gratitude and appreciation (which we would rename thankfulness), 2. Forgiveness (and this includes both the ability to forgive and the capacity to accept forgiveness), 3. Compassion and empathy (which we will call acceptance of others), and 4. Humility. We need to have some place also for spiritual disciplines and activity like meditation, prayer, and devotional reading of sacred texts as a measurable component of spiritual health (we'll call these 'Indicators of spiritual life.' Now, rather conveniently, this spells out FAITH. Forgiveness, Acceptance of others, Indicators of spiritual life, Thankfulness, and Humility. This would be set alongside of (not instead of) PERMA as our guiding faith based principles and as measurables. Developing such a PERMA Plus approach would take some thought and effort, but if we are to embrace the Positive Psychology approach in our schools we cannot do so authentically as Lutheran Christians by simply taking on a set of secular values, however good and parallel to the gospel they may be in many places, and adopt them unreflected and without reference to our own existing faith values.

Would an approach such as this make everyone happy? Probably not. There will be those who feel that the positive education approach should be taken on simply as it is, and those who feel that it is in conflict with certain aspects of Christian belief and should be eschewed altogether. These are all valid concerns. Nevertheless, we believe there would be value in seeing what can be learned from the positive psychology and positive education movements and the programmes they have produced for schools. We believe that the principles they contain would be reinforced and made more suitable within our Lutheran schools context if they were incorporated along the lines we have outlined. What we find, happily, may surprise everyone.

6. Conclusions. Challenges and deliverable within Lutheran schools.

- Lutherans affirm the development of wellbeing (Matthew19:19)
- Lutherans affirm God as the source of our wellbeing (John 10:10; Philippians 3:4-11)
- Positive Psychology has worthwhile contributions, but is limited

- As saint and sinner, the Holy Spirit strengthens us – How do we provide opportunities for the Holy Spirit ('I' in FAITH)?
- How do we embed our values into our curriculum?

Bishop Mounib Younan (leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and President of the Lutheran World Federation), in his public address at Australian Lutheran College last week stated, 'What we teach, we create; what we don't teach, we are responsible for'. As schools we want to see our students grow to be happy, healthy, resilient and responsible citizens. As Lutheran schools we are also responsible for ensuring that, 'the gospel of Jesus Christ informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities in the school' (LCA, 2001). If we don't teach that, we are responsible for that.

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