Playing to our strengths: Harnessing the power of ‘Yes’ and ‘Yet’
How do we create workplaces that are positive environments, where staff enjoy coming to work, absentee rates are low, and children are happy? These are important questions for providers who want to keep up high standards, retain staff, and to stay popular with parents.

This article discusses how positive psychology and a ‘growth mindset’ can support a learning culture in early years settings that enables employees to play to their strengths and bring their best ‘selves’ to work. Rather than ‘fixing and correcting’, the approach is to identify – and build on – strengths, bringing wide-ranging benefits for the way that both staff and children learn and develop. To bring about this organisational change, we propose a learning ecosystem that brings together formal and informal learning, people and technology, and best practices in workplace learning.

**Wellbeing and the link to learning**

If you work in the early years sector you will know how important it is to create the right environment for children to play and to learn. You will have experienced for yourself that creative ‘buzz’ that meets you when you walk into a happy nursery, where children are engrossed in their play, asking questions, making friends, negotiating and experimenting with new ideas. By taking care of children’s wellbeing and giving them the support they need to feel safe and happy, we are also creating the conditions for them to learn and develop.

While the importance of wellbeing for the development of young children may seem almost self-evident, it is only recently that we have started to understand the vital role it continues to play for effective learning in older children and into adulthood. The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, has conducted research that shows that wellbeing enhances learning at any age – with positive mood comes broader attention, more creative thinking, and more holistic thinking (Seligman, 2011).

Wellbeing, according to Seligman, cannot exist only in your head – it is a combination of feeling good as well as living a life that has meaning, good relationships and accomplishment. There are five measurable elements that count towards wellbeing – represented by the acronym PERMA. To what extent does your organisation enable or promote the five elements of PERMA?

- P – positive emotions – feeling good.
- E – engagement – feeling absorbed and energised by the work.
- R – relationships – feeling connected to others.
- M – meaning – feeling that your contribution and existence has purpose.
- A – ability to act – feeling confident and capable.

All forward-looking providers know that staff members are their most important asset, and that to keep up with the pace of change every one needs to continue learning throughout their careers. Fostering workplace wellbeing as a pre-requisite for learning is a smart move for your staff development strategy – not only does it make for a happier workforce, it also has tangible benefits in terms of individual, team and organisational improvements.

**The power of yes – positive psychology**

Jeni Hooper, child psychologist and author of *What children need to be happy, confident and successful* (Hooper, 2012), describes positive psychology as ‘the study of optimal wellbeing: what we need to be our best selves’. In its pursuit of wellbeing for individuals, organisations and society, positive psychology advocates approaches that are:

- Appreciative – celebrating what is right, what is working well, rather than focusing on what is wrong or not working.
- Strengths-based – starting from what people do well rather than on their weaknesses or deficits.

This emphasis on the positive is not to the exclusion of learning from bad events or taking notice of the negative – there are times when this is still important. But, Seligman argues, ‘for sound evolutionary reasons, most of us are not nearly as good at dwelling on good events as we are at analysing bad events … So to overcome our brains’ natural catastrophic bent, we need to work and practice this skill of thinking about what went well’ (Seligman, op cit).

**The science of motivation**

A popular misunderstanding about positive thinking is that a ‘glass half full’ attitude to life will carry you through. Positive thinking, while it can provide a starting point, is not enough, according to Gabrielle Oettingen of New York University and the University of Hamburg, and author of *Rethinking positive thinking* (Oettingen, 2014). Putting up a few motivational posters around the nursery might provide a moment of inspiration but if staff members do not have a way to move between the present and the aspirational future it can have an adverse effect.

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On the basis of large-scale scientific studies, Oettingen developed a cognitive technique called ‘mental contrasting’ that combines visualising a desired future with facing the reality of the present. By addressing our fears about what holds us back – the challenges, obstacles and limiting self-beliefs that face us now – we can then make concrete plans to take action. She calls the tool ‘WOOP’ for ‘wish, outcome, obstacle and plan’ – a more populist acronym than the academic term Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions (MCII).

There are other similar models for goal setting and action planning, such as the GROW model, that have been used in coaching for over 20 years, but it is only recently that we have started to see the evidence that these approaches can have a real impact on how people learn and change behaviour. Whatever model is adopted, it is important that people need to feel that they have the capability to move from where they are now to where they would like to be – and that they have the tools to design a plan that they can review at a later date. As Seligman puts it: ‘Learning occurs when highest strengths meet highest challenge.’ [see Useful resources]

**Strength-based staff training**
When it comes to staff training, it is tempting to focus attention on gaps and problem areas, concentrating resources and training efforts on ‘filling the gap’. But what if we change the lens and instead look at what a person does well – and enjoys doing? How might this affect the learning experience? There is a growing body of evidence, led by Professor Fred Luthans (PsyCap), that suggests that playing to our personal strengths can up our resilience and the ability to face challenges, meaning we can bounce back when faced with difficulties in life or work. The pace of change in the modern workplace means that resilience and adaptability are just the qualities that employees need.

**Psychological Capital (PsyCap)**
Professor Fred Luthans and his colleagues have applied positive psychology to the workplace and identified Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as the critical component in Positive Organizational Behaviour. PsyCap is characterized by four qualities:

- **Self-efficacy:** Having confidence to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks.
- **Optimism:** Making a positive attribution and expectation about succeeding now and in the future.
- **Hope:** Persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed.
- **Resilience:** When beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back, and even beyond, to attain success.

These four qualities are associated with higher performance, commitment and satisfaction, lower employee absenteeism, lower employee cynicism and intentions to quit, higher job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviours. [see Jacobson, 2013]

Enabling people to articulate their values and to find the aspects of the work that have real personal meaning for them helps us to tap people’s energy and enthusiasm. Staff who are able to use, and extend, their natural skills each day at work find they feel more energised and invigorated, both of which increase motivation (Baston-Fitt, 2015).

**Teamwork and collaboration**
Alex Linley, the founder of the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP), and his colleagues suggest that, from a team-building perspective ‘a strengths framework provides individuals with a language to gain a greater understanding of each other’s behaviour at work, and a new context in which to view these behaviours (Linley and Harrington, 2006).’ Additionally, the strengths framework means that, rather than trying to fill our skills deficits by going on training courses we may have little interest in attending, instead, we look to the wider team to partner and collaborate with others who have strengths we may lack.

**Where the magic happens**
When we enable staff to bring their highest strengths to meet their highest challenges we are asking them to move out of their comfort zones. To do this effectively we must build in support. A setting that has started to develop a strengths-based learning culture will be thinking about how it can support learning every day in the workplace.

Ask yourself, ‘what are we doing to’:
- Support people while they are practising new skills?
- Encourage people to persist and keep trying?
- Share and celebrate individual and team success?
- Enable people to adjust their plans in the light of experience?

The blend of approaches will be unique to your setting but may include: Coaching; mentoring; action learning; and building networks of peer support. Though the mix may differ, there is one vital ingredient. You need to understand what staff think about learning – and whether they have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset.

**‘The power of yet’ – growth mindsets**
The term ‘growth mindset’ was coined by Professor Carol Dweck (2012), a psychologist at Stanford University. It emerged from her research into the different ways that people think about themselves and how our self-images can affect how we behave and learn. She describes two ways that we can view the world and how we engage with it – the ‘growth mindset’ and the ‘fixed mindset’: ‘In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that’s that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb.

‘In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don’t necessarily think everyone’s the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.’ [see Diagram, opposite]

Dweck found that you can move from one mindset to another. With appropriate support, feedback and encouragement it is possible to develop and adopt a growth mindset – and with a growth mindset, it is possible to learn and do things you might not have attempted before. This
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is more than wishful thinking; the concept of a ‘growth mindset’ is supported by science that reveals the brain to be capable of great ‘plasticity’, meaning it is able to create new neural pathways in response to experience. A fixed mindset literally switches you off from learning.

With a growth mindset we believe that we never stop learning or improving, which negates the idea that we are each fixed by a ‘learning style’ that dictates how we learn (Clark, 2016). There are variations of the learning style concept – the most well-known is Visual, Auditory, or Kinaesthetic learners. This is still taught in some schools and training courses but in recent years has attracted criticism for lacking empirical evidence. More importantly, it stereotypes and holds students back from experimenting beyond their comfort zone. There is every reason for using different methods of delivery in our training – text, audio-visual and experiential – but that is quite different to saying that people will always learn best in one modality.

It is important that we do not fall into the same trap of stereotyping ourselves – or others – as being defined as having a ‘growth mindset or a fixed mindset’. Dweck (2016) reminds us that a growth mindset is not the same as being open-minded and flexible, or having a positive outlook and that, in reality, we are all a mixture of the two. We can all slip into fixed mindset behaviours and patterns of thinking – and this is where it can be so helpful to have mentors and coaches to help us recognise when this is happening.

Two mindsets: infographic by Nigel Holmes – reproduced with kind permission http://www.nigelholmes.com/

Notice the congruence of the growth mindset qualities with the four qualities of PsyCap

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Learning from failure

Dweck’s work gets really interesting when we look at what her model tells us about our response to failure – and the importance of constructive feedback. People with a fixed mindset tend to fear failure because it threatens their sense of self (their innate ability). People with a growth mindset tend to see failure as an opportunity to reflect on what went wrong and to try again. In experiments with students where effort is praised, rather than talent, they choose more challenging tasks than those who are told they are smart (see Useful resources).

In her 2014 TED talk, *The power of believing that you can improve*, Dweck introduces the ‘power of yet’ – the idea that a grade that says ‘not yet’ (rather than ‘fail’) gives you a learning curve, a path into the future. We are all novices at some times in our lives and continuing professional development is all about the journey, the learning curve, the ‘not yet’. There is really no end point, because professional development is not the accumulation of new facts but a continuing process of learning from experience.

We are hard-wired to learn from experience. Watch any group of young children as they learn to walk, to ride a bike, to figure out a new problem. They fall, they stumble, they pick themselves up, they may run for comfort but then they try again. If we could look inside their heads, we would see the amazing number of neural connections that are firing, fusing and developing as they do so. As adults, we sometimes have to relearn what comes naturally to children – especially if our experience of formal education has been less than rewarding. But with conscious effort and appropriate support, we can strengthen those neural pathways and learn how to learn (again).

Purpose of learning: outcomes matter

As professionals, we are not learning for learning’s sake; we are accountable for our actions and we are learning to bring our best selves to work in order to bring about the best outcomes for children and families. Dweck herself is keen to emphasise that praising and rewarding effort is not sufficient: outcomes matter to both employees and the organization. How easy is it in your organisation for employees to engage in the processes that Dweck regards as important for positive workplace outcomes? To what extent does the organisation encourage employees to:

• Seek help from others?
• Try out new strategies?
• Capitalize on setbacks?

Do performance appraisals focus on developing strengths, self-awareness and collaborative team working, or are they about gaps and deficits in performance?

Organisational culture

A growth mindset needs the right environment to grow – and when that is present in the organisational culture, the research shows it is correlated to positive behaviours in organisations, such as less blaming, more innovation, commitment, collaboration, and lower levels of unethical behaviour. Does your organisation have a development mindset culture or a culture of genius? Which description best fits your work setting?

• Culture of genius: Fixed mindset culture in which talent is worshipped. This type of organizational culture asserts that employees either have it or ‘they don’t’, when it comes to skills and learning capabilities.
• Culture of development: This culture asserts that people can grow and improve with effort, good strategies, and good mentoring. They actively seek to stretch their employees and promote new skills.

However, becoming an organisation with a developmental mindset is not a quick fix, it is hard work.

Learning in the workplace

Strengths-based learning is a holistic approach that requires us to look at what is happening at every level of the organisation. It is not about change that is dictated from above because it is less about what we do and more about how we do it. We can start to influence change from any point in the organisation.

So, while a strengths-based approach benefits from buy-in from everyone in the organisation it is not the same as a wholesale re-organisation and nor does it need to be painful. It is more about a whole series of small mindset shifts – from focusing on strengths, not deficits; from re-framing challenges as a chance to learn; from expecting ourselves to know the answers to being confident to ask the questions. It is about claiming back some control over how we work together, how we collaborate and share, and how we pass on our valuable experiences.

Moving the organisational focus towards wellbeing can be a gentle process of re-modelling of attitudes and behaviours that can start anywhere, any time. Just try one of these mindset shifts today – in a meeting, a conversation, in an appraisal – and see for yourself how it changes the mood of the communication. Once these small changes start to happen, the positive impacts ripple through the organisation.

Learning in the workflow

How we can learn in the busy flow of everyday work is the subject of much debate in learning and development circles, but there is now a growing consensus around the idea that workplace learning is more than individual training events or single courses, and that it is essential to have support and processes that help ‘embedding, extracting and sharing learning as part of the workflow’.

Making sense of experience

Making sense of our experiences is critical for workplace learning and this is the process we call ‘reflective practice’, which is based on the theories of action learning that were developed by Argyris and Schön (see Smith, 2001/2013). It is a practice that early years professionals need to develop, both on their own and alongside other team members.

As Jennings (2016) reminds us, reflective practice does not just happen: ‘It is a learning process. It requires some degree of self-awareness and the ability to critically evaluate experiences, actions and results.’ How does your organisation support and develop each of the following:

• Challenging experiences?
• Opportunities for practice?
A blend of formal and informal

There is a place for formal courses, especially at the ‘novice’ stage of learning. Formal learning can demonstrate competence to practice at a required level for accreditation, which is important for the credibility of the sector and as a way for individuals to demonstrate their transferable skills and achievements.

Novices need more support and guidance, which is where coaching and mentoring can be particularly effective – embedding learning from a course in day-to-day practice, and helping the person to apply what they are learning to the challenges of real work. Digital technology means we can blend bite-sized e-learning with collaborative discussion forums, access to webinars, videos and curated resources from around the web. The experience of learning online can be a personal one – backed up with live web-conferencing – both one-to-one coaching on Skype-type platforms, and in virtual classrooms where large groups can gather to watch expert presentations and to discuss topical issues.

Scaffolding learning

Formal learning provides the ‘scaffolding’ for reflective learning in the workplace. In a strengths-based approach, formal learning provides people with the ‘scaffolding’. They are guided through a process that enables them to ‘learn how to learn’ – in other words, they learn about their strengths, they learn how to build on what they do well, they work (often with a coach) to refine their vision of where they want to travel, then they plot their learning pathway, gather the knowledge and skills, and continually apply and test out that new knowledge in their everyday work. Ideally, they would be supported on this journey by a supportive manager, workplace mentor, and team, who provide further opportunities to extend their repertoire and try out new things in the work setting.

As people become more confident in their learning, they start to be more self-directed and flexible, seeking out informal approaches that suit them – participating in online communities, using social media, or just asking a peer for help. These are all practices that keep them up-to-date with current issues and provide a mutual sharing of expertise. Experienced learners may feel more able to volunteer for ‘stretch challenges’ at work and find ways to deliberately reflect on their work. At this stage, acting as a mentor can offer a virtuous circle for embedding learning, while also supporting others.

Online platforms can also help break the isolation of working in a small or remote setting, linking people to peers and to experts in other locations. Some platforms, for example, have the functionality to post questions to a panel of experts, providing the possibility for almost instant answers to questions or dilemmas.

At certain points in our career, we may return again to formal learning as we extend our competence in new areas, but it is the application and the reflection on experience that embeds this into our practice. Organisations who invest in their staff understand that formal learning is just part of developing a learning culture that must be matched with continuing opportunities to embed and extend learning within the workplace.

Embedding and extending learning:

Celebrate the messy!

So how do we extend and embed learning in the workplace? The answer is messy! We are all familiar with messy play in the nursery – it is a great way for children to explore the unfamiliar, to experience their sensory environment, and to develop bonds with others. Essentially, it is about trying things out. Learning for practitioners is similarly messy.

There is only so much formal theory or knowledge to access – the rest is trying things out, learning on the job, asking questions, feeling like you are back to the beginning again – but sticking at it. It can be frustrating, scary, inspiring and, ultimately, life changing, and we should not underestimate how tough it can be. If it was easy we would all be natural lifelong learners.

We all want to be seen as competent at our job, so asking people to ‘learn from failure’ and to question what they do is not a small ‘ask’. We can help our staff by normalising and celebrating the messiness of it all and by trusting that, where there are conversations and collaboration, there is learning. Messy learning can help to embed and extend formal learning but it is also where learning arises – where staff can use their creativity and collaboration to meet the
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Celebrate the messy in your setting!

challenges of the everyday. Encouraging messy learning in the workplace [adapted from Quigley, 2016]:
• Step back and allow staff to engage with one another.
• Encourage staff to regularly collaborate and share knowledge with one another.
• Host regular lunch-and-learn events, where a speaker comes to your workplace to share knowledge.
• Provide access to learning resources on key areas – e-learning can be particularly useful for quick reference.
• Re-frame mistakes by modelling learning from failure – show staff that mistakes are actually essential to learning.
• Develop a mentoring programme.
• Each week or month, develop collaborative projects and share the results of past projects.
• An environment for workplace learning: The learning ecosystem.

Our vision for healthy early years workplace learning is one that harnesses the power of positive psychology with a growth mindset, within the context of an ecosystem of learning (see Figure 1, above). Like any ecosystem, this can start small – but it is important that the underpinning values and purpose are clear from the outset (the inner circle in the diagram). In a strengths-based approach, this requires an organisational culture that fosters growth, collaboration and wellbeing.

The purpose is optimal functioning, which is more than performance improvement – it is about bringing our best selves to our work and requires self-awareness, reflective practice and teamworking. This culture is expressed through the behaviours and attitudes described by the growth mindset (the middle circle), which need to be explicitly shared through mentoring and through appraisal, as well as through formal and informal learning opportunities.

The learning ecosystem (the outer circle) combines formal courses, provided through flexible digital platforms, with learning gained on the job through taking on challenges and opportunities for reflecting on learning. Support and feedback is provided by other people, each step of the way – mentors, coaches, supervisors, managers, or peers.

Feedback is constructive and appreciative, encouraging learners to continue building on strengths and what they are doing well. Performance appraisals and supervision are informed by the same values of positive appreciation and an understanding of strengths-based learning, reinforcing the message that, while ‘learning is the work’, it is outcomes that matter.

As professionals, we each have the privilege and opportunity to make a lasting impact on young children’s wellbeing and future development. We know the importance of providing a positive environment to play, learn, and to interact with others.

We are all role-models for the children in our care and, if we are to model wellbeing and healthy choices, we need a strengths-based approach to our professional development that enables us all to bring our best selves to work so that we can provide the best possible start for the children in our care.

References

Useful resources
• Charles Jennings blogspot – http://charles-jennings.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/the-power-of-reflection-in-ever.html
• Read about the science behind WOOP – http://woopmylife.org/woop-1
• The GROW coaching model was originally developed in the 1980s by business coaches Graham Alexander, Alan Fine, and Sir John Whitmore. This was refined into the TGROW model by Myles Downey (2003) in his book Effective Coaching