

The positive and the negative in contextual and personal contributions to life outcomes

Individual differences spring from the concerted action of genetics and maturation and environment and experience (Rutter & Rutter, 1992). Across these forces, individual differences also reflect positive and negative patterns of relativities that operate in the person and context. Recent research and analysis have highlighted the role of relativities in life experience for the way in which life is lived. Ratios of positive to negative influences coming from within the individual and coming from the surrounding context are seen to direct developmental trajectory (Patterson, 2002). Various aspects of these relativities are a thread in several papers in this issue. In turn, this notion has implications for our approach to intervention.

Frydenberg and Lewis reviewed studies linking productive and nonproductive adult coping strategies to self-perception, achievement and learning styles, and stress and anxiety. They also discussed the notion that the relative strengths of nonproductive and productive coping strategies might need to be incorporated into intervention to improve coping. Emotional approaches to coping such as wishing, worrying, and self-blaming can exacerbate problems. Therefore, training in productive strategies to build more resourceful coping in stressed individuals may need to be accompanied by efforts to interfere with, undermine, suppress, or otherwise actively work to reduce nonproductive coping. This type of approach is consistent with the general trend in modern, systemic conceptualisations of intervention, which are deploying multiple components targeting various aspects of environmental and personal functioning and acting in multiple directions to maximise some outcomes and minimise others.

Burnett and Howard showed that classroom and personal variables affected child self-esteem and individual differences in tendencies towards self-enhancing and self-protective styles of interaction. Middle primary girls and boys held differential perceptions of teacher feedback, such that those with high self-esteem expected less negative teacher feedback and more positive teacher feedback, with high praise and good relationships. These relativities did not apply to children with low self-esteem, who accepted more negative feedback and used more negative self-task and less positive self-talk. These children were not getting the praise that they needed. The authors suggested that teachers engage in more active monitoring of their interactions with students. In broad terms, recommended practices for teachers may need to give emphasis to the relativities of positive-to-negative exchanges with students. This point has been made in classroom research for many years (e.g., Wheldall & Merrett, 1990). However, the dynamic of relativity in the quantity and quality of teacher input adds extra weight to the priority strategies for improving learner confidence.

Yeigh explored effects of learning style on how teacher feedback is

processed. He showed that individuals with perceptions of high controllability externalised failure and internalised success, whereas individuals with perceptions of low controllability internalised failure and externalised success. These traits affected the way individuals processed information across the phases of a task.

Other papers in this issue examined various topics in classroom environment and school based intervention and early development. Gilmore, Patton, & McCrindle examined a single Year 7 trial of single-sex schooling. Qualitative comments from boys and girls indicated benefits to positive emotions such as confidence and to positive behaviours such as classroom involvement. Interpretation of the small data set raised interesting problems of the contributions of self-selection to single-sex classes and teacher enthusiasm in innovative practice settings. This study underlined the point that the classroom provides different experience for all individuals in it and that more opportunity within a school setting for teachers and students to choose can alter outcomes. Johnson and Barrett examined enhanced coping skills arising from CBT training in classroom-based trials of prevention of child anxiety. They also discussed some of the methodological and practical challenges of evaluation in this setting. Dezoete and MacArthur reported that low birthweight twins did not show effects of birth order or sex but that birthweight did affect performance. Early educational support was recommended, but funding is a continuing issue.

References

- Merrett, K., & Wheldall, K. (1990). *Positive teaching in the primary school*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Patterson, G. R. (2002). The early development of coercive family processes. In J. B. Reid, G. R. Patterson, & J. Snyder (Eds.), *Antisocial behavior in children and adolescents* (pp. 25-44). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rutter, M., & Rutter, M. (1992). *Developing minds*. London; Penguin.

Fiona Bryer
Editor