



Positive psychology constructs associated with academic success in South African secondary schools: A scoping review

Liezel Naidoo

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
liezelshirleynaidoo@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0146-2082>

Tharina Guse

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
tharina.guse@up.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9541-0392>

(Received: 19 August 2023; accepted: 1 June 2024)

Abstract

In the South African education system, there is consistent concern about academic success and how it can be supported. Using a positive psychology lens could add additional insight on aspects of positive psychological functioning that may be associated with academic success. This scoping review examined literature on positive psychology constructs identified in association with academic success in South African secondary schools. Databases and other relevant sources were searched for studies implemented between 2007 and 2022. The search strategy yielded 15 studies for analysis. The results indicate that out of 46 potential positive psychology constructs, only 25 have been investigated in South African literature. The most researched construct was social support, followed by achievement motivation, and hope.

Keywords: academic success, achievement, high school, positive psychology, scoping review, social support

Introduction

Education is a vital domain in life that leads to a higher standard of living and subjective quality of life (Omidire, 2019). The benefits of education are far-reaching and extend beyond economic dimensions to various components of holistic well-being (Scharf et al., 2019). However, the educational challenges and barriers faced by policymakers, schools, teachers, parents, and learners worldwide are significant. These challenges include high learner dropout rates from school, low numeracy and literacy rates, chronic school disengagement, and a high number of learners unable to meet minimum academic proficiency levels (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2024; Eloff, 2013; Fourie & Schlebusch, 2021; van

der Westhuizen, 2023). The challenges are especially evident in South Africa, characterised by a long history of structural disadvantage, inequality, and poverty (Albien & Naidoo, 2018; Thaba-Nkadimende, 2022).

Many school-attending learners seem to have challenges achieving a passing grade, let alone academic success. According to the most recently published global statistics, in 2018 more than 612 million school-attending learners worldwide were not achieving the minimum levels of academic proficiency for a passing grade (United Nations, 2020). Those who do achieve a passing grade seldom reach a grade average that would make them eligible for higher education. In South Africa, 40.9% of learners who wrote the National Senior Certificate exam for 2023 achieved the bachelor's pass necessary to pursue higher education. On average since 2016, the percentage has ranged anywhere from 26.6% to 36.4% (DBE, 2024). While these numbers seem to be on the rise, they only tell a partial story.

Passing grades and the pursuit of higher education in the last year of schooling is only half the challenge in the education domain. Throughout a learner's schooling career, there is a risk of school dropout. Worldwide, 71% of secondary school learners complete school and, in sub-Saharan Africa, only 38% of those initially enrolled complete school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). In South Africa, the 2023 cohort saw a nearly 40% dropout rate since starting school in Grade 1 (DBE, 2024). If Grade 12 pass rates also took dropout rates into consideration, then the final pass rate for 2023 would shift from 82.9% to just over 55%. School dropout rates are more significant in low-income and middle-income countries than in high-income countries (UIS, 2019). The level of academic success associated with so many benefits is therefore not a simple goal to reach in South Africa, which raises the question of whether anything can be done to alleviate poor academic performance.

Current responses to poor academic performance and educational challenges internationally and in South Africa show an inclination towards problem-focused approaches. Educational systems develop and enforce policies and practices that compare student abilities, focus on correcting underachievement, emphasise deficiencies that need correction, and promote competitiveness (Kern, 2022; Ngalo-Morrison, 2017). Although the deficit approach provides valuable insights into understanding the extent of the problem, it is limited with respect to changing the outcomes of educational challenges. The field of positive psychology, with its focus on human strengths and capacities, optimal functioning, and human well-being, offers an additional lens from which to understand and promote academic achievement (Cabanas & González-Lamaz, 2022; Eloff, 2013; Gill et al., 2021).

International literature has generated substantial research on academic success in secondary school, identifying positive constructs and the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions (PPIs; Froh et al., 2011; Lomas et al., 2021; White & Kern, 2018). However, most of this research was conducted in Western individualistic contexts (Hendriks et al., 2019), and an earlier review of positive psychology literature in African countries was broadly focused on PPIs in various domains without specific consideration of the positive constructs in a school setting (Guse, 2022). It is therefore important to investigate positive constructs relevant in a South African educational context.

The term “positive” used to describe positive psychology constructs, is loaded with complexity because it has many meanings in various fields. In the field of positive psychology alone, the term has at least half a dozen meanings (Pawelski, 2016a). Therefore, it is crucial to delineate the meaning of the term in this study. Pawelski (2016a, 2016b) outlined the criteria required for identifying positive constructs and, briefly put, a construct is “positive” when it is preferable, long lasting, relevant to many people, has positive flow-on effects, and is transferrable across contexts. Du Plessis’ (2014) metatheoretical classification of positive constructs provides further guidance to identify constructs relevant to positive psychology research. He proposed that positive constructs are (a) positive characteristics, (b) healthy processes, and (c) positive outcomes. A positive construct should have positive characteristics that are enduring, trait-like, and pervasive across various contexts (du Plessis, 2014; Snyder & Lopez, 2005). Further, positive constructs should enable healthy processes of living, behaviour, or cognition that could facilitate growth, adaption, and the fulfilment of needs. Such processes should lead to positive outcomes. Finally, positive outcomes are subjective experiences of eudaimonic or hedonic well-being (du Plessis, 2014; Lopez & Snyder, 2003). Hedonic well-being can be operationalised as the presence of positive emotions or pleasure along with the absence of negative emotions. Eudaimonic well-being is defined as the presence of life elements that contribute to optimal psychosocial functioning, for example, meaning in life, social contribution, and a sense of personal growth (Joshnloo et al., 2021). In this review, both Pawelski’s (2016a) and du Plessis’ (2014) frameworks were used broadly to identify positive psychology constructs in association with academic success.

It is important to differentiate between positive psychology as a perspective and positive psychology as a discipline when identifying positive psychology constructs. As a perspective, positive psychology can be a lens through which to analyse studies that align with the values and intentions of positive psychology without overtly identifying with a positive psychology framework. Viewed as a discipline, studies purposefully situate themselves within the framework of positive psychology (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021). This review considered research from both perspectives in order to be exhaustive.

We implemented a scoping review to examine the extent, range, and nature of research on positive constructs that may support and enhance academic success in South African secondary schools. The purpose of the study was twofold: first, to identify and map the available evidence on the current topic, and second, to identify possible research gaps in existing literature (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005).

Research method

Research design

Scoping reviews are useful to investigate emerging evidence in a field, obtain an overall picture of existing research, and to identify knowledge gaps (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). The central research question for this study was: “What literature is available concerning positive psychology constructs that have been identified in association with academic success in South African secondary schools?” The broad aim was to explore

and describe existing research on positive psychology constructs associated with academic success in South African secondary schools.

Review process

We used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews checklist to draft the study protocol and ensure quality reporting (Tricco et al., 2018). The protocol can be viewed as a research plan or proposal that includes elements such as the research rationale, objectives, eligibility criteria, search strategies, and plans for data analyses and synthesis. The full version of the protocol is available on request from the first author.

Search strategy and study selection

Data sources were searched between May and August 2022. Bibliographic databases were the primary data source and included the following: Scopus, Taylor & Francis, South African Journal of Education, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost. Unpublished dissertations or theses were searched within institutional repositories of University of Pretoria, University of Johannesburg, and North-West University because publications from these institutions yielded the majority of the initial scoping search references, and time constraints limited further repository searches. Relevant reference lists were also scanned for applicable literature. Finally, academics in the field of positive psychology at University of Pretoria and North-West University were consulted to offer additional literature and information sources.

We included only South African research that reported on individuals and groups that were either secondary school learners, staff members working directly with secondary school learners, or parents of secondary school learners. The studies had to include positive psychology constructs (either overtly using positive psychology as a discipline, or inadvertently using positive psychology as a perspective) and report an association with academic success.

Definitions of academic success included as acceptable were a passing grade for previously failing learners, or an increase in marks from a previous baseline, or acquiring a school diploma, or academic performance that enabled the pursuit of higher education. The search was limited to literature published in English within the last 15 years (January 2007–August 2022) because international literature on positive psychology only started steadily increasing from the early 2000s (Lomas et al., 2021). Given that scoping reviews aim to determine the types of available evidence, the inclusion criteria were not limited by a specific type of research design (Tricco et al., 2018). Original, peer-reviewed articles were included along with unpublished theses or dissertations. Abstract-only texts and conference papers were excluded due to the limited information provided by these sources. Book chapters were also excluded due to time and resource constraints.

The Peer Review of Electronic Search Strategies guidelines were used to ensure that the main search strategy was error-free, replicable, and accurate (McGowan et al., 2016). Each data

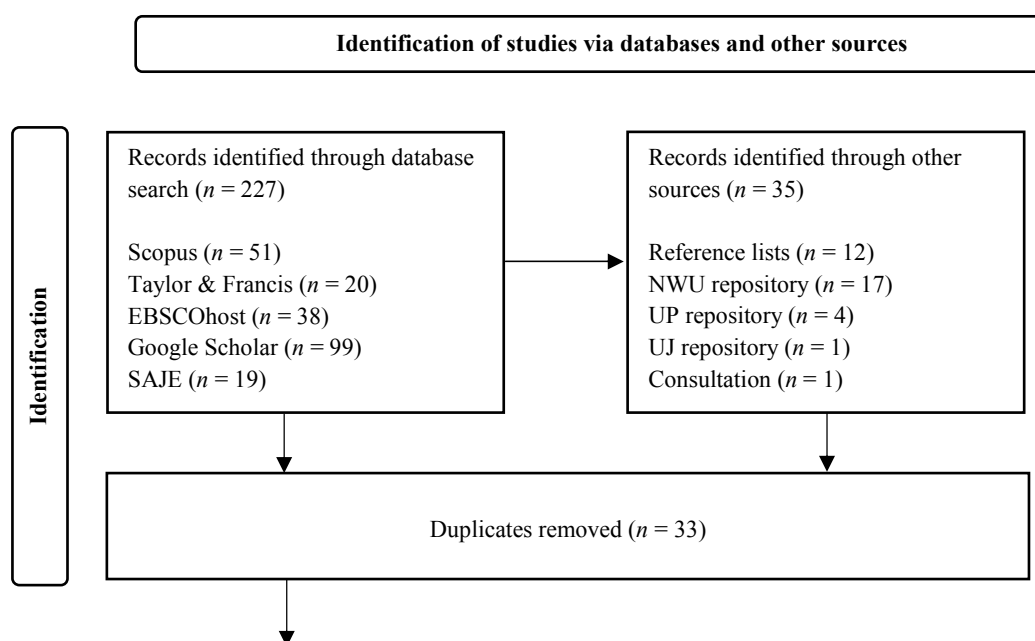
source was searched multiple times using a new search string for every positive construct of interest. The terms were accompanied by standard Boolean operators, wildcards, and truncations, which were used to combine or exclude certain search terms. Below, is an example of one such search string using the positive psychology construct of creativity:

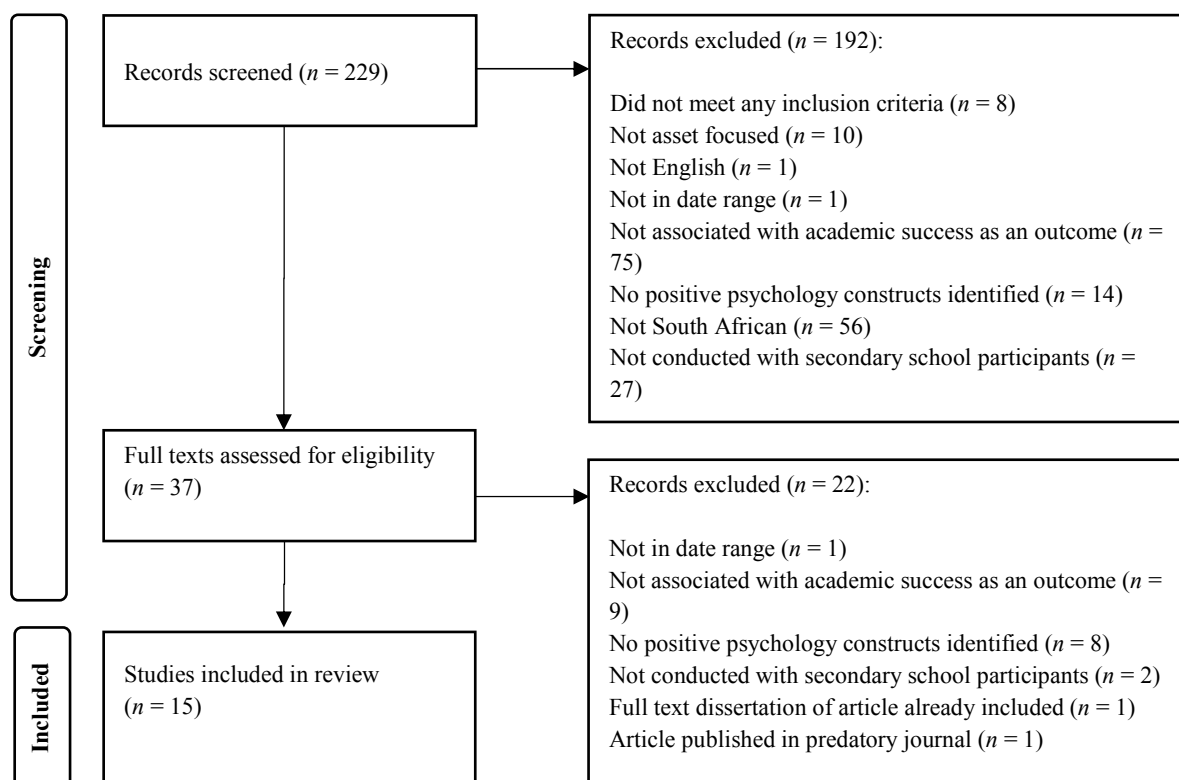
“South Africa*” AND “positive psychology” AND (creativity OR originality OR ingenuity OR innovation) AND (academic OR educational OR learn* OR scholastic OR school) AND (success OR achievement OR attainment OR outcomes OR performance OR results) AND (“secondary school” OR “intermediate school” OR “high school” OR “senior high school”) NOT “university.”

The central sourcing points for identifying positive constructs included in the search terms were derived from dominant positive psychology literature using du Plessis’ (2014) taxonomical components and Pawelski’s (2016a, 2016b) criteria. Initially, positive constructs were sourced from a list designed by Lopez et al. (2006). Further, a list of constructs from the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2005), *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook of Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures* (Lopez & Snyder, 2003), *Towards Flourishing: Embracing Well-being in Diverse Contexts* (Wissing et al., 2020), and other recent positive psychology publications were cross-compared and integrated into a single list of 46 constructs.

The search strategy yielded 6,866 titles that were screened for relevance. Only copies of the literature representing the best fit for answering the research question were selected for review. We screened the studies in an iterative process because it involved alterations to the search strategy and the exclusion and inclusion criteria based on increased familiarity with the topic as studies were collected (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). Ultimately, 15 studies were identified for analysis, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Flow diagram and results





Results

As reflected in Figure 1, 15 studies were finally included in the results section. The synthesised data is presented as a data chart in Table 1, which captured relevant information on key study characteristics and detailed information on the positive constructs identified in association with academic success in secondary school.

Table 1
Summary of included studies

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
1	Adams et al., 2019	Journal article	Johannesburg, South Africa Greater Accra, Central, and Volta regions, Ghana Kilifi and Kwale counties, Kenya	792 secondary school students 184 from South Africa 428 from Ghana 180 from Kenya	To examine the developmental assets that contribute to academic performance in three sub-Saharan African contexts	Quantitative	Positive youth development (PYD) framework	Achievement motivation Altruism Autonomy Empathy Fairness Honesty Love of learning Meaning and purpose Optimism School engagement Self-regulation Social intelligence	Adolescents who perform better academically reported more developmental assets, in particular, internal assets.
2	Adebayo et al., 2020	Journal article	South Africa	11,969 Grade 8 and 9 learners across the country participated in the Trend in Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS) of 2015	To analyse the factors that impact academic performance within non-affluent and historically disadvantaged schools	Quantitative	Not specified	Self-determination	Learner self-determination had a statistically significant impact on academic success, along with school management and teacher accountability.
3	Bester & Kuyper, 2020	Journal article	Gauteng, South Africa	117 Grade 9 and 10 learners: 62 learners from a poverty-stricken context and 55 learners from a former Model C school	To establish how additional educational support enhances adolescents' resilience and to determine if a relationship exists between resilient behaviour and academic achievement	Quantitative	Not specified	Resilience Positive relationships (teacher–learner) Social support: ~Parent support (warmth, structure, monitoring, and setting expectations)	Additional educational support (positive teacher–learner relationships, parental involvement, cognitive development, and study methods) to poverty-stricken learners resulted in higher resilience, which related positively to academic achievement.

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
4	Bojuwoye et al., 2014	Journal article	Western Cape, South Africa	90 learners from selected public schools in the Western Cape: 60 primary and 30 secondary school learners	To explore experiences of learners regarding school practices, to understand the provision and utilisation of these learning support services for improving the quality of learning	Qualitative	Asset-based approach	Social support: ~Teacher support (extra classes, extra notes, additional learning time, accessing information, study skills, and encouragement) ~Peer support (study groups and encouragement) ~Parent support (school interest and involvement)	School actions, classroom practices, and teacher and learner behaviours improved academic performance and social relations.
5	Geduld, 2017	Journal article	Eastern Cape, South Africa	14 teachers from two high-poverty schools in the Eastern Cape	To explore teachers' perceptions of factors that motivate learners to learn and attain their academic goals	Qualitative	Self-determination theory and self-regulated learning model	Optimism Belonging Social support: ~Teacher support (motivation, encouragement of self-efficacy, humour, role models, and support for intrinsic motivation) ~Community support (motivation and resources to build skills) ~Peer support (motivation)	Teachers, extrinsic reinforcements, community projects, and learners' drive to escape their socioeconomic situations were perceived as outstanding motivational factors.
6	Gibbs & Poisat, 2019	Journal article	Eastern Cape, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	399 principals, deputies, educators, and administrative staff from 30 secondary schools in three provinces	To examine and analyse performance factors (educator engagement and team performance) within the secondary school context	Quantitative	Human and system factors framework	Social support: ~Teacher support (engagement by doing their best, taking ownership of the role, passion, and going the extra mile)	Engaged leadership and educators contributed toward outcomes of high percentage pass rates.

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
7	Grobler et al., 2014	Journal article	Free State, South Africa	1,355 Grade 11 learners from four previously disadvantaged secondary schools (n = 645), two transitional schools (n = 481), and three advantaged schools (n = 229) in the Free State	To explore whether, aside from gender and school environment, learners' motivation can serve as a predictor of the (un)successful transition of learners from Grade 11 to 12 in South Africa	Quantitative	Self-determination theory	Achievement motivation: ~Autonomous identified motivation	Successful transition was associated with higher levels of learner motivation (autonomous), a positive attitude towards learning, and lower levels of educational anxiety.
8	Hemson, 2018	Journal article	Durban, South Africa	Four male learners successfully completed secondary school in a historically African township and successfully transitioned to university	To understand how a group of boys in a Durban township achieved exceptional educational results despite severe financial, social, and educational constraints	Qualitative	Resilience theory	Self-efficacy Autonomy Innovation Resilience Altruism Love of learning Social support: ~Peer support (study group, humour, belonging, teamwork) ~Community support (extra classes) ~Parent support (attending school meetings and promoting importance of studying)	The group developed strategies that evolved into an ongoing resilient system, which enabled effective responses within the school environment and had lasting effects that sustained them through their university careers and beyond.

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
9	Lethale & Pillay, 2013	Journal article	Gauteng, South Africa	Four academically well-performing secondary school learners who were orphaned and living in adolescent-headed households Five educators who interacted with the learners	To identify and explore the contribution of resilience factors to the successful academic performance of adolescents from adolescent-headed homes	Qualitative	Positive psychology and resilience theory	Courage Creativity Self-efficacy Determination/perseverance Love of learning Positive emotions Meaning and purpose Optimism Social support: ~Teacher support (caring, compassionate, kind, honest, accepting, and encouraging) ~Peer support (encouragement, social intelligence, belonging, altruism) Resilience	Fostering self-awareness, positive relationships, encouraging aspirations for a better future, and facilitating community support create resilience, which has a positive impact on academic performance.
10	Molokoli, 2014	Unpublished doctoral thesis	North-West, South Africa	150 Grade 9 mathematics learners from two public secondary schools in Rustenburg	To construct a volition-enhancing self-regulation model to improve Grade 9 mathematics learner performance in rural community schools	Mixed methods	Activity theory and constructivist views	Self-regulation	Comparing experimental and control groups indicated that the intervention effect had high statistical significance, suggesting that volition enhances mathematics performance.
11	Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014	Journal article	South Africa	114 parents of Grade 12 learners in a selected South African secondary school	To determine how parental involvement in South African schools affects the academic performance of learners in mathematics	Quantitative	Epstein's (1995) research-based framework	Social support: ~Parent support (positive attitude towards learning, school, and teachers, being knowledgeable, involved in schooling, and communication with the school)	Parent-teacher communication and home and family support were positively related to academic performance, with home and family support being the most significant factor.

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
12	Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021	Journal article	Western Cape, South Africa	10 participants from a high-risk community completed secondary school and transitioned to university	To explore the pathways to academic success of disadvantaged learners from a high-risk community	Qualitative	Positive psychology and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological model	Spirituality Achievement motivation Altruism Bravery Creativity Gratitude Honesty Hope Autonomy Leadership Love of learning Perseverance Perspective Self-regulation Self-efficacy Social support: ~Attachment figure support (taking to school, teaching how to do homework, caring, and encouraging self-efficacy) ~Siblings/family support (encouragement, skills development, and instilling a sense of responsibility) ~Peer support (belonging, motivation, and encouragement) ~Teacher support (encouragement, skill development, positive feedback, and promote self-efficacy) ~Community support (extra classes and belonging)	The pathways to academic success have obstacles, but through positive relationships, specific personal qualities, and motivation, the learners achieved academic success.

#	Author/s and year	Source type	Location	Participants	Aims	Design	Framework of study	Positive construct/s	Outcomes
13	Schulze & Lemmer, 2017	Journal article	Pretoria, South Africa	380 Grade 9 learners from four public and independent schools	To explore the relationship between family experiences, the motivation for science learning, and science achievement	Quantitative	Eccles' (2009) value-expectancy model of achievement-related choices, Marjoribanks' (1976) social learning theory of the family, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) theory of parent efficacy	Social support: ~Parent support (interest in schooling, high expectations, encouragement to engagement, and promotion of self-efficacy)	Family experiences correlated significantly with motivational aspects of science learning and achievement.
14	Schulze & van Heerden, 2015	Journal article	Pretoria, South Africa	380 Grade 9 learners from three independent schools (n = 47, 82, and 54) and one public school (n = 197)	To explore motivational factors for science learning among high school students of different genders, racial groups, and school types, in line with the TIMSS report	Quantitative	Achievement goal theory	Achievement motivation: ~Mastery goals	Motivation for learning improves academic performance. Both genders and Black students were more motivated by mastery goals than by performance goals.
15	Schutte, 2012	Unpublished master's dissertation	Free State, South Africa	182 learners in senior phase at a secondary school in the Free State	To determine whether a relationship exists between resilience, self-regulation, and the academic performance of learners living under adverse circumstances	Quantitative	Resilience theory	Self-regulation Social support: ~Community support (positive relationships and opportunities for learning)	No significant relationship between resilience and academic performance was found. A moderate relationship between academic performance and self-regulated learning was found.

Type of research output, location, and participants

The majority of studies were journal articles ($n = 13$), followed by one unpublished doctoral thesis and one unpublished master's dissertation. One study's exact location within South Africa was unspecified, while another reported on data collected across South Africa. Two studies reported taking place in the general Gauteng area. One study specified Johannesburg and two specified Pretoria. The Johannesburg study also reported on data collected from Ghana and Kenya. Two studies collected data in the Western Cape province. One study took place across three provinces, namely, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal. The Free State reported two studies. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and North-West provinces were reported as single study locations by one study each. The schools included in the studies varied in description, but the majority of schools included were schools in high-poverty contexts ($n = 9$), followed by independent schools ($n = 6$), public schools ($n = 5$), former Model C schools ($n = 3$), advantaged schools ($n = 3$), and a general education training school ($n = 1$).

The study participants were predominantly secondary school learners ($n = 15,373$ across 12 studies), followed by secondary school staff members working directly with the learners ($n = 413$ across two studies), and secondary school parents ($n = 114$ in one study). Only some studies reported the gender, racial, and ethnic information of the participants. After reading the descriptions of the research settings, we determined that the vast majority of studies mainly included only Black African participants—there were 650 Black African participants across studies compared to 355 White and Coloured participants. In all studies, except one, female participants outnumbered male participants.

Research design, framework, and aims

In terms of research design, most studies used a quantitative approach ($n = 9$), followed by a qualitative approach ($n = 5$). Only one study used a mixed methods study design. The quantitative studies, barring one study that used the data from the Trend in Mathematical and Science Study (TIMMS; Reddy et al., 2013) used a variety of questionnaires. TIMMS is conducted every four years and is an assessment of the science and mathematics knowledge of Grade 4 and Grade 8 learners. In the qualitative studies, two implemented semi-structured focus groups and two conducted semi-structured individual interviews. One study conducted both semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group. The mixed methods study was an intervention programme implemented in a group setting. The researcher completed pre- and post-test questionnaires and mathematics tests for the quantitative section of the study and individual interviews for the qualitative section. Many studies used either academic reports ($n = 5$), academic tests ($n = 1$), or the TIMMS data ($n = 1$) as performance measures. One study selected learners for participation based on their performance, while others used the performance data as a comparator for identifying qualities related to academic success for high-performing learners ($n = 4$). The intervention study used the results of the pre- and post-academic test as an assessment of the effectiveness of the intervention. The studies that did

not use academic reports relied on guidance from school staff for selecting academically successful learners for participation.

Most studies ($n = 6$) used either a positive psychology framework, an assets-based approach, or positive psychology theories. Two studies did not specify a framework or working theory and some of the studies ($n = 5$) did not explicitly use a positive psychology framework, but their results aligned with an assets-based approach.

As outlined in the criteria, all the studies aimed to explore factors contributing to academic success, either generally or subject-specific. Three studies were constructivist and exploratory on identifying positive constructs that were associated with academic success (Geduld, 2017; Hemson, 2018; Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021). The remaining studies predetermined positive constructs for investigation. Most studies were focused on correlating various types of social support and positive relationships with academic outcomes ($n = 5$). Two studies also incorporated resilience and motivation as possible factors associated with academic success (Bester & Kuyper, 2020; Schulze & Lemmer, 2017). Resilience ($n = 2$) and motivation ($n = 2$) were also investigated independently in two studies each (Grobler et al., 2014; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Schulze & van Heerden, 2015; Schutte, 2012). One of the resilience studies additionally investigated self-regulation (Schutte, 2012). Self-regulation was the main focus of association in one study (Molokoli, 2014) and developmental assets were the focus in another study (Adams et al., 2019).

Outcomes and positive constructs

Most correlational studies ($n = 14$) reported positive associations between the investigated positive constructs and academic success. Only one study did not find a significant relationship between resilience and academic success but a moderate relationship between self-regulation and academic success (Schutte, 2012). The exploratory studies found that academic success was associated with multiple positive constructs forming part of a bioecological context (Geduld, 2017; Hemson, 2018; Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021). While we identified 46 positive constructs prior to the review, only 25 were identified in the selected 15 studies included in this review, as reflected in Table 2. Some of the positive constructs that were not identified include character strengths, curiosity/interest, flow/mindfulness, and kindness.

Table 2
Summary of positive constructs identified in association with academic success

Positive construct	Number of studies that identified the construct in association with academic success
Social support	10
Achievement motivation/self-determination	5
Hope/optimism	4

Positive construct	Number of studies that identified the construct in association with academic success
Love of learning	4
Self-regulation	4
Creativity/innovation	3
Self-efficacy	3
Altruism/prosocial behaviour	3
Resilience	3
Autonomy	2
Bravery/courage	2
Grit/perseverance	2
Honesty/integrity	2
Meaning and purpose	2
Spirituality	1
Belonging	1
Empathy	1
Engagement	1
Fairness	1
Gratitude	1
Leadership	1
Perspective/wisdom	1
Positive emotions	1
Social intelligence	1
Positive relationships	1

Discussion

Despite the large number of international studies reporting on the benefits of including positive psychology within a school context (Lomas et al., 2021), and the reported increase in the number of positive psychology publications related to academic success internationally (Froh et al., 2011) and in non-Western countries (Hendriks et al., 2019), South African research on the topic is still limited. This is concerning given that Eloff (2013) encouraged researchers to investigate the relationship between school-wide interventions and more complex variables such as academic performance and increased attendance a decade ago. Although South African positive psychology research is expanding, including research in

educational contexts (see Wilson & Wissing, 2022, for an overview), there is clearly an urgent need to focus on its application to academic achievement. The type of research conducted in the identified studies varied. Barring one study that implemented an intervention, the remaining studies investigated the link between academic success and either a predetermined positive construct or identified constructs in an exploratory approach. Each study's participants and locations varied greatly, making generalisability across South African contexts difficult. However, the studies shared a common aim, that is, to explore which positive constructs are relevant in a South African context. This seems to align with calls for more contextually relevant research in positive psychology (Wissing, 2022).

The three most investigated positive constructs in South African research were social support, motivation, and hope. Social support—broadly viewed as teacher support, parental/family support, peer support, and community support—was the most identified construct. This finding was not surprising. Research has consistently shown that, although internal resources or personal qualities such as perseverance, self-control, and hope are contributing factors to success, they only partially explain why some learners thrive and others do not (Allen et al., 2022; Ungar, 2018). The most meaningful sources of social support seem to be teachers who maintain emotionally supportive connections with learners; parents who take an authoritative approach with positive expectations and take an interest in a learner's schooling; peers who are encouraging, motivational, and accepting; and communities or families that valorise education and provide various resources such as homework support. These findings suggest that academic success is an outcome of the interplay between various systems within a learner's context, which work in combination to support academic progress.

Motivation was the second most researched construct. In line with Ryan and Deci's (2017) concept of intrinsic motivation, a love of learning and the inherent value of learning was recognised as the primary source of motivation in multiple studies (Adams et al., 2019; Hemson, 2018; Lethale & Pillay, 2013). Interestingly, in one of the studies (Grobler, 2014), motivation was also identified as a moral imperative to succeed and thus a source of extrinsic motivation. This is an important finding given the collectivist cultural values held by many South Africans, which may not have been given prominence in Western literature (Albien & Naidoo, 2018; Hendriks et al., 2019).

Hope was the third most researched positive construct, and it is closely linked to motivation. The presence of hope is vital in a South African "context of poverty and a culture of hopelessness" as described by participants in one of the identified studies (Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021, p. 192). Hope entails future-mindedness and future orientation with an expectation that desired events and outcomes will occur. This future orientation is connected to feelings of confidence and positive expectations that galvanise goal-directed actions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the identified studies from our review, academic success was strongly related to a positive expectation that present opportunities would lead to better outcomes for past and future generations. Given the ongoing legacy of apartheid, poverty, and marginalisation in South Africa (Dryden-Peterson & Robinson, 2023; Kim et al., 2023),

the hope that academic success will change future circumstances may galvanise motivation for continued effort in academic work.

While we identified 25 constructs, it is important to note that they are not necessarily representative of all the contextually relevant constructs associated with academic success in South Africa. Rather, these were merely the only constructs investigated to date. This is possibly due to the dominance of quantitative studies that predetermined constructs for investigation as opposed to more exploratory approaches, as suggested in the third wave of positive psychology (Lomas et al., 2021). For example, literature shows that internationally, the construct of “appreciation of beauty and excellence” is one of the least researched and least understood character strengths (Hort, 2019). Overall, research identifying positive psychology constructs associated with academic success in South Africa requires more attention.

Conclusion and recommendations

This scoping review found that South African research on positive psychology constructs and academic success is emerging, however, the slow rate of research is concerning. Several recommendations flow from this review. First, it is recommended that, as a whole, a broader range of positive psychology constructs should be examined in association with academic success in South African secondary schools. These constructs should be explored taking context into consideration, including cultural traditions, practices, and history. For example, the nuances of intrinsic versus extrinsic academic motivation in a collectivist context, the significance of certain other-oriented character strengths versus more individualistic strengths, or the importance of specific positive emotions in achieving academic success. Second, social support seems to be essential to academic success. Thus, more in-depth research is needed regarding the nature and dynamics of social support that could be meaningful to learners. Finally, most positive constructs in this review were researched in isolation. Given the context of South Africa and the complex needs of learners, it is recommended that the interplay of multiple constructs be investigated within a bioecological or multisystemic framework.

We acknowledge that relevant research may have been omitted from this review due to the language selection, time period searched, university repositories omitted, and data sources searched. However, through identifying research gaps, we hope that the study may contribute towards further research and exploration on the topic.

References

- Adams, B. G., Wiium, N., & Abubakar., A. (2019). Developmental assets and academic performance of adolescents in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 48*(2), 207–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9480-z>

- Adebayo, K. A., Ntokozo, N., & Grace, N. Z. (2020). Availability of educational resources and student academic performances in South Africa. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(8), 3768–3781. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.080858>
- Albien, A., & Naidoo, A. (2018). Barriers and enablers for career development among marginalised South African youth. In V. Cohen-Scali, J. Rossier, & L. Nota (Eds.), *New perspectives on career counselling and guidance in Europe* (pp. 146–165). Springer.
- Allen, K. A., Riley, K., Gowing, A., Lim, M. H., Boyle, C., Vota, R. M., Richardson, M., Wolfe, M. J., Cruwys, T., Stevens, M., Leif, E., Marwan, S., van der Zwan, R., & Ammermann, M. (2022). Coming together: A comprehensive overview of the transdisciplinary perspectives of school belonging. In K. A. Allen, M. Furlong, D. Vella-Brodrick, & S. Suldo (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology in schools: Supporting process and practice* (pp. 425–461). Routledge.
- Arksey, H., & O’Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Bester, G., & Kuyper, N. (2020). The influence of additional educational support on poverty-stricken adolescents’ resilience and academic performance. *Africa Education Review*, 17(3), 158–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2019.1689149>
- Bojuwoye, O., Moletsane, M., Stofile, S., Moolla, N., & Sylvester, F. (2014). Learners’ experiences of learning support in selected Western Cape schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 34(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15700/201412121002>
- Cabanas, E., & González-Lamas, J. (2022). A critical review of positive education: Challenges and limitations. *Social Psychology of Education*, 25(5), 1249–1272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-022-09721-7>
- Department of Basic Education. (2024). *National Senior Certificate examination report 2023*. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021NSCReports/NSC23%20Technical%20Report.pdf?ver=2024-01-18-161615-123>
- Dryden-Peterson, S., & Robinson, N. (2023). Time, source, and responsibility: Understanding changing uses of the past in “post-conflict” South African history teaching, 1998 and 2019. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2212111>
- du Plessis, G. A. (2014). *A meta-theoretical taxonomy of positive psychology constructs* [Doctoral thesis, University of Johannesburg]. UJContent. https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/view/pdfCoverPage?instCode=27UOJ_INST&filePid=136134460007691&download=true

- Eloff, I. (2013). Positive psychology and education. In M. P. Wissing (Ed.), *Well-being research in South Africa* (pp. 39–52). Springer.
- Fourie, M., & Schlebusch, G. (2021). Exploring grade repetition in South African schools and its relation to learning and cognition. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity, and Change*, *15*(11), 177–194.
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Exploring-Grade-Repetition-in-South-African-Schools-Fouriea-Schlebuschb/f022137686f36e294e481f4b9d741025961c19fd>
- Froh, J. J., Huebner, E. S., Youssef, A. J., & Conte, V. (2011). Acknowledging and appreciating the full spectrum of the human condition: School psychology's (limited) focus on positive psychological functioning. *Psychology in the Schools*, *48*(2), 110–123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20530>
- Geduld, B. (2017). Personal and contextual influences on township school learners' motivation and self-regulated learning. *Africa Education Review*, *14*(2), 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1291279>
- Gibbs, M., & Poisat, P. (2019). Educator engagement: Key to high performance of school operational teams in South African secondary schools. *Africa Education Review*, *16*(4), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1394166>
- Gill, A., Trask-Kerr, K., & Vella-Brodrick, D. (2021). Systematic review of adolescent conceptions of success: Implications for wellbeing and positive education. *Educational Psychology Review*, *33*(4), 1553–1582. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09605-w>
- Grobler, A. A., Knight, M. R., Lens, W., & Lacante, M. (2014). Motivational predictors of successful transition from Grades 11 to 12 in South Africa. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *29*(4), 693–709. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-014-0223-8>
- Guse, T. (2022). Positive psychological interventions in African contexts: A scoping review. In L. Schutte, T. Guse, & M. P. Wissing (Eds.), *Embracing well-being in diverse African contexts: Research perspectives* (pp. 375–397). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85924-4_16
- Hemson, C. (2018). Agency, resilience and innovation in overcoming educational failure. *Perspectives in Education*, *36*(2), 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v36i2.6>
- Hendriks, T., Warren, M. A., Schotanus-Dijkstra, M., Hassankhan, A., Graafsma, T., Bohlmeijer, E., & de Jong, J. (2019). How WEIRD are positive psychology interventions? A bibliometric analysis of randomized controlled trials on the science of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *14*(4), 489–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1484941>

- Hort, A. G. (2019). *Revisiting the conceptualisation and categorisation of appreciation of beauty as a character strength: A narrative review* [Master's dissertation, North-West University]. Boloka: NWU Institutional Repository.
http://repository.nwu.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10394/33765/Hort_AG.pdf?sequence=1
- Joshanloo, M., Jovanović, V., & Park, J. (2021). Differential relationships of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being with self-control and long-term orientation. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 63(1), 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpr.12276>
- Kern, M. L. (2022). PERMAH: A useful model for focusing on well-being in schools. In K. A. Allen, M. J. Furlong, D. A. Vella-Brodrick, & S. M. Suldo (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology in schools: Supporting process and practice* (pp. 12–24). Routledge.
- Kern, M. L., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (Eds.). (2021). *The Palgrave handbook of positive education*. Springer.
- Kim, A. W., Mohamed, R. S., Norris, S. A., Richter, L. M., & Kuzawa, C. W. (2023). Psychological legacies of intergenerational trauma under South African apartheid: Prenatal stress predicts greater vulnerability to the psychological impacts of future stress exposure during late adolescence and early adulthood in Soweto, South Africa. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 64(1), 110–124.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13672>
- Lethale, P. S., & Pillay, J. (2013). Resilience against all odds: A positive psychology perspective of adolescent-headed families. *Africa Education Review*, 10(3), 579–594.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2013.853550>
- Lomas, T., Waters, L., Williams, P., Oades, L. G., & Kern, M. L. (2021). Third-wave positive psychology: Broadening towards complexity. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16(5), 660–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1805501>
- Lopez, S. J., & Snyder, C. R. (2003). *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures*. American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/10612-000>
- Lopez, S. J., Magyar-Moe, J. L., Petersen, S. E., Ryder, J. A., Krieshok, T. S., Koetting O'Byrne, K., Lichtenberg, J. W., & Fry, N. A. (2006). Counseling psychology's focus on positive aspects of human functioning. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34(2), 205–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000005283393>
- McGowan, J., Sampson, M., Salzwedel, D. M., Cogo, E., Foerster, V., & Lefebvre, C. (2016). PRESS peer review of electronic search strategies: 2015 Guideline statement. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 75, 40–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2016.01.021>

- Molokoli, D. L. (2014). *A model for enhancing volitional strategies' use and mathematics achievement in Grade 9 in a rural community school*. [Doctoral thesis, North-West University]. Boloka: NWU Institutional Repository.
<http://repository.nwu.ac.za/handle/10394/13397>
- Munn, Z., Peters, M. D., Stern, C., Tufanaru, C., McArthur, A., & Aromataris, E. (2018). Systematic review or scoping review? Guidance for authors when choosing between a systematic or scoping review approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *18*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x>
- Mutodi, P., & Ngirande, H. (2014). The impact of parental involvement on student performance: A case study of a South African secondary school. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, *5*, 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n8p279>
- Naidoo, L., & van Schalkwyk, I. (2021). Pathways to academic success of disadvantaged undergraduate university students from a high-risk community in the Western Cape. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *35*(4), 180–204.
<https://doi.org/10.20853/35-4-4175>
- Ngalo-Morrison, L. (2017). *Factors influencing the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students at the University of the Western Cape: A strength-based approach* [Doctoral thesis, University of the Western Cape]. UWCScholar: ETD Repository.
https://etd.uwc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11394/5553/morrison_phd_edu_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Omidire, M. F. (2019). Improving quality of life through teaching and learning innovations in multilingual contexts: Lessons from sub-Saharan Africa. In I. Eloff (Ed.), *Handbook of quality of life in African societies* (pp. 345–358). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15367-0_18
- Pawelski, J. O. (2016a). Defining the “positive” in positive psychology: Part I. A descriptive analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *11*(4), 339–356.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137627>
- Pawelski, J. O. (2016b). Defining the “positive” in positive psychology: Part II. A normative analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *11*(4), 357–365.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137628>
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. American Psychological Association.
- Reddy, V., Winnaar, L., Visser, M., Feza-Piyose, N., Arends, F., Prinsloo, C. H., Mthethwa, M., Juan, A., & Rogers, S. (2013). *Highlights from TIMSS 2011: South Africa*. HSRC.
<https://repository.hsra.ac.za/handle/20.500.11910/2980?show=full>

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.
- Scharf, J., Hadjar, A., & Grecu, A. (2019). Applying social production function theory to benefits of schooling: The concept of values of education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(7), 847–867. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1604207>
- Schulze, S., & Lemmer, E. (2017). Family experiences, the motivation for science learning and science achievement of different learner groups. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n1a1276>
- Schulze, S., & van Heerden, M. (2015). Learning environments matter: Identifying influences on the motivation to learn science. *South African Journal of Education*, 35(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v35n2a1058>
- Schutte, S. (2012). *The relationship between resilience, self regulation and the academic performance of learners living in townships under adverse circumstances* [Master's dissertation, North-West University]. Boloka: NWU Institutional Repository. http://repository.nwu.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10394/7572/Schutte_%20S.pdf;sequence=2
- Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. J. (2005). *Handbook of positive psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Thaba-Nkadimene, K. L. (2022). Editorial note: Challenges of the South African education system and the impact of low quality basic education. *Journal of African Education*, 3(1), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2633-2930/2022/v3n1a0>
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., Moher, D., Peters, M. D. J., Horsley, T., Weeks, L., Hempel, S., Akl, E. A., Chang, C., McGowan, J., Stewart, L., Hartling, L., Aldcroft, A., Wilson, M. G., Garritty, C, . . . Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 169(7), 467–473. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850>
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2019). *Combining data on out-of-school children, completion and learning to offer a more comprehensive view on SDG 4* (Information Paper No. 61). <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth>
- Ungar, M. (2018). *Change your world: The science of resilience and the true path to success*. Sutherland House.
- United Nations. (2020). *The Sustainable Development Goals report 2020*. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

- van der Westhuizen, L. (2023). *Factors influencing throughput of learners in the Youth Focus Project 2017 to 2020* [Master's dissertation, Stellenbosch University].
<https://scholar.sun.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/aacaaedb-0bb6-4984-a552-27f408b45d76/content>
- White, M., & Kern, M. L. (2018). Positive education: Learning and teaching for wellbeing and academic mastery. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 8(1), 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v8i1.588>
- Wilson F. A., & Wissing, M. P. (2022). Positive psychology in sub-Saharan Africa. In E. C. Chang, C. Downey, H. Yang, I. Zettler, & M. Muyan-Yılık (Eds.), *The international handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 307–354). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57354-6_11
- Wissing, M. P. (2022). Beyond the “third wave of positive psychology”: Challenges and opportunities for future research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.795067>
- Wissing, M. P., Potgieter, J. C., Guse, T., Khumalo, I. P., & Nel, L. (2020). *Towards flourishing: Embracing well-being in diverse contexts*. van Schaik.