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Voices For Living Project

Part of the Positive Schools Initiative



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Voices for Living Project

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Overview

The following article explores student and teacher perceptions of positive education and class enjoyment. The responses examined were collected from a Positive Schools Initiative called 'The Voices for Living' Project. Exploration of 458 responses from 21 schools suggested that although educational aims are couched in traditional academic terms; both students and teachers value their social environment as central to making education a positive and enjoyable experience.

Background

The rise of positive education and mental health in our schools

In 2000, Professors Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi formally defined positive psychology as “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.”¹ Although sometimes called the scientific study of happiness, positive psychology is concerned with more than hedonic enjoyment or being continually in a good mood. Rather it is about flourishing and being socially and mentally well. As such it is as much about how we successfully manage life’s challenges as it is about how we embrace positive experience.

In 2005, Dr Trent Barry, a parent, introduced his children’s school to the idea of positive psychology. The school was Geelong Grammar School (GGS), now known as the world leader in practising positive education. Following a visit from Martin Seligman in 2006, the GGS staff members decided to pursue the idea of applying the concepts and practice of positive psychology to the school community. In 2008, this idea became a reality and the beginning of positive education was born.²

Today, in 2015, thousands of schools have embraced concepts of positive education in their pursuit to better student wellbeing and engagement in learning. Consequently, a myriad of wellbeing programs and initiatives have been adopted by schools worldwide in an attempt to foster student wellbeing with a solution focused and positive approach to mental health. However, despite findings demonstrating the significant impact of many aspects of positive psychology to improve student wellbeing and mental health, several barriers to effective progress are becoming increasingly evident. First, the lack of consensus about the key elements required to support youth wellbeing have led to a series of school-based wellbeing trends, rather than a unified view of positive education. The self-esteem movement of the 1970s and 1980s gave way to a focus on resiliency which has now been put aside in favour of mindfulness programs and initiatives in many schools. These changeable and often heavily resourced programs have led to some scepticism over the overall effectiveness; and much confusion over the essential ingredients of effective school based practice.

The second major concern is the alarming prevalence of mental health issues in young people. The Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing suggested that 14%

of young Australians experience significant mental health problems.³ In 2014, Professor Patrick McGorry stated that “mental ill health is now the most important health issue facing young people worldwide. It is the leading cause of disability in people aged 10–24 years, contributing 45% of the overall burden of disease in this age group.”⁴ Mindframe, the Australian national media initiative, reported that 12% of 13-17 year-old adolescents with mental health problem have thought about suicide, and 4.2% had actually made a suicide attempt. Many young people with mental health problems also reported engaging in substance use, with 23.1% reported smoking, 36.7% reported drinking, and 18% reported marijuana use.⁵

Both researchers and clinicians have suggested that this high prevalence of mental disorder is not only alarming, it is increasing. These figures both challenge the impact of current in-school approaches to wellbeing and argue for a greater provision of services. No doubt schools are in a prime position to nurture positive mental health in young people, however how they can effectively do this remains a contentious issue.

A Student Voice

In recent years educational research has turned its attentions to the student voice in an attempt to better understand the factors that impact the students’ experience of school life and a positive school environment.⁶ As suggested by Dr Julia Flutter from The University of Cambridge, students’ perception of the environment may be more influential than factors identified through more objective means.⁷

With these thoughts in mind, Alexia Gillen and colleague examined students’ perceptions of a positive classroom climate.⁸ A total of 116 Year Seven and Eight students identified physical setting (e.g., seating arrangement, displays on the wall) as the most important factor in creating positive classroom climate, followed by order and organisation (e.g., reward systems, behaviour expectations), peer relationships (e.g., collaborative working, again the seating arrangement), lesson content and delivery (e.g., range of activities, lesson structure), and teacher/student relationships (e.g., valuing students’ opinions, teacher support) were rated the least important.

Locally, several schools pioneering whole school positive education programs in Australia, such as Geelong Grammar School in Victoria, St Peters College in South Australia and Knox

Grammar School in Sydney, have also each spent considerable time gathering student views and perceptions of the specific positive education programs within their individual schools. Although these schools are still in the early stages of examining their data, the results are promising with a sense that overall, students value positive education as a whole school approach to learning.

None-the-less, there appears to be a lack of studies or initiatives that have asked students from a wide range of Australian schools to define positive education in succinct terms. It also remains unclear whether students and teachers have similar ideas about positive education and how best to pursue a cohesive classroom. The Voices for Living project provided an opportunity to do explore these gaps in knowledge and understanding. In particular, the project aimed to gather succinct students' and teachers' perceptions about factors that make education positive and classroom enjoyable, in addition to providing an opportunity to showcase student and teacher voices at the 2015 Positive Schools Australia conference series⁹

Project Overview

The Positive Schools Initiative (PSI), together with the support of GGS, developed the 'Voices for Living' project to offer students, teachers and community members an opportunity to 'voice' opinions in response to some general questions about positive education and their experience of 'going to school'.

The Voices for Living project was introduced to schools and community across Australia in early 2015. Students and teachers from schools across Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, as well as members of the community who were interested in the project were invited to present a combination of image and video answers to a series of pre-set questions about their thoughts on positive education and their school experience. Image responses consisted of photos of participants holding their brief (one to three word) answers on A4+ pieces of paper. Video responses consisted of 10-20 second videos of participants presenting a response verbally and/or visually. All responses were captured using smart phones or iPad.

We received over 1000 responses, with a large majority (92%) of responses coming from students and teachers. The enthusiasm shown by the students and teachers in participating in

the project further affirmed the need for the school community to be involved in assessing and shaping school-based wellbeing and education delivery.

Current Article - method

The current article focuses on analysing students' and teachers' responses to three questions set out in the project. These are:

- 1) What is the most important thing you learn(t) at school?
- 2) What makes a class fun to be in?
- 3) What makes education positive education?

A total of 458 responses to the above questions were received from 21 schools across Australia. The majority of these responses were from students (80%). Primary school students (age between 5- to 12-year) made up 57% of all the students' responses, secondary school students (age between 13- to 17- year) 33%, and the remaining 16% preferred to stay anonymous.

Results

Due to the wide variety of the responses received, an independent coding system was created to categorise these responses into pre-determined categories. Different sets of response categories were used for each question (see below). Four independent judges (two clinical psychologists, one general psychologist, and one psychology trainee) were invited to categorise these responses. Overall 87% of the total responses were agreed by at least three of the four judges. The responses are discussed below.

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learn(t) at school?

The responses for this question were categorised into one of these four pre-set categories: (1) Basic literacy skills (e.g., reading, writing, maths); (2) Safety needs (e.g., physical safety, health); (3) Love/belonging needs (e.g., friendships, teams, groups); and, (4) Higher level/abstract needs (e.g., respect, esteem) – which were loosely based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

85% of the teachers' and students' responses to this question were agreed by at least three of the four judges to belong to one of the above mentioned categories. The responses indicated that students believe that basic literacy skills are the most important thing they learn at school

followed by higher level or abstract needs. Interestingly, teachers reported these same two categories but in reverse order. Love/belonging needs and safety needs were reported as the third and fourth most important categories for this question by both the teachers and students.

VFL RESULTS SUMMARY: What is the most important thing you learn(t) at school?

	Students	Teachers
Basic Skills	53.47%	18.75%
Higher level/abstract need	21.78%	56.25%
Love/belonging need	17.82%	18.75%
Safety need	6.93%	6.25%

Question 2. What makes a class fun to be in?

The responses for this question were again categorised into four pre-set categories: (1) The activities (e.g., reading, sports, dance); (2) The physical environment (e.g., being outside); (3) The people (e.g., teachers, friends); and, (4) Emotional engagement (e.g., interaction, inclusive environment). 86% of the teachers' and students' responses to this question were agreed by at least three of the four judges to belong to one of these pre-set categories for this question. The responses demonstrated that both students and teachers reported that the people make a class fun to be in.

While students indicated the activities they engaged in as the second most reported factor in making a class fun followed by their emotional engagement, teachers reported vice versa. The physical environment was reported as the least important factor in making a class fun to be in by both the teachers and students.

VFL RESULTS SUMMARY: What makes a class fun to be in?

	Students	Teachers
The people	62.81%	54.55%
The activities	23.14%	9.09%
Emotional engagement	9.92%	27.27%
The physical environment	4.13%	9.09%

Question 3. What makes education positive education?

The four pre-set categories for the responses to this question were: (1) The people (e.g., teachers, students); (2) The physical environment (e.g., classroom, school setting); (3) The content, subject or topic being taught or presented; and, (4) The higher level needs or emotional engagement (e.g., engaging in learning, learning process). 86% of the teachers' and students' responses to this question were agreed by at least three of the four judges to belong to one of the pre-set categories for this question. The responses showed that students and teachers reported that a combination of the people and higher level need or emotion engagement make education positive education.

In contrast, the physical environment and the content or subject topic were rarely reported as factors contributing to positive education.

VFL RESULTS SUMMARY: **What makes education positive education?**

	Students	Teachers
The people	41.79%	53.33%
Higher level need or emotion	40.30%	46.67%
The emotional engagement	8.96%	0%
The physical environment	8.96%	0%

Discussion

The Voices for Living project has provided school and college communities across Australia a platform to share their views and opinions on the education system and school-based wellbeing. Exploration of the responses to the three questions (mentioned above) has highlighted several issues worthy of discussion.

Teachers' and student' comparative views on their learning experience. Teachers and students come from different phases in life. Students' responses represent the voices of young people who are currently engaged in the education system. As such, their opinions provide a bottom-up view of the education system. By contrast, teachers offer the views of experts in the classroom who have gone through the education system – hence a top-down approach. A better understanding of these differing opinions has provided a fuller and more holistic view of the education system, which in turn is useful in developing practical strategies to promote positive education and student wellbeing. In addition, as would be expected, student responses were more concrete in nature (as per their stage of development), whereas teachers were more likely to provide abstract answers.

Literacy skills vs. life skills. Of note, the majority of students reported basic literacy skills, such as reading, writing and maths, as among the most important things they have learnt at school. This may be because students associate schools with being ‘book-smart’ and are of the view that a school is a place to learn and gain mainly academic skills. As such, students may feel that it is necessary to have these academic skills to be a part of or to feel belonging to the school community, and to be ‘successful’. Certainly academic skills remain the key focus on school reports, awards and ultimately end of school exams.

On the other hand, teachers are in a more reflective position in terms of the value of their education. Thus it is arguably understandable that the majority of teacher who participated in this project value the life skills they learnt at school, beyond literacy and academic abilities. These differences in opinion have a profound impact in understanding educational aims and creating school-based wellbeing initiatives. If teachers believe that the skills for lifelong learning are ultimately more useful in life than specific academic outcomes, this needs to be acknowledged and reflected in educational aims and in educational assessment.

Schools do not make positive emotion and wellbeing, the people do. The teachers and students participating in the project agreed that positive school-based relationships (be they between students, teachers, principals or other school staff members) are imperative in making a class fun to be in. Moreover positive relationships are believed to be fundamental for defining education in positive terms. This suggests that, although students associate schools with academic achievements, their relationships with their friends, teachers and other school staff members play the most important role in determining the emotional quality of their schooling experience. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of school social networks in promoting positive education and students’ wellbeing. It would be of interest and value to investigate the relationship between a child’s position within their class social networks and their overall quality of learning.

Overall Project Benefits. Many teachers and students who have participated in this project have expressed how much they have enjoyed the process. Students also stated that the project provided a valuable opportunity to express their views creatively. Teachers have commented on the great learning experience involved in simply asking students more about what is important emotionally and socially for them.

Overall, the Voices for Living project has provided a useful foundation for exploring the factors that students and teachers perceive to be the most important for education in general and for positive education specifically. The project highlights the distinction made by students and teachers between educational outcomes and factors contributing to a positive educational experience. Although students believe that traditional academic outcomes remain the key aim of education, both the students and teachers characterise positive education in terms of the people and relationships they form. More importantly, they identify these social factors as the foundations for making the process of education positive and enjoyable.

The importance of social elements in creating positive education atmosphere may also explain some of Gillen and colleagues' results. For example, in their study, students rated items relating to choosing who they sit with (i.e., seating arrangement) highly. In practical terms, this may be because students prefer to sit with their friends and engage in activities with their friends. Hence, it may be argued that motivation to 'belong' underlies students' perception of a positive classroom climate.

Finally, the findings of this project highlight the need for more systematic research to explore students' and teachers' understandings of educational aims and the factors contributing to a positive education experience. The project also highlights the importance of relationships and social structure in determining a positive educational experience for both students and teachers. It is undoubtedly naïve to expect any one facet of social and emotional functioning to hold the answer to the issues Australia faces with poor youth mental health. However, it is certainly worth further investigating the role that social cohesion and relationships play in promoting wellbeing and a love of learning in young people. The findings presented here suggest that the nurturing of a cohesive classroom with positive relationships may well be the most important factor in building a sustainable and effective positive education program, and in nurturing mental health effectively in Australian schools.

Additional Notes

Please note that responses for the project were obtained from schools and colleges in Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Responses from Western Australian schools were not considered for the final exploration of this project at the request of the WA Department of Education.

References

¹ In the bi-millennial issue of the American Psychologist, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined positive psychology as “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.”

² Positive Education: The Geelong Grammar School Journey edited by Dr Jacolyn Norrish, Oxford University Press, 2015

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⁵ Mindframe: National Media Initiative: <http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-mental-illness/facts-and-stats#C&Y>

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⁸ Student perceptions of a positive climate for learning: a case study. Alexia Gillen, Angela Wright and Lucy Spink: Educational Psychology in Practice, Vol. 27, No. 1, March 2011, 65–82

Voices for Living project responses can be viewed on The Positive Times

www.positivetimes.com.au

The Australian Positive Schools conference information can be viewed at

www.positiveschools.com.au



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