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RESEARCH PAPER

# Quality Learning and Positive Education Practice: the Student Experience of Learning in a School-Wide Approach to Positive Education

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## Abstract

In the emergent field of positive education, studies have investigated the characteristics of successful positive education interventions (Waters *Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 28*(2), 75–90, 2011). These characteristics include following a whole school approach, integrating positive psychology into traditional subjects, and adopting a wellbeing curriculum (Waters *Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 28*(2), 75–90, 2011). However, schools are complex environments and education in real-life contexts is influenced by a multiplicity of factors (Halliday et al. *Contemporary School Psychology,* 2019). There are few implementation studies within positive education (Halliday et al. *Contemporary School Psychology,* 2019), and there are fewer implementation studies that examine the student experience of learning. This is an important oversight, as the core aim of education is to support learning (Killen 2005). Therefore this case study explored the student learning experience of ten senior students within a whole school positive education initiative in an all boys private school in New South Wales, Australia. Through the utility of semi-structured focus group interviews this study found that active, meaningful learning experiences enabled successful implementation. Moreover, family, school ethos and academic culture were significant contextual factors that influenced student learning. These findings informed recommendations on how to improve the student learning experience within positive education initiatives.

**Keywords** Positive education · Student wellbeing · Student learning · Quality learning · Pedagogy · Effective teaching

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## 1 Wellbeing, Positive Psychology and Adolescents

Conceptualizations of what constitutes wellbeing and a life worth living has been a focus of inquiry across historical, psychological, sociological and philosophical disciplines for many years (La Placa et al. 2013; Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan & Kauffman, 2017). In the field of psychology, wellbeing is viewed as an "abstract construct that includes feeling good and functioning well" (Kern et al. 2015, p.263). While it is recognized that wellbeing cannot be defined in simple terms (La Placa et al. 2013), there are a range of theories and models that aim to capture its intricacies (Goodman et al. 2017). These models include, but are not limited to, Diener's tripartite model of subjective wellbeing (Diener 1984), Ryff's model of psychological wellbeing (Ryff 1989), Keyes's model of social wellbeing (Keyes 1998), Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2017), and Seligman's model of flourishing (Seligman 2011). These proposed foundational components of wellbeing differs across models, however, one commonality remains – wellbeing is multidimensional rather than unidimensional construct (Goodman et al. 2017; Kern et al. 2015).

The range of theoretical perspectives and theories of wellbeing continues to inform the field of positive psychology (Goodman et al. 2017). This field was introduced in 1998, by the president of the American Psychological Association at the time, Martin Seligman (Froh 2004). Seligman asserted that traditional psychology had made valuable contributions in the prevention and treatment of mental illnesses, but that should not be the only focus of psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Seligman proposed that psychology should also focus on how to help people live highly functioning, prosperous, fulfilling lives (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Positive psychology, therefore, aims to improve the human condition by exploring what is 'right' with a person, and what they can work on to enhance their experience (Faller and College 2001). Seligman (2011) also positioned positive psychology as a scientific field, that was concerned with investigating specific, measurable factors that contribute to wellbeing and optimal functioning.Flourishing is a foundational theory of wellbeing in the field of positive psychology (Seligman 2011). Flourishing establishes that there five key factors to wellbeing that enhanced an individual's overall functioning and ability to flourish (Seligman 2011). These core factors were: Positive emotion, Engagement, Meaning, Relationships and Accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman 2011). Additional factors included self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, interest and purpose (Seligman 2011).

Seligman's PERMA model is widely utilized by positive psychology practioners (Goodman et al. 2017) and supported by subsequent studies (Hone et al. 2014; Kern et al. 2014). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the critiques and limitations of the model. Firstly, PERMA does not account for personal differences and values (Goodman et al. 2017). Individuals will place a higher value on some facets of wellbeing over others, therefore, it is impossible to develop a consensus on "what is and what is not wellbeing" (Goodman et al. 2017, p.8). Rather, it is up to the individual to determine what wellbeing means to them (Biswas-Diender et al. 2009). Secondly, while PERMA has been adopted by positive psychology practitioners who work in school settings, there are few studies that investigate how this population engages with PERMA, or whether PERMA is an appropriate measurement of wellbeing for adolescents (Kern et al. 2015). However, a limited amount of studies have begun to address

the second critique. Kern et al. (2016), for example, developed a measure of adolescent wellbeing that extends upon PERMA. This model is known as EPOCH. This measure has five core characteristics: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness and Happiness (Kern et al. 2016). The authors establish that each of these characteristics influence PERMA in adulthood (Kern et al. 2016).

These studies are important contributions to wellbeing theory broadly, but are particularly pertinent for practioners who work in the applied field of positive education. These studies provide clear evidence that one of the core target populations for positive education interventions (adolescents) have unique was of engaging with items and concepts associated with PERMA. The EPOCH model of adolescent wellbeing addresses this issue and establishes characteristics that can be developed to enhance adult flourishing (as measured by PERMA) (Kern et al. 2016).

## 2 Positive Education

The application of positive psychology theory to education settings has been a central foci of positive psychology. This application is known as positive education and for the purposes of this article is defined as "the development of educational environments that enable the learner to engage in established curricula and skills to develop their own and others' wellbeing" (Oades et al. 2011, p.432). Positive education has been proposed as a model that can promote student wellbeing in schools, as it is grounded in empirical evidence of what specific, measurable factors can promote wellbeing and by extent, an individual's ability to flourish (Seligman 2011).

Positive education has gained popularity and momentum over the past ten years (Slempt et al. 2017; International Positive Education Network. 2017), and as such, there is a growing body of research that examines the effects of school-based positive psychology interventions on student and/or staff wellbeing (International Positive Education Network 2017). The Penn Resiliency Program, for example, is a positive psychology curriculum that has been utilized as the basis of 17 school-based interventions in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia, China and Portugal (Seligman et al. 2009). The PRP curriculum was designed for 8–15 year olds, and is delivered in 12, 90 min lessons by graduate psychology/education students, mental health professionals, school teachers and/or counsellors (Gillham and Reivich 2007). The curriculum aims to educate students on the Adversity-Beliefs-Consequences model, where students learn how to challenge and respond to automatic negative thoughts. The curriculum also incorporates skills-based approaches to wellbeing, where students learn assertiveness, negotiation, decision-making, problem solving and relaxation. Pedagogically, the program is underpinned by student-centred learning, where students learn through meaningful instruction, role plays, skits, short stories and group work. Seligman et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of the seventeen interventions that used PRP in their schools. They found that it: significantly reduces the symptoms of depression (post intervention, 6 and 12 months following the intervention), significantly reduces hopelessness, prevents clinical levels of depression and anxiety, and reduces behavioural problems (Seligman et al. 2009). The meta-analysis concluded that this program, when implemented in schools, "produces positive and reliable improvements in students' wellbeing" (Seligman et al. 2009, p.300).

A comprehensive, research-grounded wellbeing curriculum is one component of quality positive education interventions, however, schools are complex environments, and there are multiple components to consider when implementing an intervention. In a significant study, Waters (2011) conducted a review of 12 school-based positive psychology interventions to investigate the key features of successful positive education interventions. The interventions were "designed to teach students how to cultivate their own positive emotions (e.g. hope, gratitude and serenity), resilience and character strengths" (Waters 2011, pp.77–78). Additionally, to be selected for the study the interventions had to: focus on building positive factors, be implemented with students at a school, and utilise valid and reliable methodologies and measures (Waters 2011). Each intervention was successful in enhancing student wellbeing, goal-directed thought, positive affect, and in some cases, engagement, greater enjoyment in learning, and academic achievement in students. The review was significant to the field of positive education because it highlighted the impact of quality positive psychology interventions on student wellbeing and learning. Additionally, the study was significant because it highlighted key features of successful positive psychology interventions, thereby providing guidance for future development and evaluation of positive education interventions and programs.The first key feature Waters (2011) discussed was extending positive psychology topics into traditional core subjects. In addition to implementing a 'wellbeing curriculum' where students received explicit education on wellbeing skills, positive psychology was also taught within traditional subjects such as English. This approach was aptly called "adopting a positive turn" when, where appropriate, teachers integrated positive psychology content into their classes (Waters 2011, p.85). The second key feature was adopting a whole school approach where strategic frameworks guide the implementation. Strategic whole school approaches to positive education target: "curriculum, pastoral care, the broader teaching and learning environment, and the playground, as well as organisational structures, policies and processes" (Waters 2011, p.86). Following a framework that focuses on creating a positive educational organisation, rather than a positive educational curriculum, cultivates institutional conditions that promote flourishing (Waters 2011). These key features of successful positive education interventions are valuable contributions to the field.

Nevertheless, positive education is a relatively new field of study, and "major gaps exist between research and practice" (Halliday et al. 2019a, p.174). Educational environments are complex, and while there are growing bodies of research that examine the effectiveness of positive education interventions, there are few studies that investigate factors that influence implementation (Halliday et al. 2019b). Implementation studies are an important research direction for positive education to consider. Such studies aim to bridge the gap between controlled research conditions and real-world application within the intricate context of a school environment (Halliday et al. 2019b). Implementation studies focus on planning, delivery and practice, and by doing so, provide valuable insight into the enablers and barriers of the intervention (Halliday et al. 2019b). These studies are a vital area of inquiry for positive education interventions because they provide further insight into the multiplicity of factors that influence the effectiveness of the interventions, therefore, they can inform future iterations (Halliday et al. 2019b). One important implementation factor to consider is the students who receive the positive education intervention. Indeed, positive education studies have

been critiqued for their lack of student participation, where "assumptions are made about what might be best for student wellbeing, with little input from the students themselves" (Halliday et al. 2019a, p.174.). Other student related implementation factors include: buy in, "self-efficacy, adherence, believing the intervention can bring about change, knowing the benefits of the intervention... [and] support from significant others" (Halliday et al. 2019b, p.2). In a similar vein, we argue that there is little known about the student experience of learning within a positive education wellbeing curriculum, and further investigation of this student related implementation factor is required.

Any curricula, wellbeing or otherwise, does not exist in a vacuum, unaffected by human interaction. Indeed, there is a clear interrelationship between the curricula, teacher pedagogy, and student learning (Tinning 2001). Moreover, student feedback on their experiences of learning plays a vital role in curriculum redevelopment and the pedagogical choices of a teacher (Tinning, Macdonald, Wright & Hickey, 2001). We argue that understanding the student experience of learning a wellbeing curriculum within a positive education initiative will provide valuable insight into:

1. How to improve wellbeing curricula within positive education initiatives.
2. Preferred pedagogical approaches within positive education initiatives.

## 3 Teaching and Learning: A Crucial Factor in Positive Education Implementation

Hattie (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of over 800 studies related to student achievement, and concluded that "the major message is simple – what teachers do matters" (p.22). The core professional aim of a teacher is to support quality learning of students (Killen 2005). Student learning is a process and an outcome; an ongoing cycle between engaging in an experience (doing) and achieving an outcome (new or deeper understandings) (Killen 2005). Teachers are tasked with ensuring quality student learning, which does not have one singular definition, but rather, a series of features. Quality student learning is active, where students are questioning, critical and engaged in the experience (Hattie et al., 2009). Moreover, students are supported to develop deep understanding by forging meaningful connections between concepts within the subject matter and the world around them, and, discovering new knowledge (for themselves) through synthesis, analysis, evaluation and creation (Feldman and McPhee 2008; Hattie 2009; Killen 2005).

Teachers, therefore, must carefully select pedagogical approaches that promote quality student learning. Student-centred strategies are an established tools teachers can use to support such learning (Feldman and McPhee 2008; Hattie 2009). Student-centred strategies include discussions, group work, cooperative learning, case studies, problem-based learning tasks, debates, role plays, presentations and peer assessment (Feldman and McPhee 2008; Hattie 2009). In addition to the appropriate selection of strategies, to support quality student learning teachers must treat knowledge as problematic (Killen 2005), have the skill to intervene when they recognise learning is not occurring, and utilise a series of strategies to redirect the student(s) and maximise engagement (Hattie 2009). Moreover, the learning environment must be safe and supportive, where students feel comfortable sharing current understandings and making

mistakes in a community they trust to further their learning (Hattie 2009). Ultimately quality student learning is determined by a number of teacher-learner-environment interactions, including:

- "The teacher and his/her approach to teaching.
- The learners and their readiness for learning.
- How the teacher interacts with the content.
- How the teacher interacts with the learners.
- How the learners interact with the content.
- The learning environment... namely the classroom, the school, the community, the society and the culture" (Killen 2005, p.34).

In terms of positive education literature, there are limited implementation studies that focus on the student experience of learning, including student perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching, their understanding of the positive psychology concepts being taught, and the impact that broader socio-ecological factors such as peers, family, community, organisations, culture and society had on their learning (Brown et al. 2014; Knight and McNaught 2011). Instead most studies have a quantitative focus, and examine the impact of a positive education intervention on targeted measures of wellbeing. The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), for example, aims to prevent depression in young people by increasing the "students' ability to handle day-to-day stressors and problems that are common for most students during adolescence" (Seligman et al. 2009, p.297). The PRP curriculum suggested teaching and learning strategies of discussion, real-world homework and journal reflections (Seligman et al. 2009). Whilst the PRP is an extensively evaluated program with positive results (for example, reducing anxiety and depression), there are no reported findings of the student experience of learning within the program or any evidence of the kind of deep learning that Hattie (2009) advocates for as a sign of quality teaching. Similarly, in Waters' (2011) evaluation of 12 positive education interventions, an examination of the student experience of learning is absent. This gap is mirrored in the higher education sector, specifically in pedagogical recommendations for teaching positive psychology courses and creating positive universities (Kranzler et al. 2011; Oades et al. 2011; Russo-Netzer and Ben-Shahar 2011; Walker 2011). In the programs that do exist, the pedagogical recommendations align with some teaching practice and strategies that could promote quality student learning (for example, authentic teaching, reflective practice, structured reflection, journals, discussion, group work, assessment of and for learning, classroom assessment for learning that focuses on dominant emotions felt, experiential learning, and co-construction of curricula development) (Kranzler et al. 2011; Oades et al. 2011; Russo-Netzer and Ben-Shahar 2011; Walker 2011). However, like the literature in the primary and secondary education sectors, there is no investigation in the above-listed studies of student learning experiences, whether they were of quality and supported students to develop deep understanding of the content, or whether deeper understanding impacted student flourishing. This is an important oversight because, as Hattie (2009) argues, understanding students' experiences of learning allows teachers to modify their practice to further support learning. Therefore, in the emergent field of positive education, investigating the student experience of learning is of high value because it can uncover what spaces and/or communities learning occurred in,

how the students experienced the curricula and pedagogical approaches, and what socio-ecological factors impacted student learning. This, in turn, can serve to shape the ways in which school-wide approaches to positive education are implemented.

To address this gap in the literature, this study focused on one of the core implementation factors described by Halliday et al. (2019), that is, the student/recipient. This study aims to contribute to the positive education field by asserting that the student process of learning about positive psychology as a central implementation concern for all positive education practioners. High quality learning experiences promotes student engagement, which in turn, enhance the effectiveness of the intervention. As such, this study examined the student experience of learning positive psychology within a systemic, whole school positive education initiative in an all boys, private school in New South Wales Australia. Additionally, as the education was about positive psychology, and aims to improve student wellbeing, this study examines how students' conceptualized their personal wellbeing, including any contextual factors. Finally, we draw upon the findings to suggest ways to improve the implementation of the positive education initiative.

## 4 Methods

### 4.1 Situational Analysis

This study was part of a larger study that implemented a systemic whole school approach to positive education at a private, all boys school in New South Wales, Australia. In 2010 the school planned a systemic response to student exit surveys that were conducted the previous year. The student exit surveys were completed by Year Twelve students who completed their final year of study. The surveys highlighted that while the students felt that they were prepared academically, their personal needs were not addressed. The tutoring program aimed to address their personal/pastoral needs, however, the students viewed it as a waste of time. Additionally, the students stated that they did not feel a personal connection with their tutor.

In response, the Headmaster and school council made a commitment to support student wellbeing and academic achievement. In 2010 a positive education leadership team was formed. The team included the Headmaster, four onsite school psychologists and two experts from the Positive Psychology Institute who specialized in positive psychology and organizational change. Together, they considered the student needs (as evidenced by the surveys), and developed the positive education initiative. The positive education implementation began in 2011 and had two core elements: a staff-training program and a positive education curriculum that was implemented through a student mentoring program.

The staff-training program included a compulsory one-day training course for new staff upon induction, a compulsory two-day positive psychology training course for all staff, and options of master classes, and further study for teachers who wanted to lead the positive education program at the school. This training had a 98% attendance rate. Staff learnt about flow, mindfulness, PERMA, active and constructive responding, reframing thinking, human strengths, mental fitness, time management and goal setting. Additionally, staff discussed methods of application to classroom settings.

The mentoring program replaced the existing tutoring program. Mentors were selected by the leadership team, and were teachers who expressed interest in educating about positive psychology. The mentors were responsible for teaching $3 \times 30$ min positive psychology lessons on a fortnightly basis. The mentoring program ran across all school terms, and during this time the students in the initiative had classes on the following work: What is stress? Stress and peak performance, positive psychology – what determines happiness? Quick relaxation and wellbeing tips, learning how to relax – progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, mindfulness, stress and the way you think, changing your thinking, turning negative thinking into positive thinking, breathing techniques, changing your focus, pressure points to help you relax, and time management.

In addition to providing education about positive psychology, the mentors had a series of responsibilities within the school environment including:

- To encourage communication within the mentor group that is supportive, cheerful, constructive.
- To develop a positive climate by fostering compassion, connectedness, forgiveness, and gratitude among the students in the mentor group.
- To attend regular positive education meetings with fellow mentors.
- To contribute to building positive relationships within the school and broader community.
- To liaise frequently with parents so as to develop a trusting relationship between school and home.
- To liaise with appropriate staff regarding student progress across all domains.

The additional duties aimed to promote a culture that supported and promoted student and staff wellbeing.

### 4.2 Aim

This study aimed to understand the student experience of learning positive psychology within a positive education initiative that followed a whole school approach. Additionally, as the education was about positive psychology, and aims to improve student wellbeing, this study aimed to understand how the students' conceptualized wellbeing, including any contextual factors.

The primary research question was:

> How do the students perceive their experiences of learning positive psychology within a school-wide approach to positive education?

A series of secondary research questions were developed to help answer the primary. They were:

1. How do the students perceive their experience of learning positive psychology within the mentoring program?
2. How do the students describe the contextual enablers or barriers of learning positive psychology?

3. How do the students understand wellbeing after learning about positive psychology?
4. How do students describe contextual factors while discussing their personal wellbeing?

### 4.3 Design

This research was an explanatory case study that aimed to generate a description and explanation of the student experience of learning positive psychology within a systemic school wide approach to positive education. The case study design enables the researcher to conduct an in depth analysis of a particular case (or phenomenon) within a particular context (Yin 2014). Rather than separating the case from the context (as in experimental design), case studies are selected because they enable to researcher to consider the complex, multifaceted interrelationships between the case and the real-life context (Yin 2014). Explanatory case studies are selected where there are presumed links between the case and the context, but are too complex to investigate via experimental design (Yin 2014). Typically, an explanatory case study answers 'how' or 'why' questions, and the researcher has little to no control over the phenomena (Yin 2014). Therefore, an explanatory case study design was selected for this study as it facilitated an exploration of the of learning positive psychology (case/phenomenon) within a whole school approach to positive education (real-life context). As the case study design facilitated an examination of a real-life context (Yin 2014), it was the preferred design for an implementation study, which emphasizes the importance of examining the contextual factors that influence implementation (Halliday et al. 2019). Moreover, an explanatory form of case study was selected because there is a presumed link between the defined case and the context (Yin 2014). In this instance, the students would not have learnt about positive psychology without the implementation of a whole school approach to positive education within their school.

This explanatory case study focussed on student perceptions of their own learning experiences, therefore the research design relied on semi-structured focus group interviews because interviews enable participants to share detail about their experiences (Stringer 2008). Moreover, through the process of sharing thoughts within a group of participants, focus group interviews can add depth to the data collected, because the participants may build upon the thoughts of others in their own responses (Holly et al. 2005). Additionally, focus group interviews also promote rich descriptions of the participants thoughts because the collaborative nature of the group encourages participation and collaboration (Holly et al. 2005). Finally, the focus group interviews were semi-structured because this format allows for greater flexibility in conversation, without deviating from its original purpose (Stringer 2008).

### 4.4 Site and Participants

The participants of this study were drawn from a private, all boys school in New South Wales, Australia. This school provides education for students from kindergarten (five years old) through to year twelve (17–18 years old). The school scores very highly in one of the national standardised measures of high school achievement; the Australian

Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The students results from 2015 put the school in the top 40 schools (out of a possible 650) in New South Wales. In addition to a strong focus on academic performance, the students who attend this school also have a variety of co-curricular opportunities including involvement in a variety of student clubs, performing arts, sports and outdoor education. The school is well resourced, with multiple sports fields, multimedia centre, tennis and basketball courts, a pool, two libraries and an auditorium. Students in years 7–12 may also board. The school has approximately 180 boarders; half from the wider region of the site, a quarter from rural Australia and a quarter from overseas. Whereas the students were day students were predominantly white Australians, with a minority of students who were of Asian or European descent. A high majority of the students who attend the school are from families of high socio-economic status.

The participants of this study were selected from a year eleven cohort, aged 16–17 years old. The cohort they were selected from had 189 students. This cohort was selected as the year group to draw participants from because: they had experienced the positive education implementation from the beginning of the roll out and their developmental age (as opposed to younger years) could enable the students to articulate their experiences in more detail. The ten participants of this study were of 16–17 years of age, and all identified as male. Two of the students were boarders; one from the wider region of the site, and the other from rural Australia. Both of the boarder students were white Australian. The eight remaining students were day students. One of these eight day students was Asian-Australian, and the remaining seven where white Australian. All the participants had their school fees funded by their immediate family, and did not receive any scholarships/sponsorship to attend the school.

### 4.5 Data Collection Techniques

This study conducted a set of semi-structured focus group interviews. The semi-structured focus group interviews aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the student perceptions of their experiences of learning about positive psychology within a school wide approach to positive education. This inquiry included the students' perceptions of the contextual enablers and barriers to their learning, as well as their understanding of wellbeing. Focus group interviews were selected as they encourage participants to share their understandings, building upon each perspective presented, thereby adding depth to the data collected. Moreover, focus group interviews also remove any feelings of reluctance of the participant to open up, as the collaborative nature of the group encourages elaboration (Holly et al. 2005).

Therefore, the semi-structured focus group interviews were guided by the following questions: *1.* What is your understanding of wellbeing? *2.* Can you describe your own level of wellbeing? *3.* What has your experience been with the Mentoring Program? *4.* Has there been anything else that I have not mentioned that has influenced your sense of wellbeing or learning?

Fifteen students were selected and invited to participate in a 30 min, audio recorded, semi-structured focus group interview. To select the students the researcher entered their names into an excel spreadsheet, and a random sample of fifteen students was generated. Ten students chose to participate. The remainder of the students did not

receive parental consent, or forgot to attend. The ten participants were divided into three groups (two groups of 3, one group of 4).

### 4.6 Procedure

This study was an independent study of a positive education initiative conducted at the site. The research site sought out researchers at the University of Wollongong, Australia, to assess the implementation and effectiveness of the initiative. In 2011 the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong, Australia, granted approval for this research. In July 2012, 15 participants from Year Eleven were randomly selected through creating a random sample in excel. Additional consent was sought for these participants to engage in one of three thirty minute semi-structured focus group interviews. Of the 15 selected, ten chose to participate. The remainder of the participants did not receive parental consent or did not arrive at the scheduled time. An additional interview with the remaining participants was sought, however, the timing was not desirable as it was close to their yearly examinations and the school (research site) was concerned that the interview could be a potential distraction for their study. Similarly, after the examinations the participants were entering Year Twelve, and further interviews were not permitted once the participants entered this final year of secondary school. The interviews were completed in August 2012, and were transcribed over this month. Once the interviews were transcribed, the principal research conducted a text analysis (explained below), where emergent themes were identified and relevant parts of the transcripts were coded in alignment with emergent themes. In November 2012 peer debriefing (explained below) of the findings occurred. Once relevant changes had been made, the transcripts and the results were shared with the participants to comment on.

### 4.7 Qualitative Data Analysis

This research utilized thematic analysis to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, organizing, describing, and reporting themes within a data set" (Nowell et al. 2017, p. 2). It has five phases: familiarizing, initial coding, focused coding, reviewing themes and defining/naming the themes (Nowell et al. 2017; Saldana 2009; Given, 2008). Phase one, familiarizing, requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the qualitative data and begin to search for meaning (Nowell et al. 2017; Given, 2008). The researcher may take initial notes on their thoughts during this time (Nowell et al. 2017). During the familiarizing phase of this study, the principal researcher transcribed the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times.

In phase two, initial coding, the researcher begins to focus on characteristics of the data, and identifies initial codes to analyse the data through (Nowell et al. 2017). In this phase, the research is concerned attaching particular labels to characteristics/issues that are apparent in the data (Nowell et al. 2017). Once initial codes have been developed, the researcher progresses to phase three, focussed coding. In this phase the researcher searches for the most significant/repeated codes in the data (Saldana 2009). Through this process the researcher develops key categories/themes, and assigns the appropriate expects of qualitative data underneath the appropriate theme (Saldana 2009). These themes are considered to be the salient messages of the qualitative data (Nowell et al.

2017). In this study, the principal researcher developed initial codes once they were highly familiar with the transcripts. In phase three, the researcher assigned similar words and phrases were categorised by a colour code on the transcript. Once the similar words and phrases were categorised by colour, a series of data-driven categories – or themes – were created. Succeeding category creation, an additional document was created, where the corresponding quotes from the transcripts were put underneath the assigned category.

In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the researcher reviews all the categorized data to ensure that they are coherent, do not overlap, reflect the meaning of the data, whether any changes to the codes need to be made, whether any codes need to be deleted, or whether recoding needs to occur (Nowell et al. 2017). In this study, the principal researcher conducted this process through peer debriefing and member checking (described below). In the final phase, defining/naming the themes, the researcher must write a "detailed analysis, identifying the story each theme tells" (Nowell et al. 2017, p.10). In this phase, the researcher considers the themes in relation to the research questions (Nowell et al. 2017). In this study, the principal researcher completed this process and reported the analysis in the findings and discussion sections below.

### 4.8 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the trustworthiness of the data (rather than the validity and reliability) is of central concern (Nowell et al. 2017). There are four criteria that determine trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Credibility refers to the extent to which the researcher(s) presentation of the participants aligns with the participant's view of themselves (Nowell et al. 2017; Lincoln and Guba 1985). To ensure credibility, the principal researcher utilized member checking. To member check, the principal researcher presented the transcripts and results to each of the participants. The participants had the opportunity to comment, specifically on: whether the results were an accurate representation of their thoughts, to correct any errors, and/or challenge any interpretations made by the principal researcher.

Transferability requires the researcher to provide rich descriptions in the study in order for other qualitative researchers to determine whether the reported findings are transferable to their proposed study (Nowell et al. 2017; Lincoln and Guba 1985). This study has provided in depth descriptions of through the situational analysis, findings and discussion sections.

Dependability ensures that the researcher followed a logical, well documented research process (Nowell et al. 2017; Lincoln and Guba 1985). An audit trail is one recommended method to ensure dependability, where the researcher keeps records of all data associated with the project including raw data, researcher notes/researcher journal, and transcripts (Nowell et al. 2017). In this study the principal researcher maintained a journal and the rationale for all decisions/choices. Similarly, all raw data and transcripts have been collected.

Finally, confirmability concerns the extent to which the researcher can establish how they clearly developed the findings from the data (Nowell et al. 2017). Peer debriefing is one strategy that qualitative researchers can utilize to enhance confirmability. In this study, the principal researcher held a peer debriefing session with the other members of the research peers who were not involved in collecting or interpreting the interview data. During the peer

debriefing session the recorded interviews, transcripts and results were discussed. The peer debriefing session aimed to detect any issues with the research including any errors, bias, or over- or under-emphasis on points.

## 5 Results

This research aimed to answer the following question: "How do the students perceive their experiences of learning positive psychology within a school-wide approach to positive education?"

The semi-structured focus group interviews provided rich descriptions of the student perceptions of their experience in learning about positive psychology. There were four emergent themes that arose from these semi-structured focus group interviews:

1. Conflicting views on the learning quality of the mentoring program.
2. Family members influence learning wellbeing about positive psychology.
3. Teachers and school ethos supported wellbeing but broader academic culture did not.
4. Wellbeing articulated at high levels from an individual and partially holistic view.

### 5.1 Conflicting Views on the Learning Quality of the Mentoring Program

The mentoring program was implemented as a possible way to educate students about positive psychology, with the goal to enhance their sense of wellbeing. As such, the participants were questioned what their experience with the mentoring program had been. Participants who believed they had a 'good' mentor, found great benefit in the mentoring program. The two participants who believed that they had a 'good' mentor commented both on the content that they found relevant/engaging. Participant Four also commented that his mentor a utilized narrative teaching strategy (sharing about ones life), which he found beneficial to his learning.

Participant Four: *"I reckon it's the kind of mentor you have"*

Participants Five, Six and Seven: *"YES!"*

Participant Four: *"Yeah like, my mentor is awesome. I've learnt so much about time management, and role models, and who I want to be like, and why it's important to follow what I do. It's so good. He talks about his life and then we learn from it and talk about ours"*

Similarly, Participant One outlined:

*"Mentoring definitely helped me out quite a bit. They just do positive psychology kind of stuff which has helped me understand that I need to focus on me and not like others. It helped me like identify role models and helped me see who I want to be. My mentor is good though. Some aren't."*

In contrast, two of the ten participants found the mentoring program to have been a poor learning experience, indicating that it was either be boring, a free period, or a waste of time. One student commented that:

> *"As far as the mentoring sessions go, they seem rather superfluous because not many people pay attention in time, and they are on their phones or on the computer, like doing their own thing. Most people want the mentoring program to be time where they can work on assignments and homework they have left over, that would be a much better use of time"* (Participant Six).

When questioned on recommendations to improve the learning experience of the mentoring program, the all participants proposed meaningful instruction linking content to real world examples, within a student-centered lesson format:

> *"I like it when we get to work with our friends. The teacher should also tell us how it works in real life, rather than just talked at us and telling us how we should act and what we should do"* (Participant One).

> *"If the teacher talked about themselves, and gave us examples of how what they are talking about actually works in real life. Otherwise it's just so boring. Then we could talk about it, like a discussion"* (Participant Five).

> *"If they let us talk about the stuff more, and linked it to real life it would be good. I also like researching real life stories on the computer and reporting on it. I like working with my mates as well, when we are given a research topic. Then we could talk about it after"* (Participant Seven).

### 5.2 Family Members Influence Learning about Positive Psychology

When posed questions regarding influences on their wellbeing, each participant commented on family members. Five participants outlined the positive influence key family members (parents, siblings and grandparents) had on their sense of wellbeing. Specifically, these five students' answers invoked issues of trust, support, advice and guidance. For example, two participants commented:

> *"Well, pretty much my Dad is my hero. Like he's taught me so much about life. He taught me to follow my passions and listen to myself. Like he's told me he doesn't want me to make his mistakes, he hates his job. He's told me to do what I want to do. Have fun. Live your life. He also taught me how to be a good person, like to help people and not take advantage. He's always there for me. I am so lucky to have a Dad like him. Oh! And he also taught me to keep moving forward, no matter what! Awesome."* (Participant Seven).

> *"My sister has really helped me out a lot. She's older than me, like a mentor kind of. I can talk to her about anything, whenever I want. She's awesome. And like,*

*she's at Uni and she sees heaps of people who don't like their degree and stuff, and warned me about it. It made me really think about what I want to do so I'm not unhappy"* (Participant Five).

However, the remaining five participants outlined the negative influence parents had on their sense of wellbeing. These participants felt pushed, stressed, perceived that they had no life balance, and expressed a need to live up to their parents' expectations. This included following a career path already mapped out for them at the expense of their own wants and desires. For example, one student explained:

*"With my family, like my parents are really academically pushing and I have to study all the time, and go to bed early. They are those kinds of parents. I'm not allowed to do anything but study, even on weekends. I don't think they help my wellbeing sometimes. And like, if you are talking about purpose or whatever, they have it all mapped out for me. What Uni they want me to go to, and what I want to study. I have no say. All I have to do is study, and it's never good enough anyway"* (Participant Nine).

Another reflected:

*"My Dad has probably been a bit too persuasive on me. Like we were talking the other day and he was saying how I was going to the University of Newcastle or something. So, he's kind of got a plan for me. I have to study all the time too, and I don't get to do much. It's really stressful, especially around exams" (Participant Ten).*

### 5.3 Teachers and School Ethos Supported Wellbeing but Broader Academic Culture Did Not

When discussing what factors helped promote their wellbeing, eight of the ten participants highlighted either teachers or the ethos of the school. It was clear that the participants felt supported, and the school ethos encouraged pro-social behaviour. For example Participant 6 stated:

*"Yeah like there's not much bullying that goes on here, and if it is, it's like poking fun and making jokes. It's not so much, it's not major at all. We all kind of just hang out in our groups or whatever, but like in the year group we are all mates. No fighting or whatever"* (Participant Six).

*"Well like the whole department (teachers) are awesome. Like they are really enthusiastic, and supportive. They guide me a lot, and give me really good advice on how to cope with things"* (Participant Seven).

Of particular note, the participants found the encouragement from the teachers to pick subjects they are interested in for Year Eleven and Twelve, to be very supportive of their sense of wellbeing:

*"The fact that they told us when choosing subjects to choose things that we want to study, and stuff we are good at but still enjoy, is pretty good I think, because other schools would say choose these subjects because they will scale our school, but it's not all about that here. It's about making people ready for the real world, who are like happy"* (Participant Six).

Conversely, three of the participants also noted aspects of the broader academic culture that that were detrimental to their sense of wellbeing:

*"Yeah like my wellbeing I would say is good now, whenever exams are on I get really stressed out. We've been told by our mentors how to cope but it's really hard"* (Participant Three).

*"Yeah same. I hate exams. Like I know we have to do them and stuff, but I just hate them. They make me feel sick. I just want to do good and it stresses me out. I can't sleep either sometimes"* (Participant Seven).

Yet, again the teachers were highlighted as a main form of support within the academic culture:

*"It's good though, coming to school after I've been worried about study. Like the teachers understand the pressure, and they are really good for advice and stuff"* (Participant Two).

### 5.4 Wellbeing Articulated at High Levels from an Individual and Partially Holistic View

The participants articulated wellbeing through a predominantly individual lens, outlining one to three of the following components: physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual. There was no mention of the interrelated nature of these components, and each participant discussed slightly different combinations. Mental functioning (particularly the ability to cope), social connections with friends and family, physical fitness and emotional state (feelings of happiness) were most commonly identified in each interview. The following excerpts from the interviews were typical of the students' perceptions:

*"Wellbeing, it's like your psychological. How you are going and dealing with stresses, how you cope...* (sic.) *And yeah, I think it's also like your friends. Like I have a pretty solid group of friends that I can rely on, and that makes me feel good"* (Participant Two).

*"Well the school would define it as faith, sport and social activity. It would also include family. But for me it is how well I interact with my family and how fit I am"* (Participant Three).

*"I guess wellbeing is just like if you are happy I guess, like if you are content with life and if you are physically fit and able to keep up with everything that is going on around here"* (Participant Nine).

Succeeding this, participants were asked, *"Can you describe your personal level of wellbeing?"* Some participants used a rating scale in their response, with one denoting the lowest and ten the highest, and indicated high scores of seven to eight. Alternatively, "pretty good" or "really good" were common descriptors:

*"I guess my level of wellbeing would be, if I had a scale from one to ten, ten being the highest, I'd probably be an eight. I think I am pretty well off as I am, and I'm able to keep up and understand things as they come along. And yeah I'm pretty happy how life is. Emotionally I'm pretty decent too I reckon. I've had a couple of things recently which I've kind of been annoyed with, but I knew how to handle it. I kept a level head and thought about it, and worked out a way where everything could work out"* (Participant Six).

*"My level of wellbeing at the moment is really good, probably better than it's ever been"* (Participant Four).

## 6 Discussion

This study aimed to gain insight into the student experience of learning about positive psychology within a whole school approach to positive education. The results provided insight into the role various components of quality student learning play in implementing a positive education initiative. These were: whether the learning experiences were active, meaningful, and met the student needs. Moreover, the results supported Killen (2005) statement that support of quality student learning occurs within and beyond the classroom. Indeed, in this study, the broader school ethos and culture, family, academic testing culture and the societal pressure to succeed were described as barriers and/or enablers to the implementation of the mentoring program. These findings are significant to the field of positive education as they suggest that the quality of the learning experiences have the potential to affect implementation. This study establishes that quality learning experiences should be added as a facet of investigation to Halliday et al. (2019b) student related implementation factors.

The findings demonstrate that the quality of the student learning experience could be enhanced if all mentor teachers adopted an active learning pedagogy. This was evident when the participants' suggestions of improvement for the mentoring program. Specifically, the participants noted that they would like mentor teachers to integrate student-centred strategies like narratives, group work, research tasks and discussion. Moreover, Participant Four stated that they had a 'good' mentor teacher because they utilized student-centred strategies, namely narrative. This finding is consistent with the

literature on the features of quality student learning, which asserts that for learning to be of quality students must be supported to be engaged in the learning process through the use of student-centred strategies (Hattie 2009; Feldman and McPhee 2008). The findings also suggest that an active learning approach was not consistently adopted by the mentor teachers, which negatively influenced the student perceptions of their learning experience in the program. It is evident that the mentor's approach to teaching was either a barrier or an enabler for successful implementation. Active learning incorporates a meaningful instruction, where students are encouraged to make connections between the subject matter and the world around them (Hattie 2009; Killen 2005). The participants expressed a preference for multiple strategies that align with a meaningful instruction, which suggests that it is an enabler for successful implementation of this positive education initiative. Participants agreed that they would prefer it if the mentors explained how the content translated to real life. Similarly, narrative, case studies and exploration of role models were strategies that helped some participants connect the positive psychology content to the world around them. In the future it is recommended that that active learning is a pedagogical approach that underpins the curriculum design and implementation of all wellbeing curricula within a positive education intervention.

The ways in which students relate to the content is a core consideration for quality student learning (Killen 2005). Understanding students' prior knowledge, and linking lessons to this knowledge is an important component of quality learning as it promotes meaningful learning and engagement (Hattie 2009). The findings of this study provided insight into the participants' understanding of wellbeing. Although the students were exposed to education on specific positive psychology constructs within the mentoring program, the participant descriptions of wellbeing closely aligned to a holistic model of wellbeing that is taught in core subject in New South Wales, Australia, known as Health and Physical Education (HPE). Specifically, students learn "the nature of health – the interaction of cognitive, physical, social, emotional and spiritual components", and, to demonstrate understanding students are asked to "examine the relationship between the cognitive, physical, social, emotional and spiritual components of health" (NSW BOS 2003, p.26). The participants' descriptions of their own wellbeing suggest that the holistic model of wellbeing taught in HPE is part of their prior knowledge, and is a concept that could be built upon in HPE and/or the mentoring program. In the future, it is recommended that those responsible for implementing positive education interventions consider core subjects where health and wellbeing are already taught, and generate a plan for curriculum integration that aligns with the overarching national goals of the core subject(s), the proposed wellbeing curriculum, and the school culture.

Similarly, although learnt about positive psychology in the mentoring program the language of positive psychology was notably absent in their descriptions of wellbeing. The results suggest that this could be due to the way the mentoring program was taught. Some of the participants felt the mentoring program was ineffective because the teachers running the mentoring program classes treated it like a free period, or were not invested in utilising the class for education on positive psychology. Therefore, the participant's ability to understand and relate to the positive psychology content was hindered by teacher-related factors, thereby acting as a barrier to successful implementation. Possible teacher-related factors for the lack of education in the mentoring program are: a lack of teacher buy in, the training provided, and/or a lack of incentive.

However, this study did not include the mentors as participants, hence, in future implementation studies it is recommended that teacher-related factors are investigated.

Additionally, the findings highlight that the nature of learning communities and the broader socio-ecological factors that impact learning need to be considered when implementing systemic whole school approaches to positive education. This study found that learning about wellbeing occurred outside of the formal classroom setting. Indeed, informal conversations with teachers and a supportive school climate were highlighted as key factors that supported the implementation of the positive education initiative beyond the mentoring program. Moreover, participants learnt about wellbeing in the family environment and in some cases, the family attitudes towards study conflicted with the overall school ethos of prioritising wellbeing. Some participants felt that they needed to follow the plan their parents had set out for them, at the expense of their wellbeing and own desires. These participants felt a significant amount of academic pressure to be successful and live up to their parents' expectations of them. For example, Participant Nine commented on the parental pressure he experienced, stating he had to study at all times and follow the career path his parents mapped out for him. Regardless of what this participant achieved, he did not feel he reached the expectations his parents placed upon him. Conversely, parents were deemed a positive influence in their lives if the participants were encouraged to discover and follow their own passions and desires. If participants had this experience they expressed feelings of gratitude. In the future it is recommended that the family are included in the design, development and implementation of the positive education interventions, as they are a primary learning community.

The results also highlighted that perceived parental pressure and the strain associated with competing against peers in a standardised, outcomes-based education setting were barriers to successful implementation. The participants' comments echoed the literature, where students who have parents of higher SES, who attend non-government schools, were shown to have higher levels of perceived parental pressure, which caused increased levels of stress and anxiety, as students worry that they will not live up to the perceived educational expectations placed upon them (Chen 2012; Green et al. 2014; Putwain et al. 2010). Moreover, standardised outcomes-based education combined with the decline in suitable full time jobs has led to a heightened feeling of competition between peers:

> Young people in Australia are forced to compete with their peers for grades, for places in higher education and for slots in paid work. They are similarly meant to internalise the importance of doing it on their own, through public emphasis on being suitably employable. (Wyn and White 2000, p.173)

Therefore, the education environment has the potential to become individualised and competitive in nature, one which focusses on the attainment of high assessment scores and associated rankings based on nation-wide standardised testing that is present in the Australian primary and secondary settings. Hence, an associated and internalised pressure to achieve could be cultivated within the students in these education settings. The participants interviewed discussed the impact of the academic pressure felt, and identified it as a key factor that negatively impacted on their wellbeing, for example, Participant Seven stated exams made him feel sick, stressed and hindered his sleep.

The academic pressure felt by the students impacted their learning experience within the positive education initiative. In future positive education interventions, it is important that the content is made context-specific. In this study, the population of students were generally from a high socio-economic background and attend a school that ranks highly in student achievement (as measured by the nationwide standardised assessments). Addressing the cause(s) of the pressure within the broader whole school approach, as well as integrating the education of effective coping mechanisms into the positive education curriculum, could enhance the delivery of the program in the future. Not all causes of the academic pressure felt are within the locus of the school's control, for instance, nation-wide standardised testing. However the culture on assessment and assessment practices could shift. Possible areas to consider are:

1. Does assessment drive the learning, rather than focussing on the process of learning in itself?
2. What are the metrics used to assess teacher performance? Do the metrics have a focus on attainment of student grades? What impact does that have on the culture of assessment within the school?
3. How do the key stakeholders (for example parents) view assessment? What impact do these views have on the culture of assessment?

### 6.1 Limitations

The limitations of this study centre on lack of generalisability. Firstly, the generalisability of this study is limited as it was conducted at one site with specific characteristics: an all-boys, non-government, private school. Moreover, the semi-structured focus group interviews had a small sample size, and are not representative of the entire cohort. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in focus groups in an adolescent population. In this population there is a risk that their peers influenced their responses (Daley 2013). Therefore, the findings from the study must be treated with some caution.

### 6.2 Implications and Future Directions

All educational experiences aim to support and promote student learning (Killen 2005; Hattie 2009). Positive education initiatives, therefore, needs to ensure that students engage with high quality learning experiences. This study addresses a significant gap in the positive education literature; whilst there have been recommendations for pedagogical practice in positive education interventions, no studies focus on whether the students received a quality learning experiences during the implementation phase. This study also asserts that quality learning experiences should be added as a facet of investigation to Halliday et al. (2019b) student related implementation factors.

The findings of preferred teaching methodologies were consistent with the literature: students valued pedagogical approaches that were active, meaningful and student-centred (Feldman and McPhee 2008; Hattie 2009). The findings also reinforced the crucial role teachers play in enabling or hindering implementation of wellbeing curricula (Hattie 2009). Similarly, through investigating the students' descriptions of

wellbeing, this study has been able to assert the importance of understanding a student's prior knowledge of wellbeing and utilising it as a base to build upon when teaching positive psychology. In this case of this study, the students' understanding of wellbeing drew strong parallels with the content taught in HPE. This parallel has a strong implication for systemic whole school approaches to positive education, as it suggests the HPE subject and teachers could play a more centralised role in the development of the positive psychology curricula and the integration of positive psychology concepts into traditional curricula in schools.

This study has also shed light on two important socio-ecological considerations for positive education implementation. The first is including family members into the design and implementation of positive education, as the participants clearly articulated they were a key influence on their wellbeing. Secondly, the education of positive psychology needs to be made context-specific, and specifically address components of the students' lives that impact their wellbeing, like the broader, competitive academic culture the participants felt.

In future studies it is recommended that positive education interventions are implemented in a variety of secondary schools with different demographics, including co-educational and all-girl schools, public and private schools, and schools with high populations of minority groups/at risk groups. Furthermore, while this study did not examine gender norms, Halliday et al. (2019b) suggest that these norms could influence positive education implementation. In the future, it is suggested that future studies investigate whether gender norms influence various factors associated with quality student learning. Such factors include: student needs, current understandings of the content, how the students relate to the content, and preferred pedagogical approaches (Killen 2005). Finally, in all future positive education design and implementation, it recommended that the is continual consultation and collaboration between school staff, parents, students, and relevant community members to ensure the initiative is relevant and context specific.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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