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Australian
Learning
Lecture



CASE STUDY

POSITIVE EDUCATION - USING DATA TO BRING JOY
Mount Barker High School, South Australia

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“Many Australian adolescents suffer from sleep deprivation, drug and alcohol abuse, insecurity, poor diets, insufficient exercise and family upheaval. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one quarter of young Australians are suffering from symptoms of mental illness. Now more than ever, it is critical that we equip our young people with the skills and mindsets that counteract mental illness and prepare them for a ‘life well lived’.” (Professor Lea Waters, The University of Melbourne)ⁱ

- This ALL Case Study describes how one school is using diagnostic tools to measure students’ wellbeing and how teachers are using this data to improve student wellbeing.
- Learn about how to adopt the same tool in your school and find out more about Positive Education in schools by using the links and references at the end of this case study.
- The ALL Positive Education video provides insights into how the online tool works and has been implemented.

The ALL Case Studies are practical examples of how joy and data can come together in learning. Inspired by the inaugural Australian Learning Lecture, delivered by Sir Michael Barber, the ALL Case Studies examine how data gathered through the use of diagnostic tools in real learning experiences provides greater insight into how each student learns. Data enables educators to help learners find joy in learning, to flourish and tackle life’s opportunities.

Data, far from being in opposition to joy is an important ingredient in it.

Sir Michael Barber, Australian Learning Lecture, 21 May 2015, www.all-learning.org.au.

What is the problem?

Warren Symonds, Principal at Mount Barker High School (South Australia, Australia), sees it as his role to care for the development of the whole student. He cares about the social and emotional wellbeing of his students, as well as their academic wellbeing. Mindful of the many challenges that confront young people, and statistics that suggest that as many as one quarter of all young people suffer symptoms of mental illnessⁱⁱ, Warren asked 'how do we equip our students so that they flourish when they leave school?'

This is a complex question, and one which a growing body of research is beginning to address. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as 'a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.'ⁱⁱⁱ Importantly, WHO recognises the resilience that is needed to cope with the stresses of life as well as the value of a fruitful life.

'how do we equip our students so that they flourish when they leave school?'

For Beyondblue, resilience is key to mental health and the organisation reports that "if you have a high degree of resilience you tend to be positive, productive and adaptable."^{iv} Resilience, along with the attributes of hope, gratitude, mindfulness, character strengths, growth mindsets, optimism and empathy, forms part of what is known as Positive Education.^v Increasingly schools are focussing on how they can equip students with positive skills to deal with adult life. In part this movement stems from the recognition that a positive approach to mental health has a longer-term benefit and can short-circuit a reactive approach to mental health issues.^{vi}

Dr Martin Seligman leads this approach to mental health and he became part of South Australia's *Thinkers in Residence* program in 2012.^{vii} Seligman is an internationally recognised psychologist who specialises in the area of wellbeing and whose work underpins much of Positive Education in schools. Seligman's sets this challenge: "As our ability to measure positive emotion, engagement,

meaning, accomplishment, and positive relations improves we can ask with rigor how many people in a nation, in a city, or in a corporation are flourishing. We ask with rigor when in her lifetime an individual is flourishing. We ask with rigor if a charity is increasing the flourishing of its beneficiaries. We can ask with rigor if our school systems are helping our children flourish."^{viii}

The Positive Psychology movement is a network of research-based scientists based at over 50 universities across the world, including Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, The University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, Monash and Cambridge.

Positive Education, the application of this approach within schools, is being adopted by a growing numbers of schools in Australia. The Positive Education Schools Association (PESA) recognises the benefits of collaborating and sharing knowledge in this relatively new area.^{ix}

How is Positive Education implemented at Mount Barker?

Warren Symonds believes that the best way for Positive Education to be a success at Mount Barker is for the philosophy to be embedded into the curriculum and teaching practice. He believes that the most effective approach is to build resilience and well-being by living and teaching a practice that demonstrates how Positive Psychology can permeate every aspect of a student's life. His vision is that 'students don't even know they're doing it'.

"the best way for Positive Education to be a success at Mount Barker is for the philosophy to be embedded into the curriculum and teaching practice."
Warren Symonds

The *live it, teach it, embed it* approach encompasses not just student learning but also how teachers engage with students.^x Mount Barker teachers were trained by the University of Pennsylvania's Resiliency Training, as well as attending training at Geelong Grammar School – a leader

in the Positive Education movement. The proverb about needing a village to raise a child underpins Mount Barker's commitment to sharing Positive Education knowledge and skills with primary schools, council, local service providers and families. Warren is keen that the school develop a model that can be widely shared and understood, to improve the lives of young people across South Australia.

Mount Barker students report that initially they found this approach challenging. They would ask "how does this connect with what we're doing at school?" They were challenged by being self-reflective, but now feel that they have the tools to take a more positive approach.



Watch: Mount Barker High School students on PERMA
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJNN6jv3mO4

How is data helpful?

"We want to make certain that our students are leaving school in a better frame of mind" states Warren Symonds. This certainty is underpinned by data collected through Mount Barker's wellbeing measurement tool. As Warren argues, "we've got to measure first and then learn."

Mount Barker has adopted the Middle-years Development Index (MDI) which is administered by the Department for Education and Child Development once a year. This measurement tool measures a number of aspects of wellbeing, such as connectedness.^{xi} Students are asked to report on factors such as what they do in and out of school, how much television they watch, how much sport they play. This measurement tool provides Mount Barker with information about each student, mapped against Positive Education attributes. In the example of connectedness, Mount Barker teachers were able

to identify that many students experienced a gap in connectedness with a significant adult. The school looked at ways to increase student voice, leadership and ownership within the school, including: training student leaders in the Appreciative Inquiry process; handing over the running of school assemblies to students; and inviting every fifth student on the school roll to be involved in reviewing and rewriting the school's student behaviour management policy. In doing this students were invited to come up with the behaviours they believed *staff* and students needed to exhibit to create a positive learning environment. These then became the basis for a code of behaviour for staff and students that is publicised throughout the school. Anecdotally students have reported that since undertaking positive education training staff members are more approachable and seem more interested in them as people. Since implementing these initiatives the school's data saw a 61.8% increase in students who believe they have a connection with adults in the school.

"we've got to measure first and then learn"
Warren Symonds

Comprehensive survey data is analysed by South Australia's Department for Education and Child Development and presented to teachers in a report. Jenni Cook, Assistant Principal in charge of Positive Education and Student Wellbeing, reports that areas of concern and areas of growth are analysed. These are discussed as part of the staff Positive Education Training and Development Program, with time allowed for learning area teams to discuss ways to address identified concerns through the positive education program, through specific targeted interventions or through curriculum areas (usually through a mix of the above).

A report about the whole student cohort is shared with staff who then plan how to integrate Positive Education in to their own teaching program. As Warren reports, this is a process of constantly revising and constantly questioning. It is a process of putting the prism of Positive Education over an Art and English unit, for example, which jointly share the theme of 'optimism'.^{xii} Data from the Complete Mental Health Map, a second tool used by

the school, enables staff to determine which areas need work, so that they can focus on 'persistence', for example, with a particular year group. Jenni Cook explains, "... in year 8 the school implemented a different approach to Physical Education, with greater focus on general fitness and less on 'sport' to target an identified drop-off in physical activity in Year 9. The school now incorporates a unit on 'It's not all about me' in Year 9 Positive Education to address a need identified around 'appropriate relationships'."

Encouragingly, within 18 months of implementing the Positive Education program Mount Barker saw a 7% improvement in reported wellbeing in every area. Students have responded well to the program and report growth in the positive culture of the school.



Watch: Measuring Wellbeing Symposium:
Dr Peggy Kern - Introducing the PERMA-Profiler
www.youtube.com/watch?v=arbEEUj_ZB8

How did Positive Education start at Mount Barker?

Mount Barker began the Positive Education program in 2012, after being invited by South Australia's Department of Education to work with Martin Seligman, Thinker in Residence. Inspired by Seligman's book *Flourish*, Warren worked with his senior staff to devise a Positive Education program for Mount Barker, and a model that could be shared across the Mount Barker community. The school sees this as important: so that students at its feeder primary schools are introduced to Positive Education; so that those who surround each student are supportive of the school's ethos.

Jenni Cook sees tangible benefits for staff in adopting a Positive Education approach. "Positive psychology is not a spectator sport" she says.^{xiii} Jenni reports that learning about Positive Education has encouraged teachers to look at themselves and their own wellbeing. Staff have developed practices around keeping gratitude journals, mindfulness, and appreciating others which have improved their own wellbeing. Significantly, Jenni found that Mount Barker staff wellbeing surveys showed a 16% increase in the number of staff who were flourishing from baseline data in 2012 to the staff survey in 2013, after a year of Positive Psychology training and development for staff. The implementation of Positive Education has opened the door to increased collaboration and sharing between staff as the school develops its programs for year levels and curriculum areas and shares its Positive Education learning.

"Positive psychology is not a spectator sport"
Jenni Cook

The evidence so far

Data from the wellbeing measurement tool adopted at Mount Barker shows a 7% improvement in the wellbeing of students moving from Year 8 to Year 9. Research into Positive Education is still in its infancy, but there are promising early signs about the effectiveness of these programs to improve student wellbeing. Some research shows that improving student wellbeing improves academic performance and reduces school absences,^{xiv} as well as decreasing stress and anxiety, while increasing self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism.^{xv} In 2009 Sin and Lyubomirsky conducted a meta-analysis of 51 Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) and found that PPIs do significantly increase wellbeing. However, most of the research in this area has been conducted using adults and more research is needed on the effectiveness of Positive Psychology programs with adolescents.^{xvi}

Learn more

SenseAbility: a strengths-based resilience program designed for those working with young Australians aged 12-18 years. It consists of a suite of modules developed to enhance and maintain emotional and psychological resilience.

Visit: www.beyondblue.org.au

MindMatters: MindMatters is a mental health initiative for secondary schools that aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people. We call it a 'framework', in that it provides structure, guidance and support while enabling schools to build their own mental health strategy to suit their unique circumstances. MindMatters provides school staff with blended professional learning that includes online resources, face-to-face events, webinars and support.

Visit: www.mindmatters.edu.au

Watch: What do you see in the classroom?
www.youtube.com/watch?v=D17y1F_X7Vc

Positive Education Schools Association:
www.pesa.edu.au

Martin Seligman and Adelaide Thinkers in Residence:
www.thinkers.sa.gov.au

A useful guide to research and practice in Positive Education is also at www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/thinkers/martinseligman/find.aspx

Geelong Grammar School:

Visit: www.ggs.vic.edu.au

Watch: Wise Channel. (2014). *Australian Pep Talk: Positive Education Promotes Happiness (Learning World S4E41, 1/3)*. Watch: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldcNR365msl

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- ^{xi} The survey collects data on these aspects: self-esteem, general health, optimism, subjective wellbeing, sadness and worries, adult and peer relationships, nutrition and sleep, after school activities, empathy and pro-social behaviour, perseverance, academic self-concept, school climate, school belonging, victimisation, body image.
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We look forward to continuing this #joyanddata conversation about positive education with you on social media.

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