Background
Positive education programs aim to promote wellbeing as a complementary goal to traditional academic learning, and are becoming increasingly popular in Australian schools. However, the effects of Positive Education on students’ wellbeing remain largely unknown, as few comprehensive studies have been conducted to date.
This evaluation aims to contribute to our understanding of the impact of Positive Education programs on student wellbeing, and here we provide an overview of preliminary findings from the first year (2013) of this ongoing, 3-year study.

Participants
Geelong Grammar School (GGS) began implementing Positive Education as a whole-school approach in 2008, and so provides an invaluable ‘living lab’ in which to explore the impact of Positive Education on the school community.
This study was conducted with a total of 383 Year 9, 10, and 11 GGS students in 2013. To provide a point of comparison, 138 students from other schools who did not have a Positive Education program, but were similar in socioeconomic status, were recruited into a control group.

Procedure
Students completed online questionnaires covering a range of topics at the beginning of 2013 (February), and at the end of 2013 (December).
A smaller group of 50 Year 9 students also provided reports about the strategies they use to respond to everyday situations via an iPod Touch. The Wuzzup application prompted students to answer questions at random times of the day for one week of each term.
Seventy-nine students across Years 9 and 10 also participated in Focus groups at the end of the year, adding rich qualitative data to the research.

383
Year 9, 10, and 11 GGS students participated in the study.
**Results**

What are the levels of student wellbeing at GGS, and how did wellbeing change across the course of the year?

**YEAR 9**

GGS students in Year 9 (at Timbertop campus) experienced significant improvements in their levels of wellbeing across the school year, as well as decreases in their levels of depression and anxiety. These effects were observed even for those students who were newly enrolled at GGS in Year 9, who began the year with initially lower levels of wellbeing than those students continuing at GGS. In contrast, the control group tended to decline in their wellbeing over the course of the year.

**MENTAL WELLBEING OF YEAR 9 STUDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Start of year</th>
<th>End of year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GGS</td>
<td>49.45</td>
<td>52.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>49.03</td>
<td>48.30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**YEAR 10**

Year 10 students at GGS had slightly higher levels of wellbeing compared to control students, but their wellbeing remained stable across the year, with no significant improvements observed.

Focus groups conducted with Year 10 students indicated a number of potential areas for improvement to their explicit Positive Education curriculum, including more relevant and relatable materials and interactive teaching formats.

**MENTAL WELLBEING OF YEAR 10 STUDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Start of year</th>
<th>End of year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GGS</td>
<td>50.02</td>
<td>50.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>47.93</td>
<td>47.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**YEAR 11**

Year 11 students at GGS (who currently do not have timetabled Positive Education classes) showed higher levels of wellbeing than the control group. However, like the control students, GGS students experienced increasing levels of anxiety and depression, and decreasing levels of wellbeing, over the course of Year 11.

**MENTAL WELLBEING OF YEAR 11 STUDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Start of year</th>
<th>End of year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GGS</td>
<td>52.01</td>
<td>50.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>47.20</td>
<td>45.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What strategies are students using in their everyday life?

By Term 4 of Year 9, the most commonly used coping strategies to deal with positive or challenging day-to-day events included savouring the moment, trying to keep everything in perspective, and using ‘real time resilience’. Many students reported that they gained these skills from the Positive Education classes at GGS.

STRATEGIES USED BY YEAR 9 STUDENTS ATTRIBUTED TO POSITIVE EDUCATION CLASSES

Mean Frequency of Strategy Use

- I tried to stay true to myself and my values
- I praised myself
- I acted with integrity and dignity
- I focused on my positive qualities
- I shared my experience or celebrated with others
- I thought about what happened and what I could learn from the
- I asked for help
- I looked at the situation from a growth mindset perspective
- I stopped to think about the best way to solve the problem
- I focused on my goal(s)
- I expressed gratitude
- I used one of my character strengths
- I tried to think positively about the situation
- I tried to stay in the present moment
- I did something to improve the situation
- I tried to relax
- I used the skill of real time resilience
- I tried to keep everything in perspective
- I savoured the moment
Conclusions

These findings provide preliminary support for the effectiveness of the GGS positive education program, particularly in relation to the Year 9 Timbertop experience, which was associated with substantial improvements to wellbeing over the course of the year.

However these positive effects appeared to diminish in Years 10 and 11, when academic demands tend to increase. Of concern, Year 11 students, who currently do not receive explicit Positive Education classes, experienced declining levels of wellbeing, which may point to the need for Positive Education ‘boosters’ during this year.

A number of ideas emerged for further enhancing the Year 10 Positive Education curriculum, including the potential for more interactive class formats, and the need to make learning relevant to real-world experiences and challenges. These suggestions have already been implemented, and forthcoming data collection in 2014 from current Year 10s will provide valuable insight into whether changes to the curriculum and delivery style have translated into improved student outcomes.

These are preliminary findings which lead on to an ongoing 3-year study funded by the Australian Research Council. Future results will provide further insight into how Positive Education impacts students’ wellbeing as they move through the secondary school years, as well as how the GGS Positive Education curriculum translates to neighbouring Government school settings.

For further details

For a full description of this research, please see:


This research was funded by Geelong Grammar School, and conducted by:

- Associate Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick (Project Leader) from The University of Melbourne
- Associate Professor Nikki Rickard from Monash University
- Dr TanChyuan Chin (Research Fellow) from The University of Melbourne

www.ggs.vic.edu.au/PosEd