Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching practice and student learning

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In recent years, while there has been a considerable amount of research examining teacher wellbeing, the focus has largely been on negative states, such as burnout and stress. There are also only a limited number of studies examining the effect of positive teacher wellbeing on teaching practices and student learning. At the same time, there has been a considerable rise in the application of positive psychology strategies in professional contexts to improve wellbeing. One such strategy is the promotion of the PERMA framework, which was designed to provide a framework for human flourishing and wellbeing. The effect on teaching practice and student learning when teachers consciously use PERMA positive psychology strategies has not been examined. This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to address a gap in current literature by exploring teachers' perspectives on the effect of consciously using positive psychology strategies on their teaching practice and student learning. Findings revealed impacts in both areas, providing support for more research into the relationship between teachers' use of positive psychology principles, teacher wellbeing, teaching practice and student learning. These findings may have applicability in other similar contexts, both nationally and internationally.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of research exploring teacher wellbeing levels. However, many of these studies have focused on ameliorating negative states of teacher wellbeing (McCallum, Price & Graham, 2017), for example teachers' increased stress levels (Curry & O'Brien, 2012; Richards, 2012), teachers' increasingly demanding workload (Buchanan et al., 2013; Yin, Huang & Wang, 2016) and teacher burnout (Antoniou, Ploumpi & Ntalla, 2013). In fact, compared to other professional occupations, teachers' rate their wellbeing lower (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012) and have one of the highest occupational rates of workplace mental stress claims in Australia (Safe Work Australia, 2013).

Although few studies have examined teacher wellbeing from a positive perspective, high levels of teacher wellbeing have been shown to have significant positive effects across a number of domains. Whilst research is scarce in this area, Kern, Waters, Adler, and White (2014) evaluated the wellbeing levels of 153 Australian education staff in a single school, of which 60% were teachers. They found that staff members who were doing well across multiple wellbeing domains, were also more committed to the school, and more satisfied with their health, life, and chosen occupation.

Similarly, Brouskeli, Kaltsi and Loumakou (2018), in their study of Greek secondary teachers' resilience and occupational wellbeing, found a positive correlation between these two factors. They concluded that programs to support teachers' wellbeing should be a

priority in education systems, and recommended further research around factors that contribute to and enhance teacher wellbeing (Brouskeli et al., 2018).

Çimen and Özgan (2018) in their Turkish qualitative study of the factors that contribute to the psychological capital of teachers, defined psychological capital as a higher-order construct which draws from positive psychology, comprising the four facets of hope, self-efficacy, optimism and resilience. They found that teacher psychological capital increased when teachers helped their students to succeed and overcome problems, particularly if the teachers were working in low socio-economic schools. In addition, teacher participants reported that solidarity and teamwork between colleagues, and being reminded that teaching improves new generations and builds toward the future, impacted on teacher psychological capital as the motivation of feeling responsible for creating a better society made them more determined to reach their objectives (Çimen & Özgan, 2018).

In addition, there is a paucity of research examining the effect of teacher wellbeing on teaching practice or on student learning. This is coupled with the absence of both a commonly used definition of wellbeing and standardised wellbeing measures. A good example is Duckworth, Quinn and Seligman (2009) who examined the influence of teacher wellbeing as measured by grit, life satisfaction and optimism in novice teachers at the start of the school year against their students' academic gains at the end of the year. They found teacher grit and life-satisfaction were predictive of student academic gains. Similarly, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca and Malone (2006) found in their study of over 2000 teachers working in Italian junior high schools, that the students of teachers who had higher wellbeing levels as measured by self-efficacy beliefs and job satisfaction, received higher final grades.

Whilst these studies flag a possible relationship between teacher wellbeing, teaching practice and student learning, a review of literature on this topic reveals there is insufficient evidence to confidently assert that these three factors are linked. If such a link could be found then it may be possible to address student learning outcomes through teacher wellbeing. Therefore, to explore this notion further, the *PERMA* wellbeing model, which has strong empirical evidence of effectiveness (Kern et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2018; Tansey et al., 2018) will be considered in relation to being utilised as a possible model of teacher wellbeing.

PERMA wellbeing

Leading researcher in positive psychology, Seligman (2012), states that wellbeing can be defined as a construct which includes the elements of positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment, which he has collapsed into the term *PERMA*. Within this PERMA model, Seligman proposes that positive emotion is the subjective measure of happiness and life satisfaction, and engagement is the subjective measure of being absorbed in a task. Positive relationships are relationships with others which support wellbeing, and meaning is the subjective experience of belonging to, or serving something which you believe is bigger than yourself. Accomplishment refers to

experiencing achievement or success. High PERMA is considered to be a state of optimal wellbeing, which is termed 'flourishing' (Seligman, 2012).

Though not in educational contexts, previous research in the field of human flourishing has consistently demonstrated that when people are experiencing the positive effects of wellbeing their intelligence, curiosity, interest, passion, creativity, problem-solving skills, engagement and energy levels all rise and their success or goal outcomes improve (Achor, 2011; Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2012). Further, Achor (2011) asserted that wellbeing, optimism and happiness are the precursors of success, optimal performance and achievement, and not the other way around. Similarly, Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005) who conducted a meta-analysis of data from 293 studies examining the links between happiness and success, found that positive affect and optimal wellbeing engendered desirable work outcomes and success in the twenty-two longitudinal studies that were included in their meta-analysis.

Optimising wellbeing

A review of literature reveals four strategies that align closely with PERMA research and contribute to optimal wellbeing in a work environment. The first strategy is the use of an individuals' character strengths in the workplace. This addresses the positive emotion, engagement and accomplishment components of PERMA. Character strengths are the routes to displaying the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification of 24 character strengths. Researchers have found that when individuals are aware of, and use their character strengths at work, they are more likely to feel positive emotion (Gander et al., 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005), experience job satisfaction, pleasure, engagement and find meaning in their work (Harzer & Ruch, 2013). In addition, use of character strengths in the workplace is associated with greater self-esteem, vitality, and lower perceived stress (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan & Hurling, 2011).

Social support is the second strategy and addresses the engagement, relationships and accomplishment components of PERMA. Social support in the workplace has been found to predict job satisfaction and engagement (Achor, 2013; Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter, 2011; Orgambidez-Ramos & Almeida, 2017). Achor's (2012) study of social support in the work place found that individuals who provide social support to their colleagues are more likely to be engaged at work, be satisfied with their jobs, have better relationships at work, and receive a promotion.

Another well-established strategy that aligns closely with the PERMA meaning component and contributes to optimal wellbeing in a work environment is people's work-related attitudes. People who find their work meaningful are more likely to report higher job satisfaction (Xie, Xia, Xin & Zhou, 2016; Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England & Velez, 2018). For example, Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz's (1997) study of 196 employees at two universities and colleges in the United States found that workers who held an attitude towards their work of being a 'calling' – that is, they viewed their work as

contributing to the greater good and making a difference, also had greater productivity, higher life satisfaction, and were more likely to be optimistic and conscientiousness.

Focusing on the positive aspects of one's work is the fourth strategy and addresses the positive emotion and accomplishment components of PERMA. Research shows that much of the variance in individual's wellbeing and happiness levels are due to the choices they make in how they perceive the world (Seligman, 2011). Research has revealed that the brain is neuroplastic and is capable of 'rewiring' itself in response to changes in individual's thinking habits, that is, what individuals choose to focus on changes the way their brain perceives the world (Achor, 2011; Doidge, 2010). Research shows that when individuals consciously choose to focus on what is going well for them, or the good things in their lives or at work, they become significantly happier and more optimistic (Achor, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005).

The study

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to address a gap in current literature and answer the following research questions:

(1) What are teachers' experiences of consciously using positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing; and
(2) What are teachers' experiences of the effects on their teaching practice and student learning when they consciously use positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing.

This paper reports on teachers' experiences of how consciously using positive psychology strategies affected their teaching practice and student learning. It is hoped that this Australian study will pioneer future research in this area.

Participants and setting

Approval for the study was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Victorian State Government, Department of Education and Training, The researchers used typical sampling to select five schools ensuring that the schools chosen varied in their geographical location, size of their student population and *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage* (ICSEA). The ICSEA takes into consideration factors which can potentially influence student educational outcomes such as parents' occupation and education, as well as school level factors such as school geographical location and proportion of indigenous students (ACARA, 2017). The average school ICSEA value in Victoria is 1000 (ACARA, 2017). The researcher then contacted the principals of these schools for informed consent to conduct the study with one of the teachers in that school. The principals were asked to inform their staff of the study through email or in a staff meeting and ask any teacher who may be interested to contact the researcher. Teacher informed consent was then obtained. Pseudonyms are used in when referring to participants.

'Kate' is the first teacher in this study, she has been teaching for seven years. Kate works in a government primary school, which has 520 students and has an ICSEA of 1041. She currently teaches a Year One class. Kate worked in a corporate occupation for seven years prior to becoming a teacher. She decided to return to university to study teaching as she was looking for more meaning in her work. Kate stated she had very positive experiences with learning as a child and has fond memories of her teachers and parents encouraging, supporting and empowering her to learn. Kate said she has had great mentors along her career and feels that she is a valued member of her current teaching team. Kate has no previous experience with any of the positive psychology strategies included in this study.

'Ava' is the second teacher in the study, she has been teaching for two years. Ava works in a government preparatory to year twelve school, which has 950 students and has an ICSEA of 917. She currently teachers a Year Five and Year Six combined class. Ava stated that she had, "A difficult childhood," and reflects, "No-one showed me how to break my family cycle or helped me to get out of those difficult circumstances." Ava stated that she had to, "Grow up and become independent quickly," having to, "Figure out a lot of things by myself." Ava shared that most of the students in her class are also having a difficult childhood and that she enjoys working in this school because she knows she can make a difference by motivating and empowering her students to make a better life for themselves. Ava has previously used the 'reflecting on positive aspects of the day' strategy to help her students, but has not used it for herself. She stated that she has an interest in student wellbeing and is the 'Values Education' coordinator at her school. Ava has no previous experience with any of the positive psychology strategies included in this study.

'Steph' is the third teacher in this study, she has been teaching for four years. Steph works in a government primary school, which has 240 students and has an ICSEA of 1109. She currently teaches a Year Four class. Steph stated that her top priority in teaching is to build quality relationships with her students. She said she believes that if the students feel valued, then they will be much more ready to learn. Steph explained, "I really enjoy forming strong bonds with my students and making each school day as enjoyable as it can possibly be." She has no previous experience with any of the positive psychology strategies included in this study.

'Naomi' is the fourth teacher in this study, she has been teaching for fifteen years. Naomi works in a government school which has 300 students enrolled and has an ICSEA of 1038. She currently teachers a Year Five class. Naomi explained that she completed a Bachelor degree in another discipline and worked in a corporate job for nine years before deciding that she wanted to become a teacher. She was motivated by making a difference in her students' lives. Naomi explained that she still loves spending her days working with young people but feels that the education system and curriculum outcomes are no longer meeting the needs of today's students. Naomi is concerned at how busy educators have become in trying to meet all the demands placed on teachers. She is interested in student wellbeing and runs a 'Respectful Relationships' program in her class as well as using mindfulness and meditation in her classroom to support her students in feeling calm. Naomi is interested in teacher wellbeing but has no previous experience with any of the positive psychology strategies included in this study.

'Jayde' has been teaching for four years. Jayde works in a government primary school, which has 180 students and has an ICSEA of 845. She currently teaches a combined Years Preparatory and Year One class. Jayde stated that she loves teaching and feels blessed to be working in this school where she has been given a lot of opportunities, such as completing additional training as a mathematics specialist and training one of the school's sports teams. Jayde previously participated in a professional development workshop which raised her awareness of character strengths but, she has not used them in her teaching practice. She has no previous experience with any of the other positive psychology strategies included in this study.

Data collection and analysis

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to obtain a view of the participants' life-world to understand and describe a specific phenomenon, and reach an understanding of the essence of participants' lived experience of the phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; *Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015)*. In phenomenological studies, the major data gathering method involves in-depth interviews with participants (Creswell, 2007). Five is an acceptable number of participants in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007).

Each teacher participant was interviewed three times. The first involved a screening interview to determine the participants' suitability for inclusion in this study. Phenomenological research requires a relatively homogenous group of participants who all have similar experience with the phenomenon which is being investigated (Creswell, 2007). During the first interview researchers gauged the participants' previous experience with the positive psychology strategies used in this study to ensure that participants had no previous experience of the phenomenon. All participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were included.

The purpose of the second interview was to explain the four PERMA strategies and to ask the teachers to report on how they are already using them. Using character strengths, finding meaning, offering social support and looking for positive aspects were explained to the teachers in a pre-developed script to ensure standardisation across all participants. A core component of the research study was the intentional use of the strategies for fifteen days. After explaining the four strategies, participants were asked to share their understanding through the provision of examples. Through this discussion the researcher was able to ensure the participant understood the four strategies. In addition, teachers were asked to consider how they were already doing this in their daily work in order to prime them for the task ahead, that is, consciously observing and reflecting on how they are already using these strategies as well as looking for new opportunities to use these strategies during the following fifteen working days. Teachers were asked to write daily reflections for fifteen working days based on their observations of how they were using these strategies already and any new opportunities they found to use the strategies.

Participants were interviewed for the third and final time after they had used the strategies for fifteen consecutive teaching days. A semi-structured interview approach was employed

(Johnson & Christensen, 2008) to gain an understanding of: (1) teachers' experiences of consciously using positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing; and (2) the effect that this had on their teaching practice and student learning. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Data were analysed initially using phenomenological reduction in which the data is reduced to the constituent parts of the phenomenon (*Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The constituent parts were then clustered into themes* defined as the "core themes of the experience" of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). In this study the core themes were; teachers' experience, teaching practice and student learning.

The data from the interviews and written reflections were then compared to achieve data convergence and to develop a clear representation of the participants' experiences of the phenomena. Descriptions of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon were constructed using verbatim excerpts from their interviews and written reflections. This facilitates the understanding of participants' experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Reliability was ensured by cross checking participants' written reflections with their interview statements. Where necessary, the participants were asked further questions to clarify the researchers' understanding of the participant's experiences. Validity was addressed through presenting the participants' background information and experiences to enable readers to understand how the data was interpreted. Two sets of data were collected from each participant to enable the researchers to compare the information and to eliminate any inconsistencies. Further, both researchers independently analysed the data to ensure validity.

Results and discussion

Descriptions of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon were constructed using verbatim excerpts from their interviews and written reflections. To ensure fidelity of the participants' experience and phenomenological methods, data has been presented using a first person narrative as it was relayed to the researchers during interviews or written by the participant in their reflective journal. Each participant's results in relation to their experience of how consciously using positive psychology strategies effected their teaching practice and student learning has been presented individually in Appendix 1: Descriptions of the participants' experiences.

Calm and positive

Teachers in this study reported feeling less stressed and more relaxed, positive and calm in the classroom while consciously using positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing. For example, Kate observed that reflecting on what has gone well each day allowed her to consciously acknowledge the positive aspects of her teaching practice. This enhanced her sense of accomplishment and enabled her to feel more positive, calm, relaxed and easy going in the classroom.

So too Ava observed that noticing what was going well through the day also enabled her to feel more positive and calm in the classroom. In a written reflection she stated:

> Today was a big test on my ability to keep my emotions down as students tend to struggle on a Monday to function to the best of their ability. Generally this is the day where I can lose my cool and become quite stressed with the amount of behaviour I need to deal with. During breaks I aimed to sit in a quiet place and de-escalate by taking deep breaths and thinking about the positives from the day. Upon reflection it was clear that the day went a lot smoother as I was able to control my emotions and deal with the workload well. This helped me remain calmer with my students and therefore they were calmer too. … Noticing what was going well has had a positive impact on my teaching and overall wellbeing as I found myself less stressed and more calm through lessons. (Ava)

Jayde too reported in her interview that reflecting on what had gone well each day helped her to feel more positive:

> When I was having a crazy time, using the positive reflections allowed me to take a step back and respond differently. Looking for what went well hugely changed my perspective on the day. A day that I thought went terrible and I was just exhausted, things actually did go well when I look through the day. So, it was good for me to realise that there were things that went well. Normally I would think about 'oh this went wrong and this went wrong and I should have done this and I should have done that,' and then you feel quite negative about yourself. Whereas flipping that around and thinking well actually this went well and this was because of me made me feel awesome, really good. I think everyone needs to do it. (Jayde)

Naomi also found the daily reflections allowed her to better understand and address her feelings of being overwhelmed. As a result, she was able to reframe her thinking and problem solve in more positive ways.

Whereas, Steph found that consciously looking for meaning in her work allowed her to prioritise classroom time and reduced her feelings of stress and overwhelm. During her interview she stated:

> I am really happy with what I have been doing. I felt a bit less stressed and overwhelmed by the curriculum content because I know it is not the most important thing to me. Even when I became overwhelmed I could come back to asking, 'What is the most important thing, why am I doing this?' Which is to make the kids feel good about themselves. So I could prioritise by giving the students more student taught lessons, asking their opinions and having fun with them, and we still got through a lot of the content. (Steph)

Engagement with teaching

Participants also reported feeling more engaged with teaching, which they perceive improved the quality of their lessons. For example, Ava explained that noticing what was going well had a positive impact on her teaching and overall wellbeing. As a result, she felt more positive and engaged with teaching, which improved the quality of her lessons. So too, Jayde noticed that as a result of feeling calmer and more positive in the classroom,

she felt much more energised coming in to work each day, she comments, "It was like a fresh start each day".

Kate also noticed that through writing the reflections she became more interested and engaged in teaching and that she started seeking a better understanding of the students' perspective of her lessons. Naomi too became more engaged with teaching. She observed that as a result of reflecting on her pedagogy, she allowed the students to take more ownership of their learning. The students then became more engaged in learning which resulted in her feeling more engaged in teaching. She explained in her interview:

> It felt like students had a lot more ownership of their learning and they were more engaged. It was great, they would come in and I didn't even have to say anything, they would just get to work. They wanted to do more. That made me more engaged too because the boat was already up and rowing, all I had to do was keep tapping it along, it was much easier. I had the flu but, I actually wanted to go in to work because I was enjoying the process. In a way I had more purpose and meaning. (Naomi)

Relationships with students

Teachers reported spending more one-on-one time with their students and as a result developed better relationships with, and understanding of their students. Teachers also noticed that the one-on-one time spent with students resulted in improvement in the student's work and confidence. To illustrate, Steph explained that as a result of looking for meaning in her work, she focused more on her relationships with students. She noted that this improved her relationships with her students and resulted in improvements in students' work such as increased confidence, taking more risks, asking more questions, and volunteering to share their work with the class.

Naomi also noticed that she spent more time with her students individually which helped her to develop authentic relationships with her students. She stated, "I was able to see them more for who they were and so then they brought more of themselves." Kate too spent more one-on-one time with individual students which she reported was, "Really meaningful," and resulted in those students becoming more engaged in learning.

Ava also reported that she spent more one-on-one time with students, especially her more challenging students, seeking to deepen her relationships with them. She observed during her interview:

> I have ensured that I have had more one-on-one time with students to deepen my relationships with them. I had some of the students, who at the start of the year, I found really hard to build relationships with because we were just so different. I used my regulation and self-control strengths because they are very naughty when they are together and they are very boisterous and sometimes they don't listen very well, it's very frustrating, so I had to really control myself. One recess they wanted to come into the classroom and normally I would say, 'No, this is my time you need to go outside.' But, I told them to come in and I sat down with them and we had some jokes. It has actually helped a lot to build closer relationships with that bunch of boys. I think they have maybe developed more respect for me. It has really helped the classroom to be a bit calmer. (Ava)

Positive feedback to students

Teachers more consciously looked for positive aspects in their students and gave the students more positive feedback about their work. For example, Kate stated in her interview:

> I have noticed the things that they are really good at doing. I was reading a student's writing and normally I would go straight for the fact that he hasn't spelled these words right or hasn't put in full stops. Instead of doing that, I looked for the good things. And, I noticed he's a really great story teller, the language and content was awesome. I said, 'You wrote a really good story today mate,' I didn't actually mention anything about his spelling, because I just wanted to highlight that he wrote a great story. So, I guess because I am looking for positives in myself, I am looking for positives in them too. So I have stepped back little and I am more positive, I am not getting so caught up in what they need to do. (Kate)

Naomi also more consciously tried to give students positive, constructive feedback. She observed a ripple effect in which the students developed a culture of helping each other. She reflected:

> I was able to engage for longer with the students individually. I was able to have more one-on-one time with each of student, so that was really positive. I more consciously tried to give students positive, constructive feedback. That positivity had a ripple effect where the students developed a culture of helping each other. They know that they have had the experience of more one-on-one dedicated time so then they are able to understand better that it's not their turn and to instead help each other. (Naomi)

So too Ava stated, "I have taken time to share positive moments with them (the students) and then they feel more positive as well. I think it's motivated some of the kids a little bit to do more work."

Lesson content

Teachers became less focused on the set curriculum and more focused on making their lessons deeper, more meaningful, engaging and enjoyable for students. For example, Naomi focused on metacognitive pedagogies and noticed that the students became more engaged and enjoyed the learning process more. In her interview she explained her experience of having students working on a project:

> I put everything else aside as they were engaged in it. The learning and the teaching became about the process of them managing their own learning and felt far more authentic. I focused more on them learning how to learn. For the last couple of weeks I totally inverted traditional teaching. It felt more authentic, richer, meaningful, connected and more purposeful. There was lots of laughter and lots of joy in the room. (Naomi)

Kate reflected how her lessons changed:

> Sometimes you get really dug down in data and caught up in this expectation where everything has to be done and ticked off and you forget the real authentic parts of

learning. Instead, I have been thinking about how to help my students to actually shine or grow in some way. (Kate)

Ava focused on making her lessons meaningful through class discussions around how to manage stress. She explained that she modelled persistence and resilience and was open with the students about her experiences with stress and how she deals with it. Ava also reflected that she made the students aware of the hidden curriculum in her lessons, such as teaching the students stamina, resilience and persistence through writing. She noticed that as a result, some of the students have been doing more work than they normally would.

Steph reflected that she wasn't as focused on the content as she felt that it was more important that the students enjoyed their learning, felt valued and had choice and power in the classroom. She stated during her interview:

> I adapted lessons based on students' interests too because I believe that listening to their ideas and valuing their ideas through changing a lesson to suit them is the most important thing. I wasn't so focused on the content because I knew that it's more important that the students are enjoying their learning, feeling valued and having choice and power in the classroom. As someone who is very outcome orientated and wants to check off lots of things and make sure I have done everything, I instead focused more on meaning. This also changed the students' learning outcomes because, for example, with the goal setting students had to drive their own learning, and that is more about problem solving, critical thinking, communication and creativity which are more important life skills anyway. (Steph)

Whilst the teachers participating in this study reported a greater focus on making their lessons more meaningful and enjoyable for students, it could be argued that the concurrent reduced focus on the set curriculum may have a negative impact on student learning outcomes.

Classrooms as a partnership

Results revealed that classrooms often became more of a partnership between teachers and students as the teachers sought to empower their students by giving them a greater voice in the classroom and included more student led activities. Students took greater ownership of their learning, worked independently more often, and directed their own learning more often. Teachers more often included student's ideas, feedback and interests into their lessons to make the lessons more relevant and interesting to their students. Teachers were often surprised at the work their students were able to produce independently. To illustrate, Steph looked for meaning in her work by increasing student agency in the classroom, allowing her students to make important decisions, drive their own learning and have more independence and flexibility. She stated during her interview:

> I also focused more on increasing student agency in the classroom, giving them the tools to make important decisions and drive their own learning, Doing this definitely allowed them to have more independence and flexibility in the classroom. I've been doing a lot of student goal setting, I enabled students to self-identify areas for improvement and

choose activities they would like to complete in order to target these areas. Then, every day they have 10 – 15 minutes to work toward that goal. The students feel that I trust and respect them enough to take charge of their learning and make good choices about how they spend their time. They are definitely a lot more independent and in charge of their learning. Which enables them to feel more valued. (Steph)

Steph also adapted lessons based on student's interests to demonstrate to her students that she values their ideas. Steph reflected:

Through looking for meaning more, I focused on empowering students to be the best versions of themselves and to feel more valued. This impacted my teaching as I used more of their ideas and feedback in class to make the students feel that their voices were being acknowledged. For example, we have been doing poetry and three students said they would like to teach a lesson about rap. Doing that is going to make them feel valued and also have to take responsibility for leadership and organisation. I am someone who has always been a very thorough planner that is my strength. But, sometimes it is my weakness because I really want to get through this stuff that I have planned. When the girls asked to teach the lesson on rap I thought, 'Well all of the kids are excited for this,' so I just went with it. So, in lessons I might have had a plan and then a student made a suggestion and instead of saying, 'No, this is not on the plan,' I've just gone with it. The class love it because then it seems like they are in charge and I am listening to their ideas. It is more of a partnership. (Steph)

Jayde also noticed that her classroom became more of a team environment with the students taking more responsibility for their learning and making suggestions about their learning preferences, such as having music on whilst they work. She was surprised by what her students could achieve when she was more relaxed and positive and gave the students time to get ready to learn for example, listening to each other, explaining their learning, reading quietly and completing more work.

Kate consciously "pulled back" a little from her students to allow them to have more independence. As a result she observed that her students became more resilient and took greater charge of their learning. She stated in her interview:

Writing the reflections about what is going well, and noticing the little things I am doing well has made me more relaxed in the classroom. I'm not always trying to push the students. I'm not so, "We need to get this done," stress, stress, stress…. So I was calmer, more relaxed and easy going and I found that the kids have been a bit more like that as well. By giving them a bit more time and allowing them to just have a go even if they made mistakes, I noticed them doing things that I had no idea they could do. In some cases I was actually quite blown away by what they could do. (Kate)

Recognition of students' needs

Teachers showed greater recognition of the students' needs in the classroom, gave their students more breaks throughout the day and allowed the students more time to complete their work. This was evident in Kate's interview response:

> During different points of the day, between lessons, I've started reading a few pages of a book to give the students a breather. It's about stepping back and realising that they need a five minute break. They are not machines. So I have been adding bits of humour, trying to bring some fun back into the day and reading funny books to them, they love it. (Kate)

Ava also used brain breaks to help the students cope with the workload. As a result she noticed that student behaviour improved, the classroom became more settled and students completed more work. Jayde too, reported using more brain breaks as well as using her playfulness character strength to make the classroom more enjoyable for the students, stating, "The kids loved it."

Changes in students behaviour and attitude

Teachers in this study reported that their students became calmer in class, were more engaged with learning and that some students completed more work. For example, Ava reflected that when she was feeling calm and engaged, her students were also calmer and more engaged.

Similarly, Jayde commented in her interview:

> I was little bit more relaxed in class, I have had a lot more music going and lot more songs and dancing. The students still understood the classroom expectations that they had to work. But putting the peaceful music on made me peaceful and it made them peaceful. They were definitely calmer, more engaged and on task. That was mainly because I was being more relaxed and positive about the day. The students were listening to each other, they were able to explain their learning, and because it is calmer they got more work done, there was not as many interruptions. In the past, I have had moments where I have thought, 'they can't even sit still,' but actually giving them that time to relax and get ready to learn enabled them to be calmer. Then I realised that they can read quietly and they can listen to each other. They were able to work more independently because they were focused. (Jayde)

Although they do not address the effects of optimal teacher wellbeing on teaching practice and student learning, studies in the field of positive psychology also indicate that using these strategies increases participant's PERMA constructs of positive emotions or subjective wellbeing (Achor, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005); engagement (Harzer & Ruch, 2013; Kern et al., 2014); positive relationships (Achor, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005); perception of meaning in their work (Seligman, 2002; Wrzesniewski, 2002); and accomplishment (Achor, 2011; Seligman, 2012).

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

This study applied a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand participants' teaching practices and students' learning when they consciously used positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing. In the context of this study, teachers consciously using strategies to improve their PERMA wellbeing, affected their teaching practice and student learning in the following eight ways:

1. Teachers reported feeling less stressed, more relaxed, more positive and calmer in the classroom.
2. Teachers reported feeling more engaged with teaching which they perceived improved the quality of their lessons.
3. Teachers reported spending more one-on-one time individually with their students and as a result developed a better relationships and understanding of their students. Teachers also noticed that this one-on-one time resulted in improvement in the student's work and confidence.
4. Teachers more consciously looked for positive aspects in their students and gave the students more positive feedback about their work.
4. Teachers became less focused on the set curriculum and more focused on making their lessons deeper, more meaningful, more engaging and more enjoyable for students.
6. Classrooms often became more of a partnership between teachers and students as the teachers sought to empower their students by giving them a greater voice in the classroom and included more student lead activities. Students took greater ownership of their learning, worked independently more often and directed their own learning more often. Teachers more often included student's ideas, feedback and interests into their lessons to make the lessons more relevant and interesting to their students. Teachers were often surprised at the work their students were able to produce independently.
7. Teachers showed greater recognition of the students' needs in the classroom, gave their students more breaks throughout the day and allowed the students more time to complete their work.
8. Teachers in this study reported that their students became calmer in class, were more engaged with learning and that some students completed more work.

The findings from this study may be applicable in other similar contexts, both nationally and internationally.

Limitations of this study include the short time frame and small number of participants. Further large scale studies which run over a longer period of time are recommended to confirm the findings of this study. Also, all participants in this study were female; future studies should also include male participants. In addition, participants in this study self-reported, which may cause problems with validity as participants may not be honest, may lack introspective ability or may misunderstand the questions (Barker, Elliott & Pistrang, 2002). This was addressed through the researcher ensuring the participants had a clear understanding of the four strategies to be used in the study and the self-reporting requirements.

Another limitation of this study was the inability to account for the degree of variance that the PERMA framework may have contributed to teachers' experiences, over and above other factors, such as ideas and constructs already present in participants' minds, for example, social constructivism and student-centred learning. It is recommended that future research be conducted that includes a control group, to better understand the relationship between teacher wellbeing, PERMA, and other factors, such as social constructivism and student-centred learning.

This study found that when teachers intentionally use PERMA wellbeing strategies to support their wellbeing there were flow on effects in their teaching practice and student learning. This study is unique and addresses a gap in current knowledge around teacher wellbeing and its effects on teaching practice and student learning. If such a link could be found then it may be possible to address student learning outcomes through teacher wellbeing. It is hoped that this Australian study will pioneer future research in this area.

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Appendix 1: Descriptions of the participants' experiences

Appendix 1 presents each participant's results in relation to their experience of how consciously using positive psychology strategies affected their teaching practice and student learning. These descriptions have been constructed using verbatim excerpts from their interviews and written reflections. Data has been presented using a first person narrative as it was relayed to the researchers.

Kate

Writing the reflections, really helped me to be more engaged in teaching the lesson. I'm finding that I am wanting to learn how to communicate and teach with more depth and enrichment. I am more interested in what I am actually teaching and understanding what the students get from my teaching.

Noticing the little things I am doing well has made me more relaxed in the classroom. I'm not always trying to push the students. I'm not so, "We need to get this done," stress, stress, stress. I've noticed that when I explain how to do something, I need to be calm, clear and concise and then just let students have a go. I was calmer, more relaxed and easy going and I found that the kids have been a bit more like that as well. By giving them a bit more time and allowing them to just have a go even if they made mistakes, I noticed them doing things that I had no idea they could do. In some cases I was actually quite blown away by what they could do.

I think that has a bit to do with me pulling back a little bit and just letting them have a bit more independence as well. The students are also noticing things that they can do and they are a little bit more resilient now when they can't do something. They have built a little bit more independence and have done some surprising things. In the past I had to make sure every student was learning something every lesson. I explained everything two or three times and then said to them, "You're not doing that properly, this is how you are meant to do it." Instead now, I just let them have a go. I guess just letting them have go has made them more resilient.

I have noticed the things that they are really good at doing. I was reading a student's writing and normally I would go straight for the fact that he hasn't spelled these words right or hasn't put in full stops. Instead of doing that, I looked for the good things. And I noticed he's a really great story teller, the language and content was awesome. I said "You wrote a really good story today mate," I didn't actually mention anything about his spelling, because I just wanted to highlight that he wrote a great story. So I guess because I am looking for positives in myself, I am looking for positives in them too. Sometimes you get really dug down in data and caught up in this expectation where everything has to be done and ticked off and you forget the real authentic parts of learning. Instead, I have been thinking about how to help my students to actually shine or grow in some way.

They are really taking charge of their learning. I am still there for them, but I have stepped back a little which has allowed me to not have those onslaught of expectations and to feel more positive. So for example, when I am teaching I think, "The students need to know this, this, this and this and I need to teach them, this, this and this and if they don't understand then they are not going to pass." But when I just step back and let them have a go (since starting this study), I have started to notice the positives and then we can work on anything that might need fine tuning. But, you need to give them enough time and enough independence to have a go for themselves first. So for example, with one student in particular he doesn't like writing at all. So the other day we sat together for 20 minutes and although he only wrote two sentences, his hand writing was neat. I don't normally

have one-on–one time with him but just sitting with him was really meaningful. The next day he said to me, "I am going to try and do neat writing like I did yesterday with you." It was meaningful because I really felt like he was engaged and he was wanting to do it and not just doing it because he had to.

During different points of the day, between lessons, I've started reading a few pages of a book to give the students a breather. It's about stepping back and realising that they need a five minute break. They are not machines. So I have been adding bits of humour, trying to bring some fun back into the day and reading funny books to them, they love it.

Ava

Today was a big test on my ability to keep my emotions down as students tend to struggle on a Monday to function to the best of their ability. Generally this is the day where I can lose my cool and become quite stressed with the amount of behaviour I need to deal with. During breaks I aimed to sit in a quiet place and de-escalate by taking deep breaths and thinking about the positives from the day. Upon reflection it was clear that the day went a lot smoother as I was able to control my emotions and deal with the workload well. This helped me remain calmer with my students and therefore they were calmer too. When I stayed calm, it helped me to decide which battles were important to deal with, and which ones where not as important, it helped me to not be as stressed through the day.

Noticing what was going well has had a positive impact on my teaching and overall wellbeing as I found myself less stressed and more calm through lessons. Because I'm feeling a lot more positive about my day, I'm more engaged with what I'm doing and this has improved the quality of my lessons. If you're standing at the front of the classroom feeling motivated and engaged, the kids engage more. For example, since I've started this study, I've been really focused on teaching values a lot more and I have tried to build relationships with kids a lot more lately. So we have had some really deep conversations about values. Lately we have been talking about stress, which is relevant because I have been feeling really stressed this term and so I talk about my stresses and I try to make myself more realistic to the students so that they can relate to me a bit more and they might learn more from me. I have modelled persistence and resilience a fair bit and I have been a bit more open about my emotions with the kids, especially during values discussions.

There is one student in here who can be very nasty and so I have really tried to help her a lot, especially in the last three weeks. There have been times when she has been really nasty to me and I have really used my self-control and regulation strength to take a step back and think why is she being nasty? I have realised it's not me it's actually other things happening in her life and so I have pulled her aside to talk with her about what's going on and really try to help her. I have been telling her that I sit down after school and I reflect on the good things that have happened. She is starting to reflect a lot more now, and so she goes home and actually talks to her mum about her day. So, my reflecting has helped her to reflect and she has been a bit more positive in the classroom.

I have ensured that I have had more one-on-one time with students to deepen my relationships with them. I had some of the students, who at the start of the year, I found really hard to build relationships with because we were just so different. I used my regulation and self-control strengths because they are very naughty when they are together and they are very boisterous and sometimes they don't listen very well, it's very frustrating, so I had to really control myself. One recess they wanted to come into the classroom and normally I would say, "No, this is my time you need to go outside." But, I told them to come in and I sat down with them and we had some jokes. It has actually helped a lot to build closer relationships with that bunch of boys. I think they have maybe developed more respect for me. It has really helped the classroom to be a bit calmer.

Some of the students have been doing a fair bit more work than they normally would. For example, if I give them a writing task, I have really tried to explain to the students that it's not so much that I want them to learn to write about that particular thing, it's more about teaching them stamina, resilience and persistence, there is all this other hidden curriculum involved. I think that they are starting to realise why the things we do on class are important, that there is a deeper meaning behind a lot of the lessons like it's not just what's in front of them.

I have used a lot of brain breaks to help the students cope with the workload. This really helps with their behaviour too. It's a lot more settled in the classroom in general and I have found the students have done a little bit more work for me as well. I have taken time to share positive moments with them and then they feel more positive as well. I think it's motivated some of the kids a little bit to do more work.

Steph

I reflected on my relationships with all of my students and perhaps I do spend a lot of time chatting to the same students. So, it forced me to think about that there are a few students I don't speak to quite as much as the others, they are always around the exterior. So, I targeted them (during this study) and that has really impacted on them and our relationship. I have been feeling really positive about that and it has come through in improvements in those students work.

One student in particular normally plays with just one friend and doesn't participate in class discussions. She just coasts along. But her friend was absent for about a week and I thought about it and targeted her, encouraging her to find some other people to play with. I just kept checking in with her. In the last couple of weeks she has extended her friendships, she has really increased in confidence and she is taking a lot more risks in her work and asking more questions. Another student who I targeted has low self confidence in his academic ability. He is always avoiding writing and just sits there and says, "I don't know what to write." He came up with a really cool idea for a story and he has been begging me to stay in at recess and lunch times to work on his story and keeps asking me to read it and if he can share it with his classmates. Normally he would never draw any attention to himself.

Through looking for meaning more, I focused on empowering students to be the best versions of themselves and to feel more valued. This impacted my teaching as I used more of their ideas and feedback in class to make the students feel that their voices were being acknowledged. For example, we have been doing poetry and three students said they would like to teach a lesson about rap. Doing that is going to make them feel valued and also have to take responsibility for leadership and organisation. I am someone who has always been a very thorough planner that is my strength. But, sometimes it is my weakness because I really want to get through this stuff that I have planned. When the girls asked to teach the lesson on rap I thought, "Well all of the kids are excited for this," so I just went with it. So, in lessons I might have had a plan and then a student made a suggestion and instead of saying, "No, this is not on the plan," I've just gone with it. The class love it because then it seems like they are in charge and I am listening to their ideas. It is more of a partnership.

I also focused more on increasing student agency in the classroom, giving them the tools to make important decisions and drive their own learning, Doing this definitely allowed them to have more independence and flexibility in the classroom. I've been doing a lot of student goal setting, I enabled students to self-identify areas for improvement and choose activities they would like to complete in order to target these areas. Then, every day they have 10 – 15 minutes to work toward that goal. The students feel that I trust and respect them enough to take charge of their learning and make good choices about how they spend their time. They are definitely a lot more independent and in charge of their learning. Which enables them to feel more valued.

I adapted lessons based on student's interests too because I believe that listening to their ideas and valuing their ideas through changing a lesson to suit them is the most important thing. I wasn't so focused on the content because I knew that it's more important that the students are enjoying their learning, feeling valued and having choice and power in the classroom. As someone who is very outcome orientated and wants to check off lots of things and make sure I have done everything, I instead focused more on meaning. This also changed the students learning outcomes because for example, with the goal setting students had to drive their own learning, and that is more about problem solving, critical thinking, communication and creativity which are more important life skills anyway.

I am really happy with what I have been doing. I felt a bit less stressed and overwhelmed by the curriculum content because I know it is not the most important thing to me. So I could prioritise by giving the students more student taught lessons, asking their opinions and having fun with them, and we still got through a lot of the content.

Jayde

I was little bit more relaxed in class, I have had a lot more music going and lot more songs and dancing. The students still understood the classroom expectations that they had to work. But putting the peaceful music on made me peaceful and it made them peaceful. They were definitely calmer, more engaged and on task. That was mainly because I was being more relaxed and positive about the day. The students were listening to each other,

they were able to explain their learning, and because it is calmer they got more work done, there was not as many interruptions. In the past, I have had moments where I have thought, "they can't even sit still", but actually giving them that time to relax and get ready to learn enabled them to be calmer. Then I realised that they can read quietly and they can listen to each other. They were able to work more independently because they were focused.

They said, "We really like it when it is quiet," and they ask me to put the peaceful music on. Or, they have been asking me for brain breaks so, I let them choose a brain break and we do it together, it is more of a team environment. I have been putting it back onto them, it's not my job to make them be quiet all the time, it's up to them. By them coming up and asking for the peaceful music they are understanding that when it is quiet they are going to get the most work done. They are only Prep / Ones too, so I think it is really good that they are taking control of their own learning.

When I was having a crazy time, using the positive reflections allowed me to take a step back and respond differently. Looking for what went well hugely changed my perspective on the day. A day that I thought went terrible and I was just exhausted, things actually did go well when I look through the day. So, it was good for me to realise that there were things that went well. Normally I would think about 'oh this went wrong and this went wrong and I should have done this and I should have done that', and then you feel quite negative about yourself. Whereas flipping that around and thinking well actually this went well and this was because of me made me feel awesome, really good. I think everyone needs to do it.

When I was stressed, I also used my playfulness character strength to calm down and make the classroom more enjoyable. The kids loved it. The students respond to however you are feeling so, if I am feeling really happy then they are going to be feeling the exact same. It makes a huge difference. Coming to the end of the term you are exhausted and have so much to do, but I was much more energised coming in, it was like a fresh start each day.

Naomi

The practise of daily reflection, specific to my role as a teacher, has enabled me to understand why I'm feeling overwhelmed and to reframe my thinking so that I am able to problem solve in a positive way. I am feeling a lot more confident in this area.

Using these positive psychology strategies helped me to speak more openly with students about their learning journey. I focused more on the process of learning rather than the outcome. I was reflecting on my pedagogy so that came out strongly. I could see it in the students as well. For example, we were doing a project which was about self-directed learning. I put everything else aside as they were engaged in it. The learning and the teaching became about the process of them managing their own learning and felt far more authentic. I focused more on them learning how to learn. For the last couple of weeks I

totally inverted traditional teaching. It felt more authentic, richer, meaningful, connected and more purposeful. There was lots of laughter and lots of joy in the room.

I felt like I was able to have more authentic relationships with the students. I was able to see them more for who they were and so then they brought more of themselves. I definitely felt more positive which meant I had more to give as a teacher. I was able to engage for longer with the students individually. I was able to have more one-on-one time with each of student, so that was really positive. I more consciously tried to give students positive, constructive feedback. That positivity had a ripple effect where the students developed a culture of helping each other. They know that they have had the experience of more one-on-one dedicated time so then they are able to understand better that it's not their turn and to instead help each other.

It felt like students had a lot more ownership of their learning and they were more engaged. It was great, they would come in and I didn't even have to say anything, they would just get to work. They wanted to do more. That made me more engaged too because the boat was already up and rowing, all I had to do was keep tapping it along, it was much easier. I had the flu but, I actually wanted to go in to work because I was enjoying the process. In a way I had more purpose and meaning.

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