Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching practice and student learning

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17 February 2020

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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). Such as: 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).

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.

There has been a considerable rise in the application of positive psychology strategies in professional contexts to improve 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’.

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.

Method

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to 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.

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. The researchers 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 researchers. Teacher informed consent was then
obtained.

Each teacher participant was interviewed three times. The first involved a screening interview to
determine the participants’ suitability for inclusion in this study.

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.

Data were analysed 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.

2. Findings

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.

2.1 Teachers’ experience

- Teachers reported feeling less stressed, more relaxed, more positive and calmer
  in the classroom (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- Teachers reported feeling more engaged with teaching which they perceived
  improved the quality of their lessons (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- Teachers found meaning in their work in the following ways:
o Having a positive impact in students’ lives in ways which extend beyond the classroom. For example, teachers found meaning in tending to their students’ wellbeing, ensuring that students know that kindness is important and helping students to experience personal, emotional and social success (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

o Through providing students with classroom learning opportunities which the teachers perceived as meaningful. For example, teachers found meaning in building students confidence, helping students to feel valued, supporting student agency and teaching students to think deeply (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

o Ongoing improvement in their pedagogical practices. Teachers found meaning in professional discussions with colleagues, contributing ideas in team discussions and working collaboratively with colleagues (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

o Building positive relationships with students and creating experiences where students have fun and enjoy their learning (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

o Providing social support to colleagues (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

o Noticing positive aspects in their workplace (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

Teachers derived meaning in work through multiple sources. Often these sources of meaning would combine to increase teachers’ feelings of meaning. Alternatively, when one source of meaning was temporarily absent, teachers would shift their focus to another source of meaning (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

When teachers in this study were asked to consciously look for meaning in their work they reported that it changed their pedagogical practice. Teachers stated that they focused more on building relationships with their students, spending more one-on-one time with students and ensuring that classroom activities were meaningful, relevant and fun for their students (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

Teachers provided evidence of beginning to craft their work environment to make it more personally meaningful for them (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

There is some incongruence between activities which teachers find meaningful and the actual activities which they perform daily. Teachers commented that positive relationships with students, students enjoying their learning, students feeling valued and students having choice in the classroom were more meaningful than ‘ticking off’ the curriculum requirements (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

A ripple effect occurred whereby the recipients of social support would reciprocate or ‘pay forward’ the social support which they had received (Turner & Thielking, in press).
2.2 Teaching Practice

- 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 (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- Teachers more consciously looked for positive aspects in their students and gave the students more positive feedback about their work (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- 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 (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- 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 (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

- Teachers showed greater recognition of students' needs in the classroom, gave their students more breaks throughout the day and allowed the students more time to complete their work (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

2.3 Student Learning

- Teachers in this study reported that their students became calmer in class, were more engaged with learning and that some students completed more work (Turner & Thielking, 2019a).

Implications

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore teachers' experiences of consciously using positive psychology strategies. Findings reveal that when teachers intentionally use PERMA positive psychology strategies that they report flow on effects to their own wellbeing, teaching practice and to students’ learning.

Although few studies have used the PERMA framework to examine teacher wellbeing from a positive perspective, high levels of teacher wellbeing have been shown to have significant positive effects across a number of domains. Kun and Gadanecz (2019) in their qualitative and quantitative study of 300 Hungarian teachers' workplace happiness, used the PERMA framework to measure teacher wellbeing. They concluded that perceiving work as meaningful, personal workplace relationships and a positive overall workplace climate play important roles in
teachers’ workplace happiness and wellbeing. In addition, they found that workplace happiness correlates positively with all dimensions of PERMA wellbeing, as well as with the psychological capital factors of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Kun and Gadanecz 2019).

This study addresses a gap in current literature and responds to the call for further research around optimising teacher wellbeing. The findings of this study have implications for future research and in informing changes to pedagogical practices which are supportive of teacher wellbeing. Such a strategies may perhaps buffer the impact of the stressful nature of teaching and lead to improved teacher and student outcomes.

References


