

FOSTERING STUDENT WELL-BEING THROUGH POSITIVE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

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Article Info

Keywords: Well-being, positive education, student mental health, positive psychology, remote learning, case study, COVID-19, pandemic

DOI

10.5281/zenodo.10143221

Abstract

Over the past decade, positive education has emerged as a transformative approach, showcasing its efficacy in enhancing student mental health through various interventions. While research has substantiated the positive outcomes associated with this approach, there remains a dearth of literature on the specific processes employed by schools to integrate positive education into their systems. This qualitative case study explores the positive education framework within a school setting, offering insights into its implementation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing the SEARCH framework, encompassing strengths, emotional management, attention and awareness, relationships, coping, and habits and goals, the study delves into how the school navigated on-campus learning pre-COVID-19 and adapted during periods of remote learning amid the global pandemic. Findings underscore the significance of a positive education framework, staff training, well-being initiatives for both students and staff, and the establishment of a common language for positive education as crucial elements fostering a sustained culture of well-being. This case study aims to inspire schools to prioritize student well-being as a preventive measure during normalcy and as a tool for crisis management in challenging times.

Youth mental illness and the impact of COVID-19

Youth mental illness has been a growing global concern for two decades. Epidemiological research shows high rates of youth mental illness across the globe, with rates of mental disorders at around 10% in late childhood-early adolescence rising to between 13.4% and 21.8% in late teens (Anselmi et al., 2010; Costello et al., 2011; Frigerio et al., 2009; Kessler et al., 2005; Polanczyk et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has amplified the already high rates of youth mental illness (Nearchou et al., 2020). A review paper of 51 articles assessing the mental health impact of COVID-19 on 6–21-year-olds across China, the United States of America, Europe, and South America, found that depression and anxiety ranged from 11.78% to 47.85% (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). Global research undertaken by the Organisation for

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Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identified that more than 40% of 15–24-year-olds were at risk of depression and anxiety both early in the pandemic (April through December 2020), as well as later on (January through June 2021).

In Australia, the country of the current case study, a national survey conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020a) found that 47% of young people reported that the pandemic had led to a negative impact on levels of stress and anxiety and 30% reported that it had reduced their levels of hope. Finally, Australian research using psychological modelling to predict the impact of the global pandemic on future suicide rates identified an estimated 25% increase, of which 30% will be among young people. Furthermore, the modelling shows this higher suicide rate is likely to persist for up to five years (Orygen, 2020).

Online learning during COVID-19

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant disruptions for young people has been the rapid shift to remote learning. Indeed, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay warned that “the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption [due to the COVID-19 pandemic] is unparalleled” (cited in Lee, 2020, p. 421). At the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, school closures were occurring in 188 countries, affecting over 90% of enrolled learners across the globe (1.5 billion young people) (UNESCO, 2020b).

Research on the mental health impact of school closures and remote learning triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is scant, and the few available studies have mixed results (Asanov et al., 2021). Some students have benefited from learning at home, making the most of being able to learn at their own pace and appreciating the calm of home compared to a noisy classroom (Hartnell-Young, 2020). However, most students have experienced negative effects, including depression (Asanov et al., 2021), reduced motivation to learn, and struggling to balance responsibilities (Garbe et al., 2020). In Australia, the UNESCO (2020a) report found that over 55% of Australian students stated that remote learning caused feelings of isolation and worry. Tümkaya et al. (2021) investigated the experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in college students and found barriers included insufficient technology, problems with online education and financial issues. However, they also found some supporting factors to online learning including helpful course programs and private space. Allen et al. (2022) found that students learning from home coped with their stress more effectively if they still felt a sense of belonging to school and if they had parents who helped them use their strengths.

Positive education

While the COVID-19 global pandemic has brought the question of how schools can support student mental health to the forefront, this idea is not new and has been explored for several decades (Creemers & Tillemma, 1987; Durlak et al., 2011; Schinke et al., 1987). The current study situates itself within the paradigm of positive education (Seligman et al., 2009), defined as an approach that combines the science of positive psychology with the science of teaching and learning (Slemp et al., 2017). Positive education practices seek to teach skills to students such as cognitive reframing, mindfulness, strengths use, savoring, emotional processing, gratitude expression, goal setting, and kindness (Belen & Yildirim, 2020; Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2017; Owens & Waters, 2020; Shankland & Rosset, 2017).

Reviews of positive education have shown that interventions are typically successful in building student wellbeing (for review papers, see Maynard et al., 2017; Owens & Waters, 2020; Waters, 2011; Waters & Loton, 2019). Indeed, a range of student well-being outcomes have been shown to occur through teaching positive education skills, including reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress as well as increases in life satisfaction, coping, calmness, positive emotions, and self-esteem (Arslan et al., 2022; Owens & Waters, 2020; Shoshani et al., 2016; Waters et al., 2015; Waters & Loton, 2019; Yıldırım & Özaslan, 2022; Yıldırım & Tanrıverdi, 2021).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has made the need for schools to adopt a positive education approach more vital than ever. According to Stark et al. (2020, p. 134), “supporting children’s positive adaptation in the context of the pandemic requires immediate and planful alignment of mental health practices and policies that support children and their caregiver(s) and the multiple systems (e.g., schools) within which they live and develop.” Rashid and McGrath (2020, p. 116) argue that psycho-social practices and strength-based interventions “can play an important role in helping people to cope with residual impacts of COVID-19.”

Aligned with this idea, Hartnell-Young (2020) suggests that character education and compassion provide a fruitful approach to helping students during COVID-19 and, more broadly, to rebuilding and reimagining the education system post-pandemic. Finally, Burke and Arslan (2020, p. 137) argue that COVID-19 could “become a springboard for positive change, especially in schools that draw on positive education research to ... foster students’ social-emotional health.”

The benefits of adopting a positive education approach during the global pandemic have yet to receive much research attention; however, recent studies show that positive approaches are significantly related to student wellbeing. For example, a research study by Waters et al. (2021) with high school students in lockdown identified that the degree to which the students had been taught positive education skills (i.e., use their strengths, manage their emotions, practice mindfulness) was a significant predictor of stress-related growth during lockdown (i.e., the experience of deriving benefits from encountering stressful circumstances). Yuan’s (2021) research showed that an online mindfulness intervention for high school students during remote learning in the pandemic significantly improved student resilience and emotional intelligence.

In addition to the school studies above, research also shows that positive education helps to support the mental health of college and university students. Yang et al. (2020) found that those who used positive thinking strategies, such as positive refocusing (e.g., turning one’s attention towards the positive things in their life), positive reappraisal (e.g., focusing on what one can learn from the situation), and positive planning (e.g., thinking about the future), had less COVID-19-related psychological distress (e.g., tension, fear of infection, insomnia, and moodiness). Bono et al., (2020) found the levels of grit and gratitude in college students’ just prior to the COVID19 pandemic predicted mental health during the initial stages of the global crisis (Bono et al., 2020). Higher levels of grit were related to lower psychological distress and higher gratitude predicted less academic decline. Bono et al. (2020, p. 39) suggested that “grit and gratitude can be promoted to protect college students’ subjective wellbeing and better cope with adversity of the pandemic.”

SEARCH: A positive Education Framework

The studies above support the idea that positive education may play a role in alleviating student distress and maintaining mental health during the COVID-19 public health crisis. According to White (White, 2016; White & Murray, 2015) having a positive education framework is imperative for schools to successfully build well-being into school policy, practice, culture and curriculum.

The current case study adopted the SEARCH positive education framework (Waters, 2017b, 2019, 2021; Waters & Loton, 2019). SEARCH is a framework that comprises six pathways to well-being: strengths, emotional management, attention and awareness, relationships, coping, and habits and goals. The SEARCH framework was built using two key research methods: (1) a large-scale bibliometric review of the field of positive psychology that analyzed 18 years of research from 18,401 studies and used cluster analysis to identify the major domains/pathways to well-being (Rusk & Waters, 2015); (2) an action research project involving ten schools that tested and refined the data-driven positive education framework (Waters, 2017a).

To further establish the usefulness of SEARCH as a valid framework for developing student well-being, Waters and Loton (2019) examined existing evidence from 85 published positive education interventions that mapped

onto the six pathways. The interventions were delivered in 14 different countries worldwide and had a combined student population of 35,888 (ages 4–18 years). Positive education interventions using the SEARCH pathways were found to increase optimism, hope, life satisfaction, motivation, self-confidence, positive affect, engagement, and social well-being, to name a few. Interventions were also found to reduce aspects of student illbeing such as stress, negative affect, anxiety, and depression, as summarized in Table 1.

Recently, Waters, et al. (2021) tested the relationship between the SEARCH pathways and students' coping approaches during remote schooling in the COVID-19 global pandemic. In a sample of high school students, structural equation modelling demonstrated a significant positive relationship between the degree to which students were taught skills based on the SEARCH positive education framework and their use of strengths, positive reframing, and emotional management during remote learning. The more that students reported being taught about SEARCH, the higher they scored on items such as "I have learned to deal better with uncertainty," "I found out that I was stronger than I thought I was," and "I became more accepting of others." Waters et al. (2021) concluded that the SEARCH pathways were a significant factor in helping students cope during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Table 1. Summary of significant research findings in relation to illbeing, wellbeing, and learning outcomes of positive education interventions as mapped along the SEARCH pathways²

Search Pathway	Illbeing Outcomes	Wellbeing Outcomes	Learning Outcomes
Strengths	No significant findings	Higher levels of: Life satisfaction Positive affect Hope Engagement Emotional subjective wellbeing Emotional engagement Self-worth	Increases in: Grade point average Academic expectations Academic motivation Perceptions of academic ability Cognitive engagement Enjoyment of learning
Emotional management	Reductions in: Anxiety Depression Social stress	Greater levels of: Emotional intelligence skills Self-esteem Mental health Interpersonal wellbeing Gratitude	Higher end-of-year grades Increased scholastic confidence Better equipped for school transitions Greater satisfaction with school
Attention and awareness	Lower levels of: State and trait anxiety Stress Depressive symptoms Negative affect	Increases in: Social skills Optimism Positive affect Self-concept Self-acceptance Calmness Social emotional competence General wellbeing	Increases in: Reading scores Vocabulary test Language proficiency Study skills Quantitative thinking skills Literacy and numeracy scores Cognitive functioning test results

² We would like to thank Laura Allison for putting together this table.

Relationships	Reductions “probullying” attitudes	in Higher reports of: Connectedness Perceived social support Presence of special adult Cooperative teamwork Personal/social competency Caring/respect Social skills Honesty and trustworthiness Better peer relations	Increases in school citizenship – extra-role activities
Coping	Decreases in: Anxiety Behavioral problems Social problems Avoidance coping Depression	Increases in: Social skills Assertiveness Self-efficacy Problem solving Help seeking Cognitive hardiness Self-worth Social emotional wellbeing Competence Spiritual growth Hope Social skills Stress management skills Quality relationships	Significant improvements in reading level Learning is perceived to be more interesting, enjoyable and inspiring
Habits and goals	Lowered: Helplessness Behavioral problems Emotional problems Boredom Anxiety	Higher levels of: Self-efficacy Motivation Peer social skills (for girls) Goal orientation Task orientation Social emotional wellbeing Perceived competence	Higher levels of: Regulation Thinking Learning patterns Metacognition School performance Class motivation School team cohesion

Existing research into the SEARCH framework has predominantly used quantitative research designs such as bibliometric analysis, cluster analysis, and structural equation modeling (Rusk & Waters, 2015; Waters, et al., 2021; Waters & Loton, 2019). In addition to using quantitative designs to examine *what* outcomes SEARCH leads to, qualitative research is needed to examine *how* SEARCH is applied in a school setting. In other words, studies that aim to quantify the outcomes of SEARCH require different methods than those that aim to describe the application of SEARCH.

Qualitative research in positive education and study aim

Recently, the call has been made for positive psychology to extend and complement the dominant quantitative research paradigm by also including qualitative studies that allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how well-being is cultivated (Hefferon et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2020). According to Taber (2013), researchers in education should choose the paradigm (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) based upon whether their approach is “nomothetic,” meaning that the aim is to look for general patterns that can be widely applied, or “idiographic,” meaning that the aim is to focus on details that occur within individual cases or small samples to highlight finergrained evidence.

Following the calls from Hefferon et al. (2017) and Lomas et al. (2020) to utilize qualitative methods in positive psychology, and the call from Taber (2013) for educational researchers to ensure a fit between the aim of the study with the chosen paradigm, the current study adopted a qualitative, idiographic approach. More specifically, a single-case study design was used to describe how the SEARCH framework was embedded by one school before the pandemic and during two periods of remote learning. The aim of the current qualitative paper is to provide a descriptive case study of one school's positive education approach before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

The Case Study

Simons (2009, p. 21) defines case study research as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system.” According to Thomas (2010, p. 582), “case study research is one of the principle means by which inquiry is conducted in the social sciences.” The case study method allows for a phenomenon (i.e., embedding a positive education framework) to be investigated in its real-life context and, thus, bring to light details that are not seen in larger-scale quantitative studies (Yin, 2009).

Ravenswood School for Girls was the research site for the current case study. Ravenswood School for Girls is based in Sydney, Australia, and is a Prep³ to Year 12 day and boarding school with 1320 students and over 220 staff. Ravenswood is a Uniting Church school dedicated to excellence in education for girls and the realization of each student's potential, providing a balanced curriculum encompassing spiritual, academic, cultural, physical, and practical areas of learning. It is an International Baccalaureate World School. Founded in 1901, Ravenswood is over 120 years old. The school motto—*Semper ad meliora* (Always towards better things)—affirms the school's philosophy for all school community members. In 2017, Ravenswood became the first school in New South Wales to be trained in the Visible Wellbeing intervention (see Waters, 2015 and Waters, 2021 for a description of this intervention). All staff were trained in the SEARCH framework with ongoing professional development in positive education continuing since that time (Waters et al., 2017).

Sample, Data Collection and Timelines

In early February 2020, four years after the SEARCH training, the first author conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 12 teachers to explore how SEARCH had been embedded into the school. In addition to the focus groups and interviews, the qualitative data also included analysis of school documents and curriculum, scope and sequence documents as well as lesson plans.

One month after the February data collection, COVID-19 hit Australia, and the country was quickly declared to be in a state of emergency. On 25 March, Ravenswood School for Girls moved to a remote learning model in accordance with government regulations. Students and teachers were in lockdown conditions from March 25 to May 20, 2020. On 16 June 2021, Sydney was placed into a second lockdown due to the Delta strain of COVID-19, and Ravenswood subsequently returned to remote learning.

In October 2020, the first researcher collected data about how SEARCH was embedded during remote learning. Six teachers were interviewed via Zoom, and two focus groups that involved 22 students representing each section of the school were also conducted. In October 2021, the first researcher also interviewed the Head of Positive Education, who designed the Year 7–12 positive education curriculum, and a junior school-teacher who designed the K–6 (Kindergarten to Year 6) positive education curriculum. The SEARCH framework informs both

³ Note: At Ravenswood, the Prep year is pre-Kindergarten (3- and 4-year-old students).

curriculums. These interviews provided further information about how SEARCH was used in the two rounds of remote learning.

Staff and student names were not recorded during the data collection. The researcher notes taken during the one-on-one interviews and focus groups were merged into a large data Qualtrics file and responses were randomly mixed in order to further ensure confidentiality and anonymity of responses. The qualitative data was then analyzed for collective themes rather than focusing on ideas from individuals per se, thus, further ensuring anonymity. The focus group, interview, and document data collected across the three time points (February 2020, October 2020, and October 2021) were sorted according to the SEARCH pathways and are presented below. We have ensured that the examples are spread across the two sub-schools: junior school (K–6) and senior school (Years 7–12).

Methodological Approach

Following the call of Rich (2001), Lomas et al. (2020), and Hefferon et al. (2017) for more qualitative analysis used to explore positive psychology topics, a qualitative paradigm was adopted for the current case study. A deductive qualitative method (i.e., coding and theme development directed by existing concepts or ideas: Bingham & Witkowski, 2022) was deemed the most suitable method for this study given the school was working with a pre-existing framework (i.e., SEARCH). Qualitative analysis participants lived experiences are collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allowed the researchers to capture the large and small changes the school was making to embed positive education and also to capture the variations to practices that arose on account of lockdown.

A dedicated stepwise qualitative data analyses process was followed to allow for rigour in the data analysis using Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis process which follows four steps of analysis: data reduction, data display, data verifying and conclusions. The qualitative paradigm has a strong history of developing methods that are repeatable, dependable, and transferable across studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hefferon et al., 2017). Such processes include member checks (in this study, data themes were sent back to the Head of Positive Education and the junior school teacher who designed the K-6 SEARCH curriculum), data triangulating (in this study, data came from three sources: interviews, focus groups and school documents), sample variation (in this study the data was sourced from teachers and students across the junior school and senior school), prolonged and substantial engagement (in this study the school was asked about embedding positive education over a four and half year period) and in different contexts (data was collected prior to COVID-19 and during a lockdown period).

Results

Applications of SEARCH in On-Campus Learning

Whole-school practices utilizing SEARCH

Under the leadership of a new Principal, in 2016, the school formally included well-being as one its strategic goals using SEARCH as the school-wide framework, within an overarching PERMAH⁴ (Seligman, 2018) model. The aim of using the SEARCH framework was to create a cohesive, consistent, evidence-based approach to wellbeing from kindergarten through to Year 12. SEARCH has been embedded holistically in several important ways.

For example, a Visible Well-being Committee was established and tasked with collecting and developing teaching resources based upon the six SEARCH pathways. A well-being portal was developed so that teachers could access the portal, click on a SEARCH pathway and find a range of activities and resources available for them to use in class. All students from Year 5 onwards complete a survey that assesses their well-being levels on each SEARCH

⁴ PERMAH stands for Positive Emotions, Engagement, Meaning, Achievement and Health.

pathway. This data is used to inform the positive education interventions deployed at each year level. Ongoing professional development sessions are run “in-house” by teachers with expertise on a particular pathway. SEARCH is built into the annual performance planning process where staff set a well-being goal based on one of the six pathways.

Chapel is a core part of this school and involves every student and staff member. The chaplain has embedded SEARCH into the sermons, specifically naming pathways and making connections between the gospel and SEARCH pathways such as relationships and strengths (e.g., forgiveness, love, hope, ‘fruit of the spirit’). Additionally, the chaplain uses Christian meditation to encourage mindfulness in students to build up the two pathways of emotional management and attention and awareness. The act of coming together in Chapel supports the relationships pathway, and the rituals align with the habits and goals pathway.

SEARCH has been systematically embedded into boarding life. For example, at the start of the year, the girls engage in a “Positive Introductions” exercise where they take a strengths-based approach (strengths pathway) to cross-age peer mentoring, harnessing the experience of their older boarding peers (relationships pathway), who help new boarders plan for overcoming any challenges ahead (coping pathway), as well as harnessing their collective strengths as a boarding community. This exercise showcases the students’ strengths, builds relationships, and helps with the emotional management and coping aspects of leaving home and starting the academic year. Art portraits of each student are created by the boarders and adorn the walls of the Boarding House to celebrate cultural diversity; the girls cook together and make use of a “shout-out box” that offers commendations to their peers and spotlights strengths such as kindness, courage, compassion, leadership, and zest in one another—all of which target SEARCH pathways such as relationships, emotional management, coping, and habits and goals. In the evening, just before “prep” time, which is their study period, the boarders gather for “golden time,” an hour for socializing and having fun (relationships, emotional management, and habits and goals pathways).

SEARCH has been built into the teaching process for students with differentiated needs, to support each student’s neurodevelopment capacity. The girls discuss the strengths of having a different neurotype (strengths pathway). Teachers and students build up their “attentional muscle” (attention and awareness pathway). A major focus has been placed on emotional regulation in the moments of learning that cause frustration (emotional management pathway). Teachers have worked with students around mastery goals in addition to performance goals (habits and goals pathway).

The use of SEARCH by student leadership teams is also evident, with one student committee (Community Problem-Solving team) conducting fundraising activities to build a mindfulness garden at the school and using all six pathways to design the fundraising campaign. Student leaders also run well-being days for their peers, including a range of activities designed to build aspects of SEARCH, such as relationships, strengths, and emotional management (see Relationships below).

Finally, the school has dedicated positive education classes. The scope and sequence for the positive education curriculum is informed by SEARCH. Each week, the junior school has 80 minutes of positive education class time (1 × 50-minute lesson and 1 × 30-minute lesson). The senior school has a 55-minute, positive education class, every two weeks for Years 7–10. The positive education classes are a blend of applied learning where the students engage in well-being practices together with explicit teaching about positive education theory and models (e.g., teaching about mindsets, teaching about the character strengths model).

Separate SEARCH pathway examples

While the section above describes how the SEARCH framework in its entirety has been woven across the school, this next section will provide specific examples for each separate pathway of SEARCH to show how they have

been embedded at Ravenswood School for Girls. The evidence has been chosen to showcase examples across various year levels and represent how specific pathways have been woven into the junior school (K–6) and senior school (Years 7–12).

Strengths. One way in which the strengths pathway has been built into school life is through the VIA Character Strengths Survey (VIA Institute on Character Strengths, 2021) that is undertaken by all students from Year 5 onwards. The survey results are woven into many aspects of school life, such as student mentor groups in the senior school where students can set goals. Mentor groups meet three times a week for 15 minutes and are horizontal in structure, grouped according to Houses. Strengths are also built into co-curricular activities and school camps. For example, the booklets for school camps have now incorporated exercises where the students reflect on how they use their strengths when participating in camp activities such as hiking and outdoor cooking. The girls are also encouraged to spot strengths in their peers at camp. The students in Year 8 science class complete an “Elemental Super Hero” activity designed by the teacher to fuse learning about their VIA character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2006) with learning about the periodic table in chemistry. Protons, neutrons, and electrons form key parts of the superhero that each girl creates for herself based on her top five-character strengths. To infuse strengths into daily life for Prep students, a “Kindness Tree” has been erected at the front door of the classroom. Every afternoon, the students have circle time, and they are invited to spot the strength of kindness in a peer. The nominated students have their photo taken and the photo is hung on the Kindness Tree. Each day as students enter the class, the teacher has a routine whereby the girls stop and look at who is on the Kindness Tree and think about the kind action that person did. This strategy helps to make strengths concrete and tangible as well as develop the strengths-spotting skills in young children.

Emotional management. Two ways in which Ravenswood School for Girls has brought the pathway of emotional management to life are the “Sunshine Wall” and the Staff Well-being program. The Sunshine Wall, created by the Head of Positive Education and the Head of TAS (Technological and Applied Studies), is positioned in a prominent location on campus to prompt students to be intentional about how they can bring sunshine to the lives of others and reflect on what makes them feel happy. Students use this art installation to write reflections and suggestions for promoting happiness in themselves and others. In addition, the wall teaches students that there are small things they can do to increase their positive emotions. The emotional management pathway plays a key role in supporting staff through teaching and school life pressures. One example of this is Staff Well-being Day, which is dedicated to providing opportunities and resources to staff that they can use to help reduce negative emotions and maximize positive emotions. Additional initiatives undertaken to help staff manage their emotions include a mini-appreciative inquiry in faculty groups on feeling joy at work, mindfulness training offered to all staff, and weekly yoga classes. Each department also receives an “Action for Happiness Calendar” (Action for Happiness, n.d.), which includes daily actions to boost well-being. Happiness Action Packs are also distributed amongst work teams that provide information about interventions to help department teams manage stress and boost happiness. The activities are fashioned around the “10 keys to happier living” model (Action for Happiness, n.d.)—giving, relating, exercising, awareness, trying out, direction, resilience, emotions, acceptance, and meaning. The staff can also use these activities with their students and at home with their families.

Attention and awareness. The two examples of the attention and awareness pathway are from the upper years of senior school (Years 11–12) and the junior school (Year 3). In the junior school, Year 3 students experiment with different types of mindfulness, including guided meditations, breathing techniques, savoring, and mindful walks. With each mindfulness practice, the students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences by tuning into their senses and thinking about how their body felt, what sounds they heard and what sights they saw. Each student is asked to evaluate which mindfulness techniques work best for them. With this knowledge of mindfulness, students

are given the choice to use mindfulness as a well-being strategy during their day—this could be through a short mindfulness break to get their mind ready for learning or it could be in a moment when they are feeling stressed and need to center themselves. In the senior school years (Years 11–12), students are taught how to practice mindfulness techniques as part of their exam study preparation. These techniques can be used at home. On days when examinations are being held, students have initiated group mindfulness sessions in the school yard and examination hall just before sitting the exams.

Relationships. The school began “conversations over coffee” sessions once a semester to foster strong relationships with the families. Parents are invited to the school in the morning to enjoy coffee and catch up with their daughter’s Principal, Year Coordinator, mentor and teachers in a relaxed and informal setting that differs from the more formal parent–teacher evenings. While the latter focuses on the student’s academic progress, the ‘conversations over coffee’ focus on well-being. These sessions also create a sense of connection and community with the other school parents, galvanizing relationships between school and home. Another way the relationships pathway is supported is via student leadership roles. The student leaders are charged with running cross-age mentoring initiatives that foster relationships across all year levels in the school. For example, Year 10 students volunteer to help Year 4 students with reading before school. The senior school leaders also run an annual positive education day that involves strength spotting, well-being-related TED Talks, the Strong Woman Challenge, mask making, Hope Walls, etc. The day aims to create a sense of bonding, belonging, and relationships amongst the students and to normalize well-being conversations. Student leaders also help staff run initiatives that support well-being, such as the United Nations International Day of Happiness (Happiness Day, 2021) and the ‘RU OK?’ Day, run by a suicide prevention charity to inspire students to check in on another person’s state of mental health.

Coping. Two examples for the coping pathway include “Feel Better Bags” and student-generated “Coping Charts.” Over the past few years, Year 5 students and now Year 4 students have been given a Feel Better Bag. The bags are thoughtfully created by the teacher such that each item in the bag represents a coping strategy. For example, bags contain a bouncy ball with a note about how resilience is the process of bouncing back after loss, challenge, failure, or adversity. The bag also contains a small wooden heart that is used to remind the girls to reach out to their friends if they are struggling. Other components of the bag include a jigsaw puzzle piece that reminds the students to “break down” the problems they face into smaller pieces, so the challenges do not seem insurmountable. The Feel Better Bags are kept by each girl in her locker and used when needed. When the year ends, each girl takes her bag home to use on an ongoing basis as a resource for coping. Additionally, during the periods of remote learning, girls took their Feel Better Bags home to help them with coping techniques for lockdown. Year 7 is an important transition year in the Australian education system where students move from junior school (K–6) and into senior school (Years 7–12). As such, it is a time where students must deal with more demands and complexity. At the start of Year 7, the students create their own Coping Chart where they identify techniques that they know can help them manage the pressure. These charts are laminated and placed inside the students’ lockers as a reminder of how to cope when they are feeling distressed. Examples of things students write include breathing exercises, talking to a friend, journaling, baking, and exercising.

Habits and goals. Two examples for the habits and goals pathway include the teaching of Hope Theory and setting goals at the start of the academic year. Throughout every year level in the senior school, all students are taught Hope Theory (Snyder, 2002). Students then engage in a “hope mapping” activity where they think about what they wish to achieve in the future and create a map that outlines the multiple pathways they can take to achieve this and the barriers they may have to overcome. Students choose to represent their hope maps on vision boards, posters, art, or craft work. Photos are taken of the hope maps, and the girls place these photos in a prominent place as an ongoing reminder such as on their laptop screens or the inside door of their locker. Also in the senior school,

each girl is asked to set a personal and an academic goal at the start of the year. Students are taught the GROW coaching model: goal, reality, options, way forward (Alexander, 2006). These goals are monitored in mentor classes throughout the year. For the kindergarten students, the focus is on setting up the physical layout and learning space to develop the habits for effective learning and social dynamics. Routines are also used in kindergarten to promote well-being habits. For example, the kindergarten students reflecting on the Kindness Tree before they enter the class (outlined in the strengths section) is a mental health habit/routine.

Applications of SEARCH during Remote Learning

Masonbrink and Hurley (2020, p. 3) assert that “during school closings ... educators are limited in their ability to offer emotional support, observe warning signs, and intervene for children.” With the removal of face-to-face interactions between teachers and students during remote learning in 2020 and 2021, the school has implemented dedicated efforts to support the well-being needs of their students. As SEARCH was already embedded into school life, the teachers, chaplain, counsellors, and education support staff could pivot and quickly find ways to build the SEARCH pathways via online classes.

Strengths: To encourage students to focus on the pathways of strengths, a “good stories” portal has been set up where students and staff share examples of acts of kindness and humanity during COVID-19 shown in the media, social media, and their own networks. Teachers and mentors hold discussions with the girls about how times of crisis can amplify moral excellence (Algoe & Haidt, 2009).

The principal shared stories of overcoming in a virtual assembly, including interviewing Olympians who had suffered setbacks and triumphed over adversity. The girls apply the technique of strength spotting (Proctor et al., 2011) to these stories and discuss the character strengths they see in others during the lockdown.

Strength deployment (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011) is discussed with the girls, focusing on using their own character strengths to cope with the pandemic and help others. Given that all students from Year 5 onwards had already done the VIA Character Strengths Survey and students below Year 5 were also aware of their own strengths before the COVID-19 pandemic, the move to online conversation about strengths during both rounds of remote learning occurred smoothly.

Emotional Management: Emotional management is a big focus for the school during remote learning, and, in many classes, students are asked to do a quick “emotional temperature check” as they begin their online sessions so that teachers can gain a sense of the emotional state of each student. This teaching practice normalizes the full range of emotions that students are going through during the multiple rounds of lockdown and enhances the class’s emotional literacy. Students who identify that they are struggling in the check-in are contacted later by the teacher or year-level coordinator. If the concern continues, or is acute, the school psychologist contacts the students.

Students are encouraged to focus on gratitude and think about what they can be thankful for during the COVID related challenges they face. In these conversations, the girls mention family, friends, technology, pets, and nature as key sources of gratitude. Focusing on gratitude is an emotional management strategy that has proven useful in lockdown (Bono et al., 2020). Two students pioneered an on-line affirmations initiative, surveying the school community about people they were grateful for and then sharing this gratitude with teachers and students who have been commended.

Attention and Awareness: The SEARCH attention and awareness pathway has had considerable focus. The school offers on-demand virtual mindfulness group sessions called “Claim your Calm” that students and staff can use. The gratitude practices and emotional check-in routines outlined above are also ways for teachers to guide the girls on where they are placing their attention. In addition, delivering mindfulness activities online at the start and end of a class has been a popular way to boost the girls’ well-being.

Relationships: Maintaining relationships is critical during remote learning (Allen et al., 2022) and the school devotes time to keeping the students connected through virtual extracurricular activities such as inviting the girls to join groups that attend virtual gallery visits, virtual zoo tours, and virtual aquarium expeditions. These groups have been set up after school hours so that the girls can share a social experience and chat online in an informal way. The students are also encouraged to write letters to alumni, particularly elderly alumni, to share coping tips and create a sense of intergenerational school community during the global crisis.

Coping: All the activities mentioned so far were designed around another SEARCH pathway but also overlap to support the coping pathway. In addition to this, year level walking meetings or outdoor activities are encouraged (rather than on a computer/laptop). This way, both teachers and students can get outside and enjoy communicating as they walk along—boosting endorphins (Murphy et al., 2002). Students are encouraged to monitor their energy levels. Students have been shown the science behind power naps and how this helps the brain reset and build resilience.

Habits and Goals: For the habits and goals pathway, the school makes a concerted effort to help each student set up a workstation at home—to lay out all the equipment they need, to place a schedule on the wall over the desk, to keep track of the time, to delineate school time and home time—all of which is done to form new and effective study habits while learning from home.

In addition, to ease the transition back to campus between lockdowns, students have been taught about habit formation and, more specifically, the habit cycle (cue–habit–reward; Wood & Rünger, 2016). Girls used the habit cycle to map out three new habits that they needed to transition successfully back to campus (e.g., setting the alarm to get up earlier, packing school bag the night before, setting one’s uniform out the night before). Furthermore, as outlined above, the girls are encouraged to form good mental health habits such as strength spotting, strengths deployment, mindfulness, and gratitude, together with good physical health habits such as taking power naps and walking meetings.

Discussion

In the past two decades, there has been a growing emphasis on schools addressing student mental health by adopting prevention-oriented approaches that teach well-being skills to students to reduce, or prevent, the likelihood of mental illness (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015; World Health Organization [WHO] 2013; WHO & UNESCO, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has motivated schools to extend the prevention-oriented approach to also include crisis management skills that help students maintain their well-being in the midst of global adversity (Arslan & Burke, 2021; Waters et al., 2021). The current case study was conducted in a unique time period with data collected just before the advent of the COVID-19 crisis and then again at two time points of remote learning during the pandemic. As a result, the case study can describe how the SEARCH framework has been used during on-campus learning as a prevention-oriented approach and how it has been adapted in a time of crisis to support student wellbeing during remote learning.

Following the calls for greater use of qualitative research in positive psychology (Hefferon et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2020), and given our aim to describe how positive education is embedded into school life, the current study adopted a case study design. According to Yin (2009), case study research has the advantage of providing detailed investigations into a real-life context and offering rich descriptions of phenomena. In addition, the idiographic approach allowed us to “zoom in” and take a close look at the range of processes used to support the rollout of positive education within one school.

This paper has described multiple whole-school approaches where SEARCH reaches students of all age groups (e.g., through Chapel, learning enrichment, boarding) and reaches all staff (e.g., staff professional development,

Staff Well-being Day) as well as examples of how individual SEARCH pathways have been entrenched into the curriculum, co-curricular activities, school transitions, school camp, and student leadership roles, to name a few. The examples provided for different pathways include initiatives that reach all students (e.g., student well-being days run by student leaders) and initiatives run in distinct year levels. In the current paper, examples were provided for students in Kindergarten, Years 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12 to present a cross-section across the school.

What is evident from this case study is that SEARCH has become a core well-being framework woven into daily life at Ravenswood School for Girls. Teachers who were interviewed in the first round of data collection spoke about the clarity and direction that came from having a whole-school positive education framework: “At my former school, we took a scatter gun approach to positive education. We were doing lots of good things, but it was piece-meal. The SEARCH framework has allowed us to know that all the girls are getting consistent messages, no matter what year level.” Teachers also spoke about the benefits of having a common language for positive education: “You can hear the girls reflect the SEARCH language with each other, they know when to use their strengths or when it is they need to pause and do some mindful breathing. Because we all speak the same language, we can talk to them about their well-being in ways they understand.” Other teachers observed that SEARCH had become more than a positive education framework, with one teacher referring to it as “a way of life” and another reflecting that “it’s like an iceberg; we can see it on the surface and everyone knows it is our formal framework, but it runs deeper than that. We have reached a point where SEARCH is part of the Ravo⁵DNA, without us having to think about it.”

During the two periods of lockdown, teachers and students also offered observations about the importance of applying SEARCH. A key theme arising from the interviews and focus groups was the fact that well-being was prioritized during the lockdown. Students were encouraged to use their strengths, manage their emotions, engage in mindfulness, draw upon a range of coping strategies and set effective study habits from home. One student commented that “the discussions we had about strengths helped us see that we all had something to contribute and each of us have unique strengths that could make a difference to others during lockdown, like one of my friends who used her humor to cheer us up and how I used the strength of perspective to help my friends not panic.” Teachers talked about the “emotional check-ins” at the start of online classes and how these helped to normalize anxiety and other negative emotions such as fear, loss, loneliness, and frustration during remote learning. “The girls could see that they weren’t the only one who was struggling, and we were able to message to them that ‘it’s OK to not be OK’.” Another reflected that her students “got to put words to this amorphous weight of their feelings during lockdown.”

All of the teachers discussed the benefit of having a pre-established positive education framework when it came to making the transition to remote learning and keeping well-being at the forefront: “We were in the midst of dealing with this extreme crisis, everything being new, sudden change, new technologies, setting up work stations at home, adapting our teaching and core curriculum to deliver online—with zero time to prepare—and yet we were able to initiate well-being online without missing a beat. I think this comes from living and breathing SEARCH for five years at our school.” Another commented: “We were all exhausted when the second lockdown hit us, but we knew what to target. We knew to set up mindfulness times, to get the girls connected through online groups, to ask the girls to look inside at their emotions, acknowledge the stress but also practice gratitude in a time where you might otherwise forget about the good stuff.”

⁵ Ravo is the shorthand term that teachers and students use when discussing Ravenswood School for Girls.

The priority on well-being shown by this school throughout the two periods of remote learning is important given the existing data showing that young people's mental health around the world has been negatively impacted during COVID-19 (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Nearchou et al., 2020). The focus on positive approaches may have been particularly important at this time as argued by Waters et al. (2021) who found evidence that positive psychology approaches buffer distress, boost well-being, and build capacities that promote post-traumatic growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adding to this, research in educational settings during the coronavirus crisis has shown that gratitude, grit, strengths, emotional processing, positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, mindfulness, and positive planning have been linked to lower psychological distress as well as higher resilience and growth in students (Bono et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020). With the World Health Organization stating that student well-being is a top priority during the COVID-19 crisis (WHO, 2020), positive education offers a beneficial approach, and the current case study provides valuable examples of how schools can execute this call by the WHO.

Implications

The findings from this case study have important practical and methodological implications. With regard to practical implications, the results showed that utilizing a positive education framework was key in assisting the school to develop a cohesive and systematic approach. According to White (2016) many schools struggle to embed and sustain positive education because they have a fragmented and disjointed positive education program. White (2016) and White and Murray (2015) argue that having a positive education framework is imperative for schools in order to create a cohesive scope and sequence that is sustained over time. In the current study, the SEARCH framework allowed the school to build and sustain a K-12 positive education approach over a five-year time period. The value of having a positive education framework was also evident when the school had to immediately move to lockdown conditions. The teachers and the students commented at how seamlessly the school was at adapting well-being lessons to the online format using the SEARCH framework.

The second practical implication is the benefit of all-staff training in positive education. In the current case study, it can be seen that training all school employees at Ravenswood School for Girls allowed positive education to be embedded systematically across many areas of the school so that the well-being practices were reinforced for students in the classroom, the school yard, Chapel, student leadership roles, the Boarding House and so on. Several other researchers advocate for the whole-school training method and show how training the full faculty allows for positive education to extend beyond the classroom (Norrish et al., 2013) by providing a common understanding and a shared language of positive education (Waters & Higgins, 2021). Training all the staff in positive education allows for a systems approach that serves to reinforce and sustain well-being over time (Allison et al., 2021).

In addition to the practical implications, the paper also has methodological implications. The impetus for the current study arose from the fact that positive education research has prioritized studies on the *outcomes* of positive education with little examination of the *processes* for how schools go about embedding positive education (Waters & Loton, 2021). Research into processes lends itself to qualitative and mixed-methods research that uncover participants direct experiences (Taber, 2013). The current study used interviews, focus groups and school documents as the sources of data, however several other qualitative data collection methods are proving to be valuable in understanding and improving student and teacher well-being. For example, Waters et al. (2021) used visual narrative analysis to examine students drawing to gain insight into their understanding of well-being. Williams et al. (2016) used semi-projective techniques with written prompts to examine implicit assumptions of teacher happiness. Tanhan and Strack (2020) and Tanhan et al. (2020) used online photovoice (OPV) to research well-being in USA-based Muslim college students and also to study well-being in Turkish college students during

COVID-19. OPV gives opportunities to the students to express their own experience with as little manipulation as possible (Tanhan & Strack, 2020). OPV has the advantage of not only being useful for researchers but can also be used by teachers themselves as a tool to gain feedback from their students about the well-being activities being run at school.

Limitations

Adopting a qualitative paradigm for the current research paper allowed a detailed description of how positive education can be infused into school life. We selected a single-case study design to comprehensively examine the processes used to show how the SEARCH framework was operationalized over time (including how SEARCH was utilized during two periods of a rapid shift to remote learning). The gains provided by a single case study in terms of rich, deep evidence are, however, traded off for a lack in the breadth of data, which is a limitation of the current research. Another limitation comes from the fact that the current study was conducted in an independent, all-girls school in Australia and may not be generalizable to the way that the SEARCH framework would be applied in different countries, in co-educational schools, and in schools that belong to different systems (e.g., public/government). That said, while it is likely that the particular practices adopted by the current research site may differ from other schools, it is feasible that some of the more general processes for embedding SEARCH could all be generalized to other schools. Additionally, it must be made clear that “generalizability” is not the core goal to which qualitative research holds itself accountable (Given, 2008). Unlike the nomothetic approach which aims to look for general patterns that can be widely applied, the idiographic approach focuses on individual cases or small samples to highlight detailed descriptions about participant experiences (i.e., depth over breadth) (Taber, 2013). The current paper provides rich and detailed data about one school’s experiences.

Conclusion

The growing science in positive education has given researchers and educators confidence about the outcomes that can be attained through a positive education approach (Waters & Owen, 2020); however, scientific attention given to the processes schools employ to embed positive education remains sparse. The aim of the current qualitative paper is to provide a descriptive case study of one school’s positive education approach before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. By describing the ways in which SEARCH was built into school life, we hope to inform and inspire other schools with ideas for the processes needed to build a culture of well-being. Results from the current study suggests that having a positive education framework, training all staff, having both student and staff well-being initiatives and cultivating a common language for positive education are core processes that create a sustained and adaptive culture of wellbeing. Finally, as the first qualitative publication to examine the role of applying a positive education framework during the COVID-19 pandemic, we join a small number of other positive education studies (all of which are quantitative to date) that point to the important role of positive education in times of crisis.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following people who contributed to this paper: Kate Barbat, Fiona Cooney, Lucy Cumming, Sarah Guy, Jon Humphries, Sally Wynne and Lisa Bass.

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Received: December 22, 2021

Accepted: March 9, 2022

Published Online: April 26, 2022

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