

A pilot study evaluating strengths-based coaching for primary school students: Enhancing engagement and hope

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Objective: This pilot study examines the impact of an evidence-based strengths coaching programme on male primary school students' levels of engagement and hope.

Design: In a within-subject design study, 38 Year Five male students (mean age 10.7 years) participated in a strengths-based coaching programme as part of their Personal Development/Health programme at an independent, private primary school in Sydney, Australia.

Method: Participants were randomly allocated to groups of four or five with each group receiving eight coaching sessions over two school terms. The Youth Values in Action survey was used to highlight participant's character strengths, and the participants were coached in identifying personally meaningful goals, and in being persistent in their goal-striving, as well as finding novel ways to use their signature strengths. They also completed a 'Letter from the future' that involved writing about themselves at their best.

Results: The strengths-based coaching pilot programme was associated with significant increases in the students' self-reported levels of engagement and hope.

Conclusions: Strengths-based coaching programmes may be considered as potential mental health prevention and promotion intervention in a primary school setting to increase students' wellbeing and may also form an important part of an overall Positive Education Programme.

Keywords: Evidence-based coaching; strengths-coaching; hope; positive psychology.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY can be understood as being a strengths-based psychology, founded on the humanistic assumption that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives (Seligman, 2002). Positive psychology has also been defined as the study of optimal functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005). There are an increasing number of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) that are being developed for the purposes of mental health prevention and promotion, with generally promising outcomes (for a recent meta-analysis, see Sin & Lyubormirsky, 2009).

Positive psychology's complementary partner, Coaching psychology, can be understood as being an 'applied positive psychology' – a collaborative, solution-focused, systematic methodology designed to enhance wellbeing, facilitate goal attainment and foster purposeful, positive change. There are several research studies that

provide support for coaching as a means of increasing aspects of wellbeing including hope and hardiness (see, for example, Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Green, Oades & Grant, 2006; Spence & Grant, 2005) and there is a growing evidence-base for solution-focused, cognitive behavioural approaches to coaching in a wide range of different settings (Grant et al., 2010).

Coaching methodologies can provide the opportunity for the application of positive psychology research in areas such as the identification and use of personal character strengths (see, for example, Linley et al., 2010). Whilst the role of positive psychology in coaching has been discussed previously in the literature, further research in regard to its specific applications is much needed (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Kaufmann, 2006; Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007).

Positive psychology in education

It might well be said there have been applications of positive psychology in education for years. This includes programmes such as those aimed at enhancing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which themselves largely evolved from research on prevention and resilience (see Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994). However, there has been a significant increase in research and interest over the last five years occurring specifically within the field of positive psychology.

In 2009, Professor Martin Seligman, formalised the field of 'Positive Education' in part emerging from his own work on depression prevention in schools and the pioneering work at Geelong Grammar in Victoria, Australia. In 2008, Seligman and a team of scholars from the University of Pennsylvania worked with one of Australia's most elite private schools, Geelong Grammar, to implement a programme of 'teaching positive education', 'embedding positive education' and 'living positive education'. This programme sought to infuse positive psychology throughout the entire school, and with encouraging outcomes (Seligman et al., 2009). Whilst the programmes and approach were based on scientifically informed programmes and practices, unfortunately it appears that this large-scale programme was not itself evaluated using scientifically validated measures; to the best of the present authors' knowledge no outcome studies of the Geelong Grammar programme have been reported in the peer-reviewed press.

There has, however, been significant research conducted on the Penn Resiliency Programme (PRP), which formed part of the Geelong Positive Education Programme. The PRP is a school-based intervention designed to teach students how to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter (Horowitz & Garber, 2006). Results from studies of over 2000 individuals in the US have shown

improvements in student wellbeing from participation in the programme (Seligman et al., 2009). The US Department of Education also recently spent \$2.8 million to implement a randomised controlled evaluation of the Strath Haven Positive Psychology for Youth (PPY) project. The programme, targeting adolescents in high school, was shown to increase students' reports of enjoyment and engagement in school (Seligman et al., 2009).

In the UK, Jenny Fox-Eades, is considered to be a pioneer in strengths-based approaches in education, and is currently conducting multiple longitudinal research studies, examining the impact of the 'Strengths Gym' programme on adolescent wellbeing, including life satisfaction, positive affect, and self-esteem. The 'Strengths Gym' programme is designed to help individuals identify and use their strengths through a cycle of festivals and storytelling. Positive psychology is woven into the curriculum by using traditional teaching methods of oral storytelling and community celebrations (Eades, 2005).

In Australia, the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney hosted the 'First Positive Psychology in Education Symposium' in 2009. This provided a forum for a range of applied positive psychology interventions being conducted in both private and public schools in Australia. One of the programmes presented included 'BOUNCE BACK', a resilience programme currently taught in several schools across Australia which integrates positive psychology principles within the literacy curriculum (Noble & McGrath, 2008).

Evidence is building for such approaches. For example, a study of solution-focused cognitive behavioural life coaching for Senior High School students conducted by Green, Grant and Rynsaardt (2007) showed significant increases in female senior high school students' levels of cognitive hardiness (a measure of resilience) and hope. This line of research has since been extended to developmental coaching

for teachers, again providing evidence for the use of coaching in educational settings to enhance hope, hardiness and workplace-wellbeing (Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010). The use of solution-focused cognitive-behavioural coaching in educational settings appears to be an area worthy of further study, given preliminary evidence that indicates it may have the potential to build resilience and wellbeing in young people within educational settings.

Applied positive psychology in education as mental health promotion

Mental health problems are reportedly on the increase among young people, possibly reflecting greater awareness of disorders and also resulting from the frequency and intensity of stressors on young people in the 21st century (Broderick & Metz, 2009). Today's youth are exposed to a multitude of threats to their personal wellbeing (McLoughlin & Kubick, 2004). In a national survey investigating a range of mental health issues in a stratified, random sample of 4500 Australian youths (aged 4 to 17), 14.0 per cent of those surveyed were found to have mental health problems (Sawyer et al., 2000). Among adolescents, there are also high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenges (Larson, 2000). Efforts to reduce mental health issues and problem behaviours may need to begin in childhood, with special attention to a window of escalating risk in the transition to adolescence (Masten et al., 2008).

Knowledge and skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, and engagement can be taught. According to Piaget (1977) pre-adolescent children are entering the formal operations phase of cognitive development and have the cognitive maturity necessary to understand and apply the skills taught. The present study sought to expand on current findings by focusing on primary school students and examining the efficacy of a strengths-based coaching programme within this particular age group.

The mission of schools remains one of preparing students academically for the world of higher education, work, and good citizenship. However, increasingly, schools are also responsible for managing students' social and emotional wellbeing (Broderick & Metz, 2009).

This current study examined a programme designed to be easily integrated within the traditional school curriculum, whilst at the same time addressing a number of the personal development and health outcomes identified on the New South Wales Board of Studies syllabus document (NSW Board of Studies, 2007). Embedding the teaching of strengths identification, goal setting, and metacognitive skills within the curriculum provides naturalistic opportunities for students to develop important social-emotional competencies (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Meaningful participation in these kinds of activities also encourages students to take control and responsibility of their own lives (Oliver et al., 2006).

Aims of the study

The study sought to investigate the impact of an evidence-based strengths coaching pilot programme in a primary educational setting. It was anticipated that participation in the strengths-based coaching programme would be associated with increases in male primary school student's levels of engagement and hope.

Engagement

The discipline of positive psychology defines engagement as one of three important realms of happiness; the engaged life, the meaningful life and the pleasant life (Seligman et al., 2009). The state of 'flow', a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1993), is a major part of living the 'engaged life'. It consists of a loss of self-consciousness and deep engagement in the task at hand, and can occur when people deploy their highest strengths to meet the challenges that come their way. There is a growing evidence to support the concept of engagement as a

state which is valuable in its own right as well as bringing about higher levels of life satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2009).

Strengths

A 'strength' can be defined as a natural capacity for behaving, thinking and feeling in a way that promotes successful goal achievement (Linley & Harrington, 2006). 'Signature strengths' refer to the top five character strengths and virtues of a particular individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Signature strengths can convey a sense of ownership and authenticity, and individuals often experience a powerful intrinsic motivation to put them into practice (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Strength-based coaching helps people to identify their strengths and then better direct their talents and abilities into meaningful and engaging behaviours (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Playing to an individual's strengths has the potential to enhance wellbeing because people are then able to do what they naturally do best, thus increasing the chances of meeting their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and confidence (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Finding original ways to use strengths also reflects the importance of ongoing personal effort in producing a flourishing life (Park & Peterson, 2006).

Hope

Hope is defined as '*a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful agency and pathways*' (Snyder, 2000; p.287). The construct of hope is central to successful goal attainment. In order to pursue goals people need (a) a number of pathways or alternative routes to achieve their goals because otherwise it is likely that they will give up if the first pathway fails. They also need (b) agency or confidence, in their capacity and ability to reach their goals, so once again if they face setbacks they will persevere in the belief that they can be successful (Snyder, Michael & Cheavens, 1999).

Hope as a cross-situational construct has been shown to correlate positively with self-

efficacy, perceived problem-solving capabilities, perceptions of control, optimism, positive affectivity, and positive outcome expectations (Snyder et al., 1999). In educational settings, higher levels of hope have also correlated positively with perceived scholastic competence (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999) and greater academic satisfaction (Chang, 1998). Higher levels of hope also predict better academic performance whilst controlling for student intelligence (Snyder et al., 2003).

Consistent with hope theory, an evidence-based approach to coaching can provide the support necessary for individuals to pursue goals, to see oneself as able to generate alternative routes to goals and as having the perceived capacity to utilise these routes to reach the desired goal/s (Green et al., 2006). Hope can be engendered in young people by engaging them in solution-focused conversations and activities. For example, children can be asked to set small goals, guided over the hurdles they encounter, and encouraged to persevere until they have succeeded (Snyder, 2000). These are key features of the present study.

Method

Participants

Thirty-eight males aged between 10 and 11 years (mean age 10.7 years) from an independent, private primary school in Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Procedure

The strengths-coaching programme formed part of the school's Personal Development and Health curriculum. Prior to commencing the programme participants were screened by the school psychologist using the Beck Youth Inventory (Beck et al., 2005). As a result of completing the Beck Youth Inventory (Beck et al., 2005) seven individuals were identified as having higher than expected scores on the Beck Youth Inventory (Beck et al., 2005) and were referred to the school psychologist.

Before commencing the programme, a note was also sent home to parents outlining

full details of the programme. In line with the International Coach Federation (ICF) Code of Ethics (ICF, 2005), the information clarified that the programme did not involve any counselling or therapy for mental illness.

Participants completed self-report measures at Time 1 (pre-intervention) and Time 2 (post-intervention) to assess levels of engagement and hope. Participants also completed the Values in Action Strengths Inventory for Youth (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and were provided with a copy of their results to share with their family. The participants were then randomly assigned to small groups of four or five individuals, with whom they would complete eight group coaching sessions.

The teacher-coach was a qualified primary teacher who, in addition to her teacher training and teaching qualifications had also completed coach-specific training, holding a Masters degree in Coaching Psychology from Sydney University and had past experience in coaching both child and adult populations.

The coaching programme

The coaching programme consisted of eight group face-to-face coaching sessions with the teacher-coach. Each coaching session was 45 minutes in length and was conducted on a fortnightly basis over a period of two school terms (equating to approximately six months). Because this programme was run in a school setting in which directive or instructional modalities are commonplace, great care was taken to differentiate this coaching programme from general directive or teaching processes by basing this programme on a solution-focused cognitive-behavioural framework that had been demonstrated as being effective in two previous randomised, controlled studies on evidence-based life coaching (for details see Green, Oades & Grant, 2006; Spence & Grant, 2005).

There were three key parts to the programme. Part One of the programme focused on raising the participant's self-

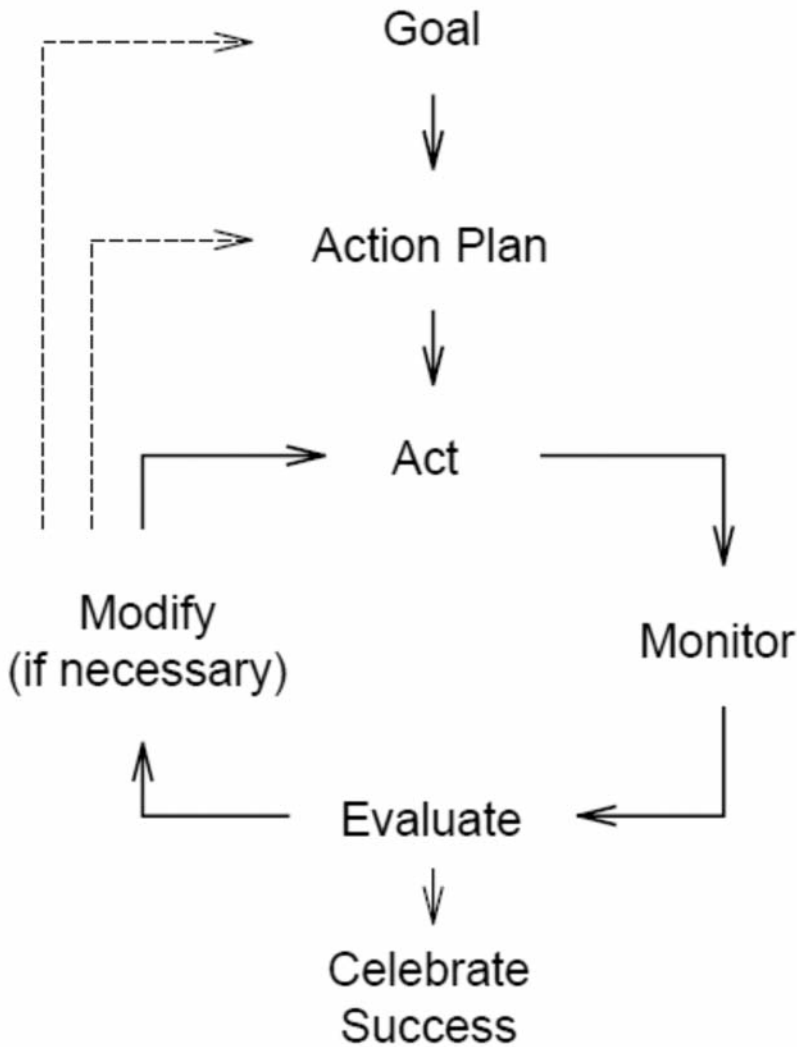
awareness, including the identification of personal character strengths. Using the Youth Values in Action survey results, the participants were provided with a useful vocabulary to both identify and talk about their own character strengths. The participants created 'strength shields' representing how they were already using their top five 'signature strengths'. These shields were openly displayed in the classroom and referred to on a regular basis.

In Part Two of the programme, the participants were coached to identify personal resources and utilise these in working toward individual goals. Utilising the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attractive, Realistic and Timeframed) goal-setting criteria (for rationale for SMART, see Locke & Latham, 2002) the participants were coached in identifying personally meaningful goals and to be persistent in their goal-striving. The participants applied this knowledge and skills within an ongoing assignment focused on finding novel ways to use one of their signature strengths.

Part Three of the programme was focused on coaching the participants in working through the self-regulation cycle (see Figure 1) of setting goals, developing action plans, monitoring and evaluating progress. Participants were individually coached to identify personal resources that could be utilised in moving towards their goals, and to develop self-generated solutions and specific action steps, and in this way systematically working through the self-regulation cycle.

In addition to the individual coaching process detailed above, group processes were utilised in that participants were also given the opportunity to share their results with the group and jointly reflect on what they learnt. Finally, the students completed a 'Letter from the future' that involved writing about themselves at their very best, focusing on how their needs and values were being met, and finding solutions to allow for all the things they would like to have happen.

Figure 1: A generic cycle of self-regulation.



Measures

The Beck Youth Inventory (Beck et al., 2005) was used as a measure of psychopathology. It assesses current levels of Anxiety, Depression and Anger. It also gives an overall indication of a young person's self-concept. The inventory is designed to assess according to the diagnostic criteria listed in the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association), however, it only assesses current status and does not offer a diagnosis (Beck et al., 2005). It views

the differences between normal and clinical populations as differences of degree, hence is a useful tool for the present study to screen participants for mental health issues that require referral.

To identify character strengths, the participants completed the Values in Action Strengths Inventory for Youth Survey (Park & Peterson, 2006). The VIA measure is a self-report survey allowing the comparison of character strengths across individuals and

also identifies an individual's 'signature strengths' relative to his or her other strengths (Park & Peterson, 2008). The VIA Youth is designed for people aged 10 to 17 (Park & Peterson, 2006). It reflects each of the character strengths in the VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and it is adapted specifically for use with youth as the items are phrased in simple language and refer to settings and situations familiar to young people (Park & Peterson, 2006). The survey is available online at no cost from www.viacharacter.org (Peterson & Seligman, 2007). It contains 198 multiple choice items and takes about 45 minutes on average to complete. The survey has good reliability (all item alphas are greater than .70) and good reported construct validity (Park & Peterson, 2008).

To measure the results of the programme, participants completed a self-report questionnaire at Time 1 and Time 2. The questionnaire was modified from Snyder's Children's Hope Scale (Snyder, 2000), and the California Healthy Kids Survey (Bernard, 2008). The questionnaire utilised a seven-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (7) to Strongly Disagree (1). The Children's Hope Scale is a self-report measure that is based on the premise that children are goal-directed and that their goal directed thoughts can be understood according to agency and pathways. The scale is validated for use with children aged 7 to 16 years and demonstrates both internal and temporal reliability, convergent and discriminant validity (for details, see Snyder, 2000). The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) is sponsored by the California Department of Education as a comprehensive data collection service on youth mental health and resilience (Bernard, 2008). Assisting in its development was an advisory committee consisting of researchers, education practitioners from schools across the state, and representatives from federal and state agencies involved in assessing youth health-related behaviours (Bernard, 2008).

At the completion of the strength coaching programme, an informal questionnaire was also used to elicit the student's feedback and opinions about their involvement.

Results

Quantitative findings

It was hypothesised that participation in the coaching programme would be associated with increased engagement and hope. The results for all measures are shown in Table 1.

Paired *t*-tests found significant increases in students' self-reported measures of hope, $t(37)=3.39$, $p<0.01$ and significant increases in students' self-reported measures of engagement, $t(37)=3.30$, $p<0.001$. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d*. For hope an effect size of $d=2.70$ was observed. This is considered to be a large effect size (Cohen, 1992). For engagement a medium effect size of $d=.98$ was observed (Cohen, 1992).

Values in Action Strengths Inventory for Youth results: Class tally

We recorded the top strengths of the class and the number of students who rated each strength as being their highest strength: These strengths, in order of frequency were; Vitality (nine students); Creativity (eight students); Love (five students); Teamwork (three students); Love of learning (three students); Perseverance (three students); Humour (two students); Curiosity (one student); Leadership (one student); Bravery (one student); Gratitude (one student); and Kindness (one student).

Qualitative findings

To augment the quantitative data reported above, and to further assess the impact of this pilot study qualitative teacher observations are now reported. These personal observations are made by the teacher-coach who conducted the strengths-based coaching programme.

Table 1: Results for Measures of Engagement and Hope.

N=38	Time 1		Time 2		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Hope	23.79	3.16	24.87	2.76	3.38	<.001	2.70
Engagement	23.26	4.26	24.98	2.51	3.29	<.01	.98

Note: *p* values are two-tailed; Cohen's *d* is given as a measure of effect size.

Teacher-coach personal observations

‘Overall, I felt that the programme was a successful way for a teacher to further develop positive relationships with students. I found that understanding the students’ top strengths was very helpful in getting to know the students better, and also in understanding what engages and motivates them. Learning about character strengths also provided students with a useful dialogue to recognise strengths not only in themselves, but in others too. For example, when a new boy joined the school, the students welcomed him into the school community and were quick to point out his strengths, such as bravery and social intelligence, during his first weeks. The students were also very keen to share and discuss their results with their families. The positive feedback from the parents was overwhelming and many of them also did the survey to find out their own character strengths.’

Recording the top strengths of the class group provided an interesting insight in to the classroom dynamics. Vitality was the top strength of the class. Viewing this as a strength for a class of Year 6 boys, rather than a problem, was both humorous and refreshing.

I found that the students were highly engaged during the goal-setting sessions. They were enthusiastic and excited about their projects and would often stop me in the playground to give updates on their progress. Sharing their successes with their peers was invaluable as they were provided with both positive feedback and recognition. For some students in particular, this was a very special experience, made very clear by their big, beaming grins. The students were also able to transfer their goal-setting skills to their learning in the classroom. Overall, the impact of the programme has been profound, with a far more positive, encouraging and supportive classroom climate.’

Examples of student goals

Participants set personal goals as part of the coaching programme. These goals were linked with their specific signature strengths. Examples are given below:

Love of learning Signature Strength: Goal was to: *‘read 15 pages of a non-fiction book on cars every night over the next two weeks. Have Mum sign off when I do it. Show (my teacher) Mum’s note in our next session and tell her one fact that I learnt about cars.’*

Leadership Signature Strength: Goal was to: *‘Organise a jelly bean competition with two friends to raise money for the school. Get approval from the principal and my parents. Set up the store outside the canteen every lunch time. Aim to raise at least \$100. Bring the money raised to our next session.’*

Kindness Signature Strength: Goal was to: *‘Help Mum out at home by making both mine and my little brother’s beds every morning before school. Ask Dad to sign off that I do it, but don’t tell Mum I am doing it for an assignment. Show (my teacher) the note in our next session.’*

Discussion

The present study was a small-scale pilot study designed to be a preliminary investigation of the effect of a strengths-based coaching programme within a school setting. The strengths-based coaching pilot programme was associated with significant increases in the students’ self-reported levels of engagement and hope. Although the resorts are promising, it is important not to over-generalise from these findings. Nevertheless, as we argue below such strengths-

based coaching programmes may well have potential as a mental health prevention and promotion intervention in a primary school setting to increase students' wellbeing and additionally be utilised as an important part of an overall Positive Education Programme.

Schools already are a major provider of mental health services (Seligman et al., 2009). However, the predominant approach is reactive rather than proactive in that educational psychology services are available only after students demonstrate difficulties (Noble & McGrath, 2008). A significant proportion of available educational resources is directed toward attempts to remediate young people's problems. This is not surprising, given extra support is provided on the basis of documentation of an individual's assessed problem (Noble & McGrath, 2008). The challenge is to shift the direction and mindset of both educational systems and school personnel from a deficit model to a preventative wellbeing model (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Problem-focused approaches can be useful in reducing and treating specific targeted problems, but they do not necessarily prepare young people to have healthy, fulfilling, productive lives (Park & Peterson, 2008).

There is growing recognition that effective interventions need to focus on promoting competence and strengths in addition to the prevention and treatment of problems (Masten et al., 2008). We argue that positive psychology offers new directions for working with individual students and for working collaboratively with schools and teachers in designing and implementing school-wide preventative programmes (Noble & McGrath, 2008). For example, schools could be adopting more holistic approaches with missions that address the needs of the whole child (McLoughlin & Kubick, 2004). A narrow focus only on cognitive development ignores other critical areas of youth development (Bernard, 2008).

The present pilot study is a very small step in that direction by showing that a strengths-based coaching programme can

quite easily be integrated within the traditional school curriculum, and can be associated with increased engagement and hope. It should be noted that even though the present pilot programme was part of the school curriculum, and in that sense was compulsory, the student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Such positively-framed programmes, without the stigma often associated with remedial counselling, may provide an effective means of promoting student wellbeing (Park & Peterson, 2008).

It would appear there are many other potential benefits of strengths-based coaching programmes for students, teachers and schools. For example, when students work with their strengths, they tend to be more motivated and perform at a higher level (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Similarly, increases in wellbeing are likely to produce increases in learning, with positive mood producing broader attention, more creative thinking, and more holistic thinking (Seligman et al., 2009). In addition, students who have positive attitudes toward their teachers and school are more likely to display more appropriate behaviour (Huebner et al., 2004). Indeed, we contend that an evidence-based strengths coaching programme, such as the one utilised in this study, could form an important part of an overall Positive Education Programme.

Whilst the importance of happiness and wellbeing cannot be contested, there is debate about how best to enhance these important aspects of human experience within the traditional educational context (Park & Peterson, 2008). Researchers are concerned by the lack of empirical evidence for most programmes (Arthur, 2005, cited in Seligman et al., 2009). Educators and politicians are also concerned such Positive Educational Programmes will waste money or even lower achievement by diverting time and money away from academic subjects (Benninga et al., 2006).

Limitations

Future research is needed to explore the potential of a range of approaches to Positive Education. The present study was a small-scale pilot study designed to be a preliminary investigation of the effect of a strengths-based coaching programme within a school setting. As such there are a number of limitations that must be taken into account when considering these findings. Firstly, the present study utilised a straightforward within subject, pre-/post-design. The lack of a control group means that the effects could have occurred naturalistically, rather than being caused by the intervention. Secondly, no longitudinal measures were taken so it is not known if the reported effects would be maintained over time. However, it should be noted a longitudinal study (Green et al., 2006) found that gains in a similar coaching programme were maintained at a 30-week follow-up. Thirdly, the present study is also limited by the exclusive use of self-report measures. It would be extremely valuable to move beyond self-report measures and document the effects on observable behaviours from a broader range of outcomes, including students' behaviour and academic performance. The findings would also need to be replicated to determine if the programme is effective with students from a variety of social-economic and cultural backgrounds. Finally, it should be noted that the teacher-coach was acting in a role as a designated teacher. This could have influenced outcomes by inducing a demand effect; that is, the participants may have felt that they had to report making progress and enhanced wellbeing in order to please the experimenter.

Future directions

Despite some clear limitations, the results of the present pilot study provide promising initial support for this kind of intervention in a school setting, and future research should be conducted in this area. Further studies that compared interventions with educational tutoring or positive parent

involvement would provide additional information about the effectiveness of life coaching for students, and the use of randomised controlled designs would further extend the current research..

Recent research has found that peer coaching was not as effective as a professionally-trained coach (Spence & Grant, 2007) and this finding emphasises the importance of expertise in facilitating purposeful, positive change in others. Teaching children to employ hopeful thinking requires an interested person who guides the process of goal setting and problem solving with encouragement (Snyder, 2000). For teachers or parents interested in nurturing hope in children, the first step must be to attend to their own hopeful thinking (Snyder, 2000). The 'Teacher as Coach' training programme as utilised in the research of Green, Grant and Rynsaardt (2007) could be used to develop teachers in the evidence-based coaching theories and techniques, which do not currently form part of teacher-training. Through such evidence-based coaching programmes, teachers may learn to better identify what motivates and inspires each of their students. They could then use this information to design more the supportive, positively-orientated teacher-student relationships which are a defining feature of positive school cultures (Noble & McGrath, 2008).

Of course, there is much more to positive education than a simple stand-alone course (Seligman et al., 2009). There is a need for comprehensive and integrative positive education programmes, such as the one recently trialled at Geelong Grammar (Seligman et al., 2009). Rather than running a number of independent initiatives that are not integrated, it may be better to strategically implement an overall Positive Education policy that is aligned with the overall school climate (Noble & McGrath, 2008).

Clearly there is a need for further research and for external coaching consultants and educators to work collaboratively with schools in order to create programmes

with a consistent approach and similar language embedded throughout.

Similarly, there is a need for further research in developing measurement tools to assess the culture and climate of individual schools. With any programme or intervention that can be used in schools, a key element is the overall culture and climate that exists within the school environment (Snyder, 2000). Administrators have an important role in educating the school personnel, teachers and parents about their role in creating a positive school climate. Ultimately, the focus should be on creating a curriculum for students that has genuine relevance, meaning and connectedness to their lives (Noble & McGrath, 2008). We argue that coaching in school settings has potential to both shift the culture of the broader educational system and to better enrich the overall individual student experience.

Conclusion

This pilot study has examined the impact of an evidence-based strengths coaching programme on male primary school students' levels of engagement and hope. It provides preliminary evidence that evidence-based strengths coaching programmes may be useful in the primary school setting. The study also illustrates how evidence-based coaching methodologies can be integrated in an educational setting, adding to our

collective understanding about what might be included in learning programmes designed to enhance wellbeing. We believe that evidence-based strengths coaching programmes can be designed to fit into several existing aspects of the curriculum with relative ease and can address outcomes specified in school syllabus documentation (Noble & McGrath, 2008). This pilot study, whilst targeting Year Five students, could also be adapted to form part of a school-wide initiative, with a strong practical focus on infusing positive psychology in to the whole school curriculum.

With future research in this area, evidence-based coaching may in time become a crucial methodology for the application of positive psychology in educational settings. We look forward to future developments with interest.

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