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The student voice in well-being: a case study of participatory action research in positive education

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ABSTRACT
Positive education blends academic learning and student well-being. Although research and application in positive education is growing, most has involved psychologists and educators applying strategies in schools, with little research that involves student voices in the development and implementation of a school's positive education strategy. Assumptions are frequently made about what is best for student well-being, with little input from the students themselves. This paper describes a case study of participatory action research (PAR) carried out by students ($N=10$) at a publically funded Australian school aiming to implement positive education. PAR is a form of collective inquiry undertaken by the people that the issue directly affects. The PAR group researched the school community regarding well-being during the school year. Mixed methods examined PAR student's well-being, self-efficacy, autonomy, social and emotional assets, and other competencies before and after the process. Student involvement allowed the school to better understand their students' well-being, and student-led communication about positive education laid the groundwork for its implementation. Results suggested benefits for the PAR students, particularly in engagement and self-efficacy. This realistically scaled study suggests that involving students using a framework of PAR is a promising, accessible, evidence-based, and developmentally beneficial approach to the implementation of positive education.

Introduction
Positive education is premised on the notion that schools ought to be places where students cultivate strengths, virtues, and social and emotional competencies, in addition to developing academic-related skills (Seligman et al. 2009). It aims to use evidence-informed interventions and practices to support a student's well-being, defined as the ability for an individual to feel good and function well (Huppert and So 2013). It is theoretically underpinned by positive psychology, which is the scientific study of positive experience, individual traits and institutions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Over the past five years, interest in positive education has increased rapidly, especially across Australia (Slemp et al. 2017).
However, major gaps exist between research and practice. The positive psychology interventions (PPIs) used in positive education have a strong evidence base (e.g. Bolier et al. 2013; Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009), but less is known about their efficacy within complex school environments. Frequently, assumptions are made about what might be best for student well-being, with little input from the students themselves.

In this paper, we discuss several pertinent considerations in the implementation of positive education, and examine student involvement through a framework of participatory action research (PAR) as a pathway toward creating more effective positive education. We ask the following research questions. First, how can student-led PAR impact the implementation of positive education? We consider how students help the school fit appropriate positive education to the wider student body, and the extent to which student led-PAR can foster students’ buy-in to the concept of positive education. Second, how does the PAR process impact the students conducting it? We consider whether student-led PAR corresponds with gains in personal competency, agency and increased connection with the other students and the school itself.

Positive education

Positive psychology encompasses a preventative approach that aims to understand and support optimal functioning (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Research and application from this perspective has grown rapidly over the past two decades, spreading across numerous fields (Rusk and Waters 2013), and developing a number of empirically supported interventions and programmes (Parks and Biswas-Diener 2013). Despite this, the field has been criticised for an over-emphasis on positivity, individualism, and ignoring social and structural factors that influence individual outcomes, amongst other criticisms (e.g. Held 2004; Lazarus 2003; Miller 2008). In response, recent research in positive psychology has moved toward a more holistic understanding of resilience, adaptive functioning, and group eudaimonia (Hart and Sasso 2011).

The application of the positive perspective to education has been labelled ‘positive education’ (Seligman et al. 2009), which developed in part as a response to the significant problem of psychological ill-being (Green 2014). Epidemiological evidence reveals that many lifetime mental disorders begin in late childhood and adolescence (Kessler et al. 2007), thus prevention and early intervention in adolescence may help to prevent adult psychological ill-being, or reduce its severity and duration (McGorry et al. 2011). However, the application of positive psychology principles in schools is complex, with many factors that influence the uptake and effectiveness of intervention efforts.

Issues impacting the effectiveness of positive education

There are several considerations that impact the successful implementation of positive education. First, programmes need to be accessible. Positive education has been implemented and documented in several well-resourced schools that have benefited from expert consultants, extensive teacher training and collaboration with universities to inform, assess, and motivate their efforts (e.g. Kern et al. 2014; Norrish 2015). However, these schools are not constrained by the resource and curriculum demands that constitute the reality of many schools. Involving students in systematic stakeholder research potentially offers a way to
inaugurate positive education in a school in a cost-effective manner, using the valuable resources that already exist within the school (i.e. the students themselves), rather than drawing on expensive external resources.

Second, effective programmes use interventions that are compatible with its recipients (Durlak and DuPre 2008). Although various positive education programmes and curricula have been developed, the context of the school matters; the same programme or intervention that is effective in one school may not be effective or can even be harmful in another. There is little guidance around how to choose the positive education interventions (PEIs) or practices (PEPs) that will be best for a particular school. Students have unique and useful knowledge and perspectives (Levin 2000) that, when utilised in conjunction with baseline data and expert knowledge, can help to identify the most appropriate interventions and practices for those students and their peers.

Third, effective programmes require engagement and buy-in from all stakeholders, students as much as teachers (Levin 2000), but does not automatically occur with all students and all staff in all schools. Participation is considered a vehicle for buy-in and commitment to change in educational reform (Levin 2000).

Fourth, change initiatives in schools typically are top-down in nature, with school leaders introducing a policy or programme that staff are expected to implement and students are expected to consume. Reynolds (2005) suggests that change in schools is facilitated by the inclusion of both top-down (e.g. policy frameworks, resources, operational plans) and bottom-up (e.g. energy, action) processes. For example, at the beginning of positive education in an independent K-12 all boys' school in South Australia, appreciative inquiry (AI) was used as a collaborative, strengths-based, bottom-up approach to allow school staff and leadership to come together and collectively plan and implement well-being at the school (Waters and White 2015). Staff conducted the AI; this allowed them to add important ‘ground-level information’ and to give insight to the leadership team on relevant matters ‘at the chalk-face’ (p.22). Waters and White (2015) concluded that the AI process allowed staff to be empowered and active members of the change process, thus engendering their buy-in to positive education.

Students are also important stakeholders. It is students who are the recipients of positive education, therefore their ownership and buy-in is vital for the desired outcome (Jensen and Simovska 2005; Leadbeater, Marshall, and Banister 2007). Students are at the chalk-face of their own lives and are best placed to inform what they will and will not respond to in the determination of appropriate positive education content (Boyle 2012). Education has shifted from a teacher-centred distribution of information towards student-led inquiry methods (Shute and Slee 2016), which can aid empowerment and ownership (Cargo and Mercer 2008).

**Participatory action research**

The current study used student-led PAR as a bottom-up approach for student involvement in positive education. PAR is a systematic approach to collective investigation of an issue by the people whom the issue directly affects (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006). It blends the strengths of the academic ‘experts’ involved with the strengths and lived experience of participants (Gosin et al. 2003). Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992) is a widely recognised theoretical framework that can be used to conceptualise the extent to which engagement between adults and children occurs. Rungs range from nonparticipation at Rung 1 to true participation at Rung 8 (see Figure 1). Prior to commencement, authors and school staff
deemed this project to be placed at Rung 6, as it was initiated by adults, but the decision-making was shared with young people.

There are several key reasons for using PAR to include young people in matters that affect them (Head 2011). First, young people have the right to a voice. Article 12 of the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child states that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to express an opinion and have that opinion taken into account (UN General Assembly 1989). Young people should be able to articulate their views on issues that matter to them and their views should be given weight in accordance with their age and maturity (Lansdown, Jimerson, and Shahroozi 2014). According to Shier (2001), rung 6 of Hart’s ladder is the level of youth involvement needed to be consistent with an endorsement of the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Second, the involvement of young people can help to make an intervention more effective through appropriate fit (Proctor et al. 2011) and student buy-in (Levin 2000). Decisions on programmes designed for young people that are fully informed by young people’s experiences and perspectives will be more relevant and therefore more effective than those that lack that perspective (Lansdown, Jimerson, and Shahroozi 2014). Adults do not always have sufficient insight into the lives of young people, and thus decisions that are made often ignore the reality that young people face (Checkoway 2011). Young people have valid scope

**Figure 1.** Ladder of Children’s Participation adapted from Hart (1992).
to inform what will and will not work in practice and are best placed to understand what they will and will not respond to (Boyle 2012). Adolescents whose voices are listened to also experience greater investment regarding the future of an intervention (Lind 2007).

Third, young people can reap benefits from participation, with potential for transforming and strengthening youth development outcomes (Ozer and Douglas 2013). PAR has particular benefits to students’ feelings of competence, agency, and relatedness, which are three fundamental and universal psychological needs central to human motivation, well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000) and school success (Mitra 2004). Competence refers to having skills and confidence in those skills. Studies suggest that PAR improves communication skills, problem-solving and critical thinking, self-efficacy, confidence, self-regulatory capacity, public speaking, research skills, overall well-being, and helps participants be better students (e.g. Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Flicker 2008; Lansdown, Jimerson, and Shahrooozi 2014; Mitra 2004; Samdal and Rowling 2015). Agency refers to the ability to contribute to decision-making, exerting influence, and power. Studies suggest that PAR increases a sense of personal agency, the sense of being heard and feeling useful, empowerment, and collective efficacy (e.g. Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Flicker 2008). Relatedness refers to positive, supportive relationships with others. Studies suggest that PAR increases novel social networks and interactions, and fosters attachment to the school (e.g. Mitra 2004; Ozer and Wright 2012).

In addition, PAR establishes ‘truth’ through participation of crucial stakeholders, using multiple sources of and methods for investigation, and by being systematic and transparent (Crane and O’Regan 2010). Truth is seen as contextual: a shared understanding within a particular local and community context. For example, schools from differing socio-economic backgrounds may have different understandings of well-being (Crivello, Camfield, and Woodhead 2009), and those understandings are recognised and understood by bringing together the perspectives of those involved.

While there is considerable academic, organisational and government literature on stakeholder research with youth, to our knowledge, student-led PAR has not been used in the development, implementation and sustainability of a positive education strategy. The frameworks for positive education that do exist emphasise work with staff as a starting point, the rationale being that if the well-being of the staff is nurtured, they can be authentic role models for the students to whom they teach (Norrish 2014). The current study, while not disputing the veracity of this claim, investigates involving students in parallel with teachers at an initial stage. In the present study, PAR was used to involve students in the implementation of positive education, providing an empowering process for them to have input and systematically gather input from the school community.

**Background**

The present case study examines the utility of involving students in the initial stages of the implementation of a positive education strategy at a single Australian government school (i.e. a publically funded/state school) in South Australia in 2015. That year, 877 year 8–12 students attended the school, and 88 teaching and non-teaching staff were employed. The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)1 of 1060, and has 10% of students with a language background other than English (Australian average = 20.05%; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015). The principal, deputy
principal, and student well-being team had been interested in implementing school-wide positive education to their compulsory school activities for a number of years. They supported selected teachers to receive training and professional development, and collected data on well-being. But a formalised positive education curriculum had not been implemented.

In their plans for implementing positive education, the leadership team selected PERMA+ as a guiding framework. This model is adapted from a theoretical model (Seligman 2011), which suggests that well-being is comprised of five domains: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The + indicates additional concepts that contribute to well-being, such as sleep, nutrition, and physical activity.

Ten students from years 9 to 11 (mean age = 14.9 years, SD = .99; 50% female) took part in the participatory action research (the ‘PAR group’). At the deputy principal’s request, the students were volunteers from the 2015 Student Representative Council (SRC). As background learning, all SRC members participated in a well-being workshop given by school teachers who had previously received training in positive education. The first author also gave a brief presentation on PAR and the current study at one of the SRC meetings. These students received South Australian Certificate of Education (S.A.C.E.) credits for participating in the study.

We examine the impact of PAR outcomes through narrative description, and the impact of the PAR process using mixed methods. For the latter, we recruited a matched comparison group to control for any school-wide effect that may help explain findings within the PAR group. The selected ten control students were purposively chosen by an assistant principal to ensure the group was closely matched to the PAR group on gender and ability. This group completed briefer measures than the PAR group and did not receive any incentives. One student from this group withdrew during the process, leaving nine in the final comparison group (mean age 15.2 years, SD = 1.2; 55.6% female).

**PAR procedure**

The PAR workshops and research activities were designed in coordination with school staff and were constrained by the time the school had available. As summarised in Table 1, six workshops were conducted fortnightly during lesson time (excluding school holidays). Workshops began with introductions, a focus on the concept of well-being, and background information on positive education. In workshop 2, teaching focused on the PERMA+ domains and the PAR methodology. Students considered the PAR process and made decisions around data collection. Workshop 3 involved students scrutinising barriers and enablers to well-being, relevant to the school community. In Workshops 4–6, students considered strategies for communicating information.

The PAR process used an eco-critical approach, which situates individuals in a social system where intervention exists at multiple levels beyond the individual (Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009). Thus, early in the PAR process, students learned about Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Systems Theory of Development, to explore how issues are affected by multiple layered domains. Bronfenbrenner’s work has been influential in mental health and well-being initiatives in schools, promoting the holistic approach (Shute and Slee 2016). PAR students also learned about qualitative research methods, ethical considerations, purposive
Table 1. Summary of PAR workshop themes and activities assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop</th>
<th>Topical theme</th>
<th>PAR activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1        | • Introductions and get-to-know  
          • Review of well-being concepts  
          • Review of 2014 school well-being data  
          • Positive education background information | Think about PERMA+, talk to peers and bring examples from each domain to next workshop |
| 2        | • Compilation of PERMA+ domain examples  
          • Theoretical background  
          • Research methods involved in PAR  
          • Data collection discussion / decision | Collect data from parents, teachers and other students on their barriers and facilitators of well-being |
| 3        | • Compilation of barriers and facilitators data  
          • Discussion | Note effective and appropriate forms of communication from the school to students |
| 4        | • Devise wider communication strategy  
          • Determine essential information | Form positive education logos  
Compile diary page  
Present at whole school assembly |
| 5        | • Finalise year-level assembly presentations  
          • Devise focus groups questions | Trial and critically review some positive education practices |
| 6        | • Finalisation of video presentation | No activity assigned |
| Post-workshops | | Presentation at year-level assemblies  
Focus groups in years 8 & 10 |

Notes: PERMA+ is the school’s chosen well-being framework (adapted from Seligman 2011); P-positive emotions, E-engagement, R-relationships, M-meaning, A-accomplishment, + representing additional concepts that contribute to well-being such as sleep, nutrition and physical activity.
and representative sampling, communication skills and possible adverse events that may be encountered.

Although workshops were observed by a school staff member and facilitated by the study’s first author, students were considered the experts. Adults were instructed to consider their role as learning about and recording observations, and as possible moderators, being mindful not to regress to usual power relationships. The adults remained responsible for the overall administration and coordination of the PAR research initiative.

Students subsequently conducted a series of research activities that built upon the knowledge gained through the initial workshops. Workshops were overseen by a school counsellor. The first author (who had all appropriate working with children clearances) observed activities, taking field notes, which were subsequently digitised and stored in NVIVO. Due to practicalities, one of the research activities and one of the presentation activities were conducted after the final workshop.

**PAR process analysis**

We evaluated the PAR process using a self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2000) framework to consider if students reported gains in autonomy, competence and relatedness. Students in the PAR and control groups completed a self-report questionnaire prior to commencement of the first workshop (T1) and at the conclusion of the final workshop (T2). The questionnaire included demographic questions about participants’ age, gender and year level, and standardised measures (42 quantitative items). The PAR group answered twenty additional quantitative and qualitative items designed by the author at T2 (11 qualitative items and 9 qualitative items). A research assistant also separately interviewed two students after the final workshop. The surveys included questions on well-being (EPOCH: engagement, optimism, connectedness, and happiness; Kern et al. 2016), self-efficacy (GSE; Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995), social and emotional competencies (SEARS-A-SF; Merrell 2011). Each student’s pastoral care teacher also completed the teacher rated version of the SEARS (SEARS-T-SF) within several days of the T1 and T2 assessments.

Due to the small sample, we used Reliable Change Indices (RCI) to analyse change in standardised measures. A reliable change indicator is a standardised measure of the magnitude of change, which uses the reliability of a scale to determine whether a change observed for an individual case is greater than what might be expected due to measurement error (Evans, Margison, and Barkham 1998). The method helps determine if response change observed is a genuine change or simply random error. The formula recommended by Evans, Margison, and Barkham (1998) was used.

Open-ended questions within the questionnaires and interviews conducted by a research assistant provided qualitative data. Time constraints limited further interviews; as such, we purposively chose articulate students, as many students in the PAR group were observed to be reserved in their communication styles and relatively quiet during the PAR workshops. The first author then transcribed the qualitative responses verbatim for analysis. Due to the small sample size, the brevity of the participants in written responses and only two students being interviewed due to time constraints, we are unlikely to have reached data saturation.
Results

PAR outcomes

Research question 1 asked how student-led PAR can help fit appropriate positive education content to students, and whether PAR enables ownership and buy-in among students. Table 2 summarises the PAR group outcomes. Observations suggest that PAR helped facilitate the school’s understanding of student well-being, allowing for better informed decisions about what positive education content should be included in the programme. PAR students helped communicate the concept of well-being and positive education to the wider school community, which was thought to be crucial in facilitating buy-in of the wider student body.

PAR students first explored the components of PERMA (Seligman 2011) by identifying examples of each domain from their own lives. They discussed the overlapping nature of the five components. Using butcher paper, students discussed Positive Emotion, Engagement and Relationships (Meaning and Accomplishment were discussed but not noted). Personal interaction, including ‘spending time with friends’ (relating to Positive Emotion), ‘building things in tech class’ (relating to Engagement); and ‘winning at basketball’ (relating to Accomplishment), was a prominent feature discussed. Students had difficulty coming up with examples from their own lives related to the domain of Meaning. PAR students then talked about the PERMA well-being framework with their peers, and created graphical displays around the school that presented PERMA + to the school community (see Figure 2).

The PAR group discussed and defined their school community as students, teachers, parents, non-teaching school staff and local employers. The PAR group learned about the domains in Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Systems Theory. The group discussed and identified elements from each of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) domains that impact the well-being of their school community. For example, students identified substance use (micro level), bullying (meso level) and media portrayals (macro level) as key elements that impact well-being. PAR students then researched the school community using a simplified model based on Ecological Systems Theory to identify the barriers to and facilitators of well-being in the

| Facilitating appropriate fit through increasing understanding | The PAR group learned about and raised awareness of PERMA+
The PAR group collaborated on positive education content and terminology
The PAR group researched barriers and facilitators to well-being within the BHS community
The PAR group trialled some positive education programmes and gave feedback
The PAR group took a deeper look at what may motivate students to participate in Positive Education through focus groups |
| Building whole school buy-in through student-led communication | The PAR group helped develop the strategy for the communication of positive education to students
The PAR group developed several BHS positive education logos
The PAR group produced a positive education introductory video
The PAR group compiled the positive education ‘essential’ info into a page for the 2016 diary to be given to every student in the school
The PAR group helped introduce Positive Education to the students at assemblies in 2016 |
The students had decided that brief face-to-face interviews were the best way to gather the needed information. They conducted up to 10 relatively in-depth interviews each \( (n = 47, \text{age range} = 14–58) \), using an agreed upon set of questions. The PAR students interviewed parents, teachers and other students, recording data on a template provided by the first author. Interestingly, PAR students overlooked local employers and non-teaching staff, even though they had previously defined these as part of the school community. The group compiled this data on butcher paper at the next PAR workshop (see Figure 3). They later combined this data with focus group data (see below for discussion of focus groups) and delineated the information into themes of personal functioning and practical concerns (Table 3). Barriers to well-being included lack of self-efficacy around personal ability and understanding school work, issues about the school (e.g. teachers harsh, inability to express self, lack of opportunity), personal care issues (e.g. too much screen time, lack of sleep), and miscellaneous other issues (e.g. money concerns, social isolation). Facilitators to well-being included self-efficacy around being able to do well in school and get a job, interpersonal factors (friends, families, etc.), aspects of the school (e.g. well-behaved students, school support), personal issues (e.g. sport and exercise, hobbies), and other miscellaneous factors (e.g. opportunities for new experiences). Being able to have a say about and giving feedback on school affairs was also listed as a well-being enabler by focus group participants.

Two members of the PAR group conducted focus groups in years 8 and 10 to investigate students’ motivation to participate in positive education. Final focus group questions were determined with the entire PAR group’s input. PAR students and supervising adults found focus group participants to be appropriately behaved and open with their responses. Well-being, its barriers and facilitators, were well understood and articulated (see Table 3). Focus group students prioritised pragmatic concerns; jobs, career, professional communication and finances featured as most important to know by the time students left school, with less
emphasis given to hedonic well-being. Being capable of goal setting, managing finances and being independent were also deemed important. Personal functioning themes were mentioned, especially by the older students. Friends, adaptation, communication skills and emotional literacy also rated as important assets to have by the end of school.

Regarding motivation for a programme such as positive education, focus group students recognised that pedagogy is closely connected with classroom well-being and motivation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to well-being</th>
<th>Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>School Matters</th>
<th>Personal Care &amp; Regard</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>others not believing in my ability</td>
<td>fights with friends and other people</td>
<td>teachers that are harsh and not encouraging</td>
<td>poor health, being absent from school</td>
<td>not having enough money</td>
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<td></td>
<td>not understanding school work</td>
<td>family conflict, parents’ divorce</td>
<td>wearing a uniform; not being able to express myself</td>
<td>too much ‘screen time’</td>
<td>not having enough support or security</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>bullying and harassment</td>
<td>canteen too expensive, lack of access to culturally relevant food</td>
<td>not enough sleep</td>
<td>too much spare time (boredom)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>feeling uncomfortable speaking in front of people</td>
<td>lack of sports activities</td>
<td>other students doing drugs</td>
<td>social isolation due to not having an interest</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not being able to see family (due to divorce or being an international student)</td>
<td>physical education classes</td>
<td>negative body image</td>
<td>school holidays</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>work overload, lots of homework</td>
<td>overthinking, low self-esteem</td>
<td>having others challenge your values</td>
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<td>Facilitators to well-being</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>being able to get a job</td>
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<td>being organised and prepared, having good time management skills</td>
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<td>doing well at school - good reports, good grades</td>
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<td></td>
<td>being able to have a say about and giving feedback on school affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>friends, family, relationships</td>
<td>having someone to rely on</td>
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<td></td>
<td>gratitude</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Matters</td>
<td>school / life balance</td>
<td>well-behaved students</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>school support, having supportive teachers</td>
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<td>having a variety of teaching methods and techniques</td>
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<td>having hands on activities in class, breaking up double lessons</td>
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<td>engendering respect in the learning environment</td>
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<td>having healthy options in the canteen (gluten free, vegetarian etc)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Care &amp; Regard</td>
<td>sport, exercise</td>
<td>good sleep</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hobbies, music, dancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>having new experiences and knowledge</td>
<td>doing the things you love to do</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data derived from; interviews of students, teachers, parents \((N = 47)\); year 10 student focus group \((N = 8)\), year 8 student focus group \((N = 10)\).
(Shute and Slee 2016). Flexibility, interesting material, varying teaching and learning methods, doing work in groups and having good teachers were all mentioned as being beneficial to motivation. Students were open to technology in their learning, as long as they did not have to read too much on the screen. There were mixed responses as to what level of privacy was acceptable in positive education activities, but students were open to having a choice in how much they had to share with teachers and the class. With no prompting, mindfulness (which a teacher had independently been using with her class) was specifically mentioned by a year 10 male participant as a beneficial relaxation aid.

The PAR students trialled possible PEIs, critically evaluating the time required, interest, and format, and raising issues that had not been otherwise considered. For example, PAR students trialled *Smiling Mind*, an Australian mindfulness smartphone app, finding that they liked being able to do it at home in their own time. As a 15-year-old male expressed it: ‘rather than using your phone to check Facebook, it was just as easy to spend a few minutes doing the Smiling Mind thing’. A 17-year-old female said it was a little annoying to download and raised concerns of excess phone data usage. Others suggested this could be overcome if smartphones used the school Wi-Fi during the application download, initial set-up and the downloading of application data for offline use.

PAR students helped determine an overall communication strategy to convey positive education to the wider student body. They helped clarify the optimal terminology to be used, specifically what would best be understood and accepted by the wider student body. They also collaborated on what should be the ‘essential information’ to be communicated (Table 4). These concepts intended to give the school community a common language when discussing well-being and positive education. In addition, this information summarised the eudaimonic benefits of hedonia, helped clear-up misconceptions of positive education, and explicitly stated students’ involvement with the direction of positive education in the school.

PAR students then chose communication roles that they felt comfortable with and that suited their strengths. This included the design of a logo for positive education at their school (see Figure 4), the design of a ‘wellbeing’ page that was printed in every students’ school diary the following year (see Figure 5) and presenting at whole-school and year-level

### Table 4. Positive education information deemed ‘essential’ by PAR students ($N = 10$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive education fosters and teaches the skills for well-being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being is feeling good and functioning well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∴ Positive education – education for feeling good and functioning well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are benefits to well-being beyond just being happy: academic and career benefits, better personal relationships and less psychological ill-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive education is not just being happy or positive all the time. It is about cultivating the skills for happiness, resilience and optimal functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being is learnable and can be built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The framework we use to measure and to think about well-being is PERMA+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERMA+ is:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P – Positive emotion: Positive emotions, pleasurable experiences, happiness and satisfaction with one’s life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E – Engagement: Taking part in activities and challenges that are motivating and absorbing. Experiencing intense concentration, absorption, and focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R – Relationships: Being connected to others, having social contact and social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M – Meaning: Having purpose in life, believing that life is worthwhile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A – Accomplishment: Working towards worthwhile accomplishments and valued goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘plus’: Refers to additional aspects of feeling good and functioning well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are helping the school to find the best positive education curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data derived from Workshop 4.
Figure 4. The final positive education logo design.

Figure 5. The positive education page of 2016 school diary.
assemblies. These creative communication roles appealed to the PAR students and promoted their continued active involvement (Wood and Hendricks 2017).

A keystone of the students’ communication strategy was the production of a short video introducing positive education to others at the school. Students collaborated on the script, font, images and music soundtrack. Each student narrated a number of slides, but unfortunately the final sound quality was poor. It was thus re-recorded by two of the PAR students at a later date. The three-minute video explained: what positive education and well-being are; their benefits; how skills for well-being can be learned; and explained the domains of PERMA+. The video was considered crucial in the overall student-led communication strategy; it enabled the PAR group to introduce positive education in a medium that resonated with adolescents. The video (Figure 6) was used in PAR students’ assembly presentations, put on the school’s website where parents can view it (www.bhs.sa.edu.au/curriculum/well-being/videos) and was used in the introductory session of a positive education pilot programme the following year (Halliday et al. 2017).

**PAR process evaluation**

Our second research question was the extent to which PAR students benefited from being involved in the process. We used a mixed methods approach. The control group was used to examine if any school-wide effects might explain any changes.

**Quantitative data**

Independent sample t-tests compared demographic data (age) and outcome measures at baseline. No significant differences between the PAR and control groups were found in age \((t(17) = -0.639, p = .531)\), Engagement \((t(17) = -0.718, p = .483)\), Perseverance \((t(17) = -1.239, p = .232)\), Optimism \((t(17) = 0.363, p = .721)\), Connectedness \((t(17) = 0.278, p = .784)\), Happiness \((t(17) = 0.965, p = .348)\), self-efficacy (GSE; \(t(17) = -0.524, p = .607)\), or social and emotional assets (SEARS-A-SF; \(t(17) = -0.388, p = .703)\).

![Figure 6. The positive education video produced by PAR students (N = 10).](image)
Using Reliable Change Indices to consider change between T1 and T2, a clear pattern appeared: students in the PAR group showed some reliable changes in the desired direction, particularly in Engagement and General Self-Efficacy, while students in the comparison group recorded some reliable changes in the undesirable direction (see Table 5). Out of a possible 70 self-reported measures, the comparison group recorded eight reliable changes in the desired direction (11.43%). Out of a possible 63 self-reported measures, the comparison group recorded one reliable change in the desired direction (1.59%). Patterns were similar for changes in the undesired direction, with the PAR group reporting one reliable change (1.43%) and the comparison group reporting nine reliable changes (14.29%). The comparison group showed declining mental health and well-being over the course of the school year, consistent with adolescent samples of other studies (e.g. Boniwell, Osin, and Martinez 2016; Vella-Brodrick, Rickard, and Chinn 2014), likely reflecting increasing demands of adolescence and senior level school work. The PAR group did not show this pattern.

The PAR group also completed questions on general satisfaction, competency and autonomy. Most PAR students reported improved confidence, research skills and autonomy (see Table 6).

**Qualitative data**

The qualitative data were useful in illuminating and contextualising our quantitative findings. We consider the results within the SDT framework. Many responses related to personal and developmental competencies gained, especially communication and research skills. For example, comments included:

- ‘The best thing I got out of PAR was the skills (sic.) to approach survey participants and explain the purpose in a formal and concise manner. Overall, my communication skills have been improved.’ Female, aged 15.

---

**Table 5. Reliable changes for PAR participants and comparison group.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>GSE</th>
<th>SEARS</th>
<th>SEARS-T</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAR group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 15</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>−0.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>−3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M 15</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>−1.25*</td>
<td>−0.5*</td>
<td>−3</td>
<td>−3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 15</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 14</td>
<td>−2.25*</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>−1</td>
<td>−1.5*</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.7*</td>
<td>−2</td>
<td>−3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 14</td>
<td>−1.5*</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>1.25*</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 17</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison group</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 17</td>
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<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>7*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>1.25*</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0.7*</td>
<td>12*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>−0.58*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 16</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 14</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 16</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−0.5</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−0.1</td>
<td>−2</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M 14</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>0.5*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
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<td>F 16</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
<td>−0.1</td>
<td>−3</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * - reliable change in undesired direction, ** - reliable change in desired direction.
• ‘(PAR) also helped me work on communication with my peers and, like, oratory skills. I had a speech in front of the whole school and stuff which is daunting, but it challenged me.’ Female, aged 17.

• ‘I now have better communication with people of different year levels.’ Male, aged 17.

Several participants mentioned autonomy, empowerment or agency:

• ‘I think (involving students) is a very good idea because they feel like they’re being involved and that they matter. It’s very important for students to feel like they have a voice and that they matter in the school, it’s really important.’ Female, aged 17.

• ‘I felt more control in my school because I’m one of the people whose introducing positive education to school, therefore making a difference to the school.’ Female, aged 15.

• ‘I don’t think it was giving me too big of a say but my ideas were listened to.’ Male, aged 14.

• ‘(PAR) made me feel that the school wanted the students' input on decision-making.’ Male, aged 17.

• ‘We had a say, an opinion and a voice.’ Male, aged 14.

And others referred to relatedness, school connection and forging new networks:

• ‘I was able to help the school.’ Male, aged 15.

• ‘I think friendships between student researchers remains neutral however, we became familiar with each other as we worked together to achieve goals.’ Female, aged 15.

• ‘I got to be involved in the school.’ Male, aged 14.

• ‘(PAR) helped you to realise what (the other students) thought, and whether you shared an opinion and then you had a closer bond, and then you’d get talking, so yeah definitely bringing students together.’ Female, aged 17.

There was critical feedback regarding letting everyone involved in the PAR group have a say during workshops and defining students' roles earlier in the process. While students enjoyed learning about PERMA+ as a framework of well-being, they did not necessarily find Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework helpful. PAR students thought that conducting stakeholder research gave them more autonomy and control in their school environment. One interviewed student stated we should ‘introduce positive education to as many schools as possible’.

Table 6. PAR group (N = 10) evaluative data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: Reported as ‘moderately true’ or ‘exactly true’ on the 5-point Likert scale response.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six students reported that PAR had helped them gain new confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight students that PAR made them feel like they were having a say in school affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two students reported that PAR made them a better student, with eight reporting ‘neutral’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine students reported improved communication skills with one reporting neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six students reported increased research skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six students reported that PAR allowed them to feel more in control of what happens at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four students reported PAR helping their ability to problem solve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four students reported PAR helping them to think critically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion

This study investigated the value of involving students in a positive education strategy using a framework of participatory action research. The process was pragmatically small scale to fit within the school’s resources, timetable and calendar. Despite these real-world limitations, the PAR group produced important outcomes for the understanding and communication of positive education, having direct impacts on intervention compatibility and buy-in to the concept, and appeared to benefit from being involved in the process, reporting a greater sense of competence, autonomy, and research skills.

Student involvement significantly enriched the quality and depth of findings, as youth have a more intimate knowledge of the adolescent world than adults (Livingstone, Celemencki, and Calixte 2014). PAR students, for example, did not resonate with the concept of Meaning in the PERMA model as adults do, instead emphasising personal connections and interaction. This is consistent with findings of Kern et al. (2014), who found items reflecting Meaning loading on the Relationships factor for adolescents, rather than being a unique factor. As the authors suggest, this may be due to adolescents’ tendency to gain meaning from their associations with others, underlining the importance of adolescents’ social functioning in their overall well-being (Allen and Kern 2017). Shute and Slee (2016) suggest there is value in increased partnership with students in the development and evaluation of mental health and well-being programmes, and this is underlined by the deeper understanding brought about in the present study. The quality of the data confirms the maturity, intellect, and commitment to participate of high school students (Livingstone, Celemencki, and Calixte 2014). Disagreements, conflict and unfairly distributed workloads reported as characteristics of stakeholder research (Kidd and Kral 2005) did not feature with the students in this PAR group. There was some loss of motivation and engagement in the early workshops, but this was overcome with better defined roles and more active and engaging activities, such as producing the video for assembly and online presentation.

Buy-in and ownership

The findings suggested that PAR students enjoyed learning about well-being and having the ability to support well-being in their school. They advocated for positive education’s wide dissemination, indicating ownership and initial buy-in. PAR students communicated the relatively abstract notions of well-being and positive education to the wider student body in the ‘student voice’. This was considered crucial to aid ownership of and buy-in to subsequent positive education among the wider student body (see Halliday et al. 2017).

Benefits of PAR participation

While we cannot make direct causal attributions, the evidence presented here suggests that student involvement was beneficial, appearing to contribute to important youth development outcomes for the young people involved (Mitra 2004). Participation in stakeholder research corresponded to gains in personal competency (engagement, self-efficacy, research and communication skills), autonomy and school-specific relatedness. Students reported satisfaction in being involved in school affairs, and being able to help the school, especially in an area that dealt with student mental health and well-being. The control group showed
no evidence of these benefits being a school-wide effect. Further, while the control group showed some decline in well-being measures through the year as other studies have also found, the PAR group did not show these declines. Thus, student-led PAR appears to be consistent with the objective of positive education – to foster well-being.

**Reflections on the process**

Adults had to be mindful not to step beyond their administrative roles. For example, when organising the logistics pertaining to the assembly presentations, the adults had to refrain from writing presentation material, even when students asked for help.

The level of participation, as defined by Hart’s (1992) model, was ambiguous at times. As Kirby and Gibbs (2006) discuss, participation shifted within projects and within tasks. Although we initially placed the project at Rung 6 of Hart’s ladder, student participation was situated closer to Rung 5. Students were sincere consultants whose opinions were treated seriously and valued. They were explicitly involved in the process as experts on adolescent well-being. While students’ views were deeply considered in decision-making, the final decisions remained with the school, which retains the ultimate ‘duty of care’ concerning the implementation of positive education. We feel that students were recognised as citizens of their school community and participated at their highest possible level. Hart (2008) himself discussed the importance of the need for involvement of children in an issue that affects them:

> When people recognise the rights of others to have a voice and involve them, then this, in my mind, is morally superior to children being ‘in-charge.’ (24)

**Limitations**

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. First, in order to be pragmatic, we dealt with a much shorter timeframe than other research in the area. Flicker (2008) highlights participatory research requires substantial time and human resource investment. The current study did the best it could within the real-world constraints of the school. Lack of time and human resources was an issue. The method of collecting data from student practitioners was less than ideal; the author who facilitated workshops was minimally involved in the administration of questionnaires to the PAR group. Working with the constraints of the school calendar, some PAR activities that involved four of the ten PAR students (two students presenting positive education to their peers at assemblies and two conducting focus groups) were conducted after the final measures were taken at T2. This may have resulted in any benefit to those participants stemming directly from these activities not being included in the evaluative data we collected, therefore PAR having less impact in this study’s measures than it might have actually had. Had more time been available, subsequent cycles of investigation by students might have been facilitated. A deeper examination of data may have been carried out, for example, on how different groups within the school community are impacted by identified barriers to well-being.

The sample was small and so results are not intended to be generalizable. Moreover, there may be a selection bias for the PAR students, being drawn from the SRC group of that year. However, Carpenter and Suto (2008) allow deliberate selection of specific individuals, events
and settings due to the crucial information they can provide, and it was at the school’s request that PAR volunteers were drawn from the SRC group.

Further, although the framework used here aimed to be timely and economically sustainable, using PAR in the implementation of positive education does come with time and human resource investment. Those interested in conducting PAR with students should consider investing more time to conduct PAR activities.

**Conclusion**

Finding out what young people need rather than just telling them, doing research ‘with youth’ rather than ‘on youth’, is vital for improving effectiveness and efficiency of interventions for young people (Boyle 2012). Involving students through their participation in action research is a promising approach for an accessible, evidence-based, and developmentally beneficial approach to better understand student well-being. By involving students in PAR, a school can show its students that they are considered key stakeholders in positive education, their own well-being, and have the capacity to contribute to their own well-being.

We found that student involvement has value; PAR detailed in this case study provided a platform for the success of positive education at the school. It helped the school to better understand its students’ well-being, aiding the relevance and appropriateness of a preliminary positive education curriculum at the school. It also fostered student ownership of and buy-in to it (see Halliday et al. 2017). Student-led PAR: allowed researchers to ensure the project’s theoretical base and methodological durability; allowed teachers, parents and other students to have systematic input into the positive education initiative; and has done so in a way that indicated benefits to those who conducted it.

**Note**

1. ICSEA provides an indication of the level of educational advantage of the school’s student population relative to those of other schools using: the geographical location of the school; the proportion of indigenous students catered for; and the occupation and level of education of students’ parents’ (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012). The Australian average is 1000.

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We would like to sincerely thank Blackwood High School and its staff for their support in this project. We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to the students who participated in the action research for their superb enthusiasm and cooperation.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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