Teachers' experiences with positive education

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ABSTRACT

Positive education is the teaching of both traditional school skills and skills for enhancing well-being. This study examines teachers' (N = 72) experiences with training in positive education. Qualitative content analysis was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences, and quantitative measures investigated teachers' well-being. Results show that teachers experienced both personal and professional growth. They also saw positive changes in their students. Teachers used methods of positive education e.g. when communicating with students and co-workers, and when supporting the students' socioemotional development. Challenges with implementing positive education practices mostly consisted of lack of time or support from colleagues. The authors argue that positive education is an effective tool for enhanced well-being both for participating teachers and their students and could therefore be utilised on a larger scale. Future studies could focus on whether teachers continue systematic implementing of positive education methods long-term, and the reasons behind continued or discontinued.

Introduction

The prevalence of mental illness among youth in Finland is estimated to be around 20–25% (Haravuori, Muinonen, & Marttunen, 2016). At the same time, Finnish schools are legally obliged to support student health and well-being (Student Welfare Act, 1287/2013, §4). Thus, it is important to find and implement methods that effectively enhance student well-being at school. Already practised in many parts of the world, positive education may be one such framework (Seligman, 2019). Positive education is defined as education in both traditional school skills and in skills that enhance well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The aim with positive education is to support students in finding their own strengths and developing resilience, as well as creating a learning environment that not only focuses on the traditional school subjects, but also supports student psychosocial development as well (Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Vuorinen, 2016).

Furthermore, in many cases the positive education curriculum is taught to school-teachers, who in turn integrate it into their work within schools. Several studies have examined how students benefit from such interventions, resulting in positive effects on

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e.g. life satisfaction, self-esteem and the prevalence of positive affect and lack of negative affect (see e.g. Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Shoshani, Steinmetz, & Kanat-Maymon, 2016). In addition to student outcomes, it is important to investigate how teachers experience the work with positive education. The current study aims to do just that, while also measuring the impact positive education has on teacher well-being.

Well-being and the PERMA model

Positive education is built upon the frameworks of positive psychology. Positive psychology, as we know it today, was born at the turn of the millennium (Seligman, 2011). Instead of focusing on disorders and illnesses, the aim with positive psychology is to study what makes life worth living and how to build a life that feels worth living. Seligman (2011) developed a model of well-being called the PERMA theory. The PERMA acronym explains psychological well-being in the form of five independent elements: Positive emotions; Engagement; positive Relationships; Meaning; and Accomplishment. Positive emotions entail hedonistic feelings such as happiness and pride. Engagement is the feeling of being fully absorbed with what you are doing, related to flow. Positive relationships are secure based on trust and respect. The element of meaning is either the feeling of being or actually being a part of something bigger than yourself. Accomplishment, finally, is about the effort you put into your work, while the actual result plays a smaller part (Seligman, 2011).

Using key concepts and themes such as positive emotions, positive relationships, flow, mindset andtcharacter strengths, positive psychologists strive to change negative thought and behaviour patterns in individuals in order to increase well-being. Working with the key concepts includes psychoeducation, discussions and practical exercises. For example, one goal is to create a shared vocabulary when communicating about strengths both with experts within the field and with the public. Peterson and colleagues (2004) conducted extensive research, identifying six core virtues and 24 character strengths that fitted into the core virtues. Based on these, participants discuss and test their own strengths, practise spotting strengths in both themselves and others, and learn how to use their own strengths best. Another example of how to explain key concepts to students is using the bucket metaphor when aiming to foster positive relationships (Rath & Clifton, 2004). The premise for the bucket metaphor is that interactions with others impact us greatly, both positively and negatively, while we at the same time don't put too much thought into the interactions. The metaphor illustrates that everyone has an invisible bucket on the top of their heads, which can be filled and emptied with our interactions. A full bucket makes us feel good, strong, more energetic and more optimistic, while an empty bucket does the opposite. In other words, with positive interactions we fill each others' buckets, while negative interactions empty them (Rath & Clifton, 2004). It works as a tangible and fun way to teach children about social skills, empathy and taking others into account (Leskisenoja, 2016).

Positive education

Positive psychology has been adapted to a school context, i.e. positive education. Today, the focus in school lies mainly on teaching skills that prepare students for future studies and work opportunities. Positive education aims to combine teaching the traditional school skills as well as teaching skills that support students' well-being (Seligman et al., 2009). This is important from a societal perspective, since depression rates are rising among youth, but also from an educational point of view, since students with higher reported well-being also perform better at school (Bortes, Ragnarsson, Strandh, & Petersen, 2021; Seligman et al., 2009). Students who have participated in a positive psychology intervention (PPI) at school reported an increase in well-being (Roth, Suldo, & Ferron, 2017; Shoshani et al., 2016; Institute of Positive Education, 2019). Students also reported experiencing positive emotions more frequently (Roth et al., 2017; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014 ; Shoshani et al., 2016; Suldo et al., 2015), feeling more hopeful and grateful (Suldo et al., 2015) and feeling more optimistic, as well as having higher self-confidence and self-efficacy (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). Many studies also measured students' satisfaction with life, but the outcomes vary. Some have shown an increase in satisfaction with life (Kwok, Gu, & Tong Kai Kit, 2016; Roth et al., 2017; Suldo et al., 2015; The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019), while others reported it did not change (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Shoshani et al., 2016).

Using PPIs for preventing or treating mental illness has also been effective. Students participating in PPIs have shown a decrease in depressive symptoms and experiencing anxiety (Burkhardt et al., 2016; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Seligman, 2011), and they report feeling less stressed (Burckhardt et al., 2016). However, not all studies have reported significant results on depression and anxiety (Bastounis, Callaghan, Banerjee, & Michail, 2016). PPIs could potentially also be of use with students with special needs. Vuorinen and colleagues (2019) found that boys showed fewer tendencies to aggressive behaviour after a PPI, but other studies have not shown similar results (Roth et al., 2017; Suldo et al., 2015).

Regarding education, students gained a more positive attitude towards both school and learning after participating in a PPI (Shoshani et al., 2016; Vuorinen et al., 2019), and they performed better academically as well (Shoshani et al., 2016). Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia has been a forerunner in the work with positive education. For 10 years they have developed a whole-school approach to positive education, and researched the impact on students, parents and staff. The results are promising, and among others show an increase in student well-being (The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019). The PERMA theory (presented earlier) is used as the foundation for the programme, but a sixth element, 'positive health', has been added, since physical and psychological health often correlate (Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017). GGS developed the motto 'learn it, live it, teach it, embed it', to infiltrate the whole school with positive education. First, all school staff, including staff outside of the classroom, *learn* the methods, so they themselves can *live* by them and reflect on the process. Next, teachers can *teach* the methods to their students, both by giving specific lessons about positive education and by including the methods in other lessons. The whole staff then aims to *embed* it into everything the school does (Hoare et al., 2017). Most studies regarding positive education focus on student outcomes, and only few on the teacher perspective, but the Institute of

Positive Education (2019) reported teachers in GGS being less stressed and feeling better than other teachers in Australian schools. They also reported that teachers utilised the methods in both private and professional contexts. Other studies have shown similar results: that teachers mainly have positive experiences with positive education (Isopahkala, 2019; Vuorinen et al., 2019). They reported that the vocabulary with character strengths has become a part of everyday communication and that they have used the methods in performance discussions with the students (Isopahkala, 2019). They also started seeing students in a different, more positive, light (Vuorinen et al., 2019). However, positive education comes with challenges as well, especially when trying to engage the whole staff and all leaders, which could then affect the effectiveness of the methods (Isopahkala, 2019; The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019; Vuorinen et al., 2019).

In Finland, a positive education intervention model was developed through the Strength, Happiness and Compassion research project (Laakso et al., 2020; Pentti, Fagerlund, & Nyström, 2019). Results are promising, showing an increase in positive affect after the interventions (Laakso et al., 2020) and students' having a clearer self-image, better knowledge of themselves and higher self-esteem (Söderlund, 2019). The current study aims to investigate teachers' experiences from the training and from beginning to work with positive educational methods, while also measuring its impact on teacher well-being. The research questions are the following:

(1) For what aims do teachers feel positive education is useful?
(2) What changes does positive education contribute to?
(3) What challenges do teachers face in the work with positive education?
(4) Does positive education affect teachers' own well-being?

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were recruited from a continuing professional development course arranged by the Strength, Happiness and Compassion research project, in collaboration with the Centre for Lifelong Learning in Åbo Akademi University and financed by Finnish National Agency for Education. Out of around 108 participants, 72 gave written consent to participate in a qualitative study, and 65 of these filled out an additional questionnaire. The 72 participants were made up of pre-school teachers (for children aged 5–7 years), primary school class teachers (for children aged 7–12), subject teachers for students in secondary school or upper secondary school (for children aged 12–18), special-needs teachers, guidance counsellors, school social workers, assistants and principals. Some worked full-time, while others only part-time (Table 1). Participants had varying amounts of experience with the teaching job, varying from less than three to over 30 years of experience.

The intervention

The continuing professional development course was arranged in four different locations around Finland and consisted of four regional training days over a time period of about 11 months. In the end, all participants gathered to participate in one last training day to

Table 1. Participants by teaching groups.

Group	Amount	Percent (%)
Class teachers	46	62.2
Special-needs teachers	15	20.3
Subject teachers	7	9.5
Others[a]	6	8.1

Note: Some teachers identified with several groups and are therefore reported on multiple places. [a]pre-school teachers, part-time teachers, guidance counsellors, assistants and principals.

Table 2. Intervention themes and content.

Training day theme	Content
A Positive Me: On Values, Strengths and a Higher Self-Worth	• Character strengths • Utilising strengths
Positive Emotions: To Broaden and Build	• Positive emotions • Enhanced learning through positive emotions • Bucket metaphor
Strengthening Positive Relationships	• Fostering positive relationships • Conflict management
Positive Thoughts and Engagement	• Realistic hopefulness • Mindset • Resilience

summarise everything they had learned and build networks. The intervention was based on the PERMA theory and divided into four categories, one for each training day. The categories are presented in Table 2. An important part of each training day was that participants were divided into smaller groups to plan how they could implement the new methods in their own schools, and the following training day they had an opportunity to reflect upon how the implementation had worked.

Procedure

Learning diary

The goal with the learning diary was to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences with positive education. No specific questions were asked, which gave participants space to write freely about their experiences. They were only instructed to write about their thoughts and processes with positive education, both from the training days and from the work in between with their own students. Some optional questions were presented to support participants' writing (Appendix A), in case they found it difficult. In addition, several participants gave their consent to being interviewed after the intervention, if the learning diaries proved to be too short or if too few participants turned them in.

The data was analysed with qualitative content analysis, which is used when the aim is to understand experiences and phenomena (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). First, all learning diaries were read through to gain an overview of the material, whereafter we chose which exact statements were relevant to the aim of the current study. During the process three main themes of the teachers' experiences were identified during the reading, becoming the research questions: (1) aims that teachers felt positive education was useful for; (2) changes positive education had contributed to; and (3) challenges teachers faced while working with positive

education. The learning diaries were read through again, now with these elements in mind. Statements that described positive education being good for a specific purpose were interpreted as answers to the first element, while statements with comparative words, comparisons over time and words indicating change were interpreted as answers to the second element. Statements that brought up something challenging, hard or situations when positive educations didn't work as they had hoped were interpreted as answers to the third element. The statements were then analysed out of their contexts and regrouped into different themes within the statements. The statements were also viewed in the light of the PERMA theory and earlier studies of the subject.

Questionnaire

In addition, a questionnaire was used to answer the research question regarding the teachers' own well-being, to investigate whether the teachers personally gained something from the intervention. Specifically, teachers' well-being and burnout symptoms were measured with two questionnaires both before and after the intervention. To analyse the results, paired t-tests were calculated.

To measure participants' well-being, The PERMA profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) was used. It is grounded in Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory. The questionnaire measures overall well-being as well as seven subscales: (1) positive emotion; (2) engagement; (3) relationships; (4) meaning; (5) accomplishment; (6) negative emotion; and (7) health. The scale has shown good internal consistency for most subscales (α = .80-.93), except for the subscale 'engagement' (α = .66). Acceptable rates of convergent and divergent validity have also been shown (Ryan et al., 2019).

To measure burnout symptoms the Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators Survey (MBI-ES, Maslach & Jackson, 1981) was used. The MBI-ES measures overall burnout symptoms as well as the subscales (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalisation and (3) personal accomplishment. The subscales have shown varying internal consistency: the general burnout (α = .67) and depersonalisation (α = .64) have shown questionable internal consistency, while the subscales emotional exhaustion (α = .86) and personal accomplishment (α = .76) have shown good and acceptable internal consistency.

Ethical considerations

The ethics for the current study were disclosed for the participants in a consent form, where they were informed about confidentiality and how their data would be handled. It was also important to highlight that participation was completely voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw their consent at any given time. All data has been handled with care and confidentiality. We concurred that there were no problems with confidentiality with the study, since all statements were anonymised in the analysing stage, so that all names of people and places have been replaced with unidentifiable words such as student, school or colleague. Statements that referred to a specific gender have also been corrected into gender neutral terms.

Results

Teacher experiences with positive education

Relevant statements found in the learning diaries were divided into three sections based on the specific research questions. Categories that emerged from the data are found in Table 3. At the end of each section, the findings are summarised and interpreted.

Aims that positive education was useful for

Many participants described positive education as being useful in many different situations. About a fourth of the participants reported finding positive education useful for supporting students' emotional development. Most situations that were described in the statements were situations with individual students, where positive education was used to strengthen the student's self-esteem and to manage negative emotions. Some wrote that the students learned to describe and identify their feelings, and work with their mindsets to change negative thought processes. The following statement exemplifies how strengths has been a good starting point when talking to students about changing behaviour:

> During the past weeks I have also had a problematic situation with a student who has problems with honesty and being considerate to others. It was great to be able to, in a tangible way, talk to the student about which strengths they now should focus on and which strengths they already had and could bring forward.

The participants also reported using positive education, in most cases strengths, to support students in new or challenging tasks and situations. It was useful e.g. when integrating students into a new class, when learning a new skill such as how to ski, and when discussing difficult topics, such as plastic in the ocean. Strengths were also used to increase students' self-efficacy and to motivate students to work in class. Two quotes from participating teachers regarding these topics were the following:

> When the class went downhill skiing, and 90% of the pupils had never even stood on slalom skis before, the preparation was almost as important as the actual skiing day. Apart from the practical information we prepared ourselves by discussing strengths.

> Where I feel strengths have been especially good is when we are doing exercises – I encourage students to bring out their persistence, creativity, teamwork etc. And especially if it is a difficult task that could lead to resistance, it doesn't do so when I present it together with the strengths they need to execute it.

Table 3. Categories answering specific research questions.

Aims that teachers felt positive education was useful for	Changes positive education contributed to	Challenges in the work with positive education
Supporting students' emotional development	Personal changes for the teacher	Lack of time
Supporting students' social development	Professional development for the teachers	Insufficient support from the workplace
Making and strengthening relationships	Improved collegiality	Students' inability to embrace the methods
Performance discussions and giving feedback	Emotional changes for the students	Personal resources don't suffice
Supporting language development	Changes in social interactions between students	

Participants also noticed how positive education supported students' social development and strengthened their relationships. Around 20% of the teachers described how they used positive education when working with social abilities, class atmosphere and conflict prevention and management. They described it as having been useful to raise students' awareness about other peers' feelings, especially with the help of the bucket metaphor. One participating teacher described the students' social development like this:

> I told them about how I perceived the situation, that they had emptied both others' and their own buckets, also mine, and drops had splashed off from the class' common bucket as well. They understood. They now took care of their empty buckets. They have since wanted to fill their buckets every day. Soon they are filled up again. It worked, [the exercise was] tangible and good.

A handful of participants stated that relationships between students, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents and between colleagues benefited from positive education. Teachers expressed that especially the work with strengths gave both students' and staff new ways of communicating with each other, creating a more positive atmosphere at school. Some also discussed how positive education was beneficial when giving feedback and having performance discussions with the students. Many teachers stated that it was easier to come up with positive feedback, and one teacher pointed out that strengths worked as a good base for an encouraging performance discussion together with the students and their parents. One teacher also commented that it was easier to set goals with the students and to figure out a way to reach these goals with methods from positive education:

> Earlier during the goal discussions, we spent too little time on HOW we would reach the goals and what challenges we might face on the way. This method helped students to not only clarify their goals, but also to clarify how to reach them.

Summary and interpretation.   The participants described having found positive education useful in many situations, mostly in emotional and social aspects. The two methods of positive education described most often in the statements are strengths and the bucket metaphor. Our interpretation is that the bucket metaphor has worked as a way to make students more aware of other people's feelings, and in that way making them more empathetic. This is supported by other findings (Leskisenoja, 2016). Furthermore, the bucket metaphor works as a concrete way to show students how their behaviour can affect others (Rath & Clifton, 2004). Learning about strengths was also beneficial for social development, since it gave students an understanding of how people are different and have different experiences. They were, however, proven most useful for emotional development and especially student self-esteem. Our interpretation is that teachers who notice and point out strengths in students show them how to use tools they already have, especially in challenging situations, which in its turn also supports them towards a more dynamic mindset. The fact that all strengths are equal and that everybody has strengths seems to have increased positive emotions in students. Recognising these emotions is important to create a positive and safe student–teacher relationship.

The aims that teachers felt positive education was useful for were mostly student-centred. However, we still interpret that the participants themselves also had benefited from positive education, since it gave them useful methods and support in their everyday

work, especially in challenging situations. Positive education gave teachers new tools and perspectives to support students' social and emotional development, as well as developing their language, which we interpret as something useful for teachers' professional development.

Changes positive education contributed to

Over a third of the participating teachers reported some personal changes that positive education contributed to. They described having more positive thought patterns overall, and that it was easier to hang on to a positive perspective in challenging times by the help of positive education. A few participants stated that they got to know themselves better, increasing their self-awareness by understanding their own thought and behaviour patterns. Some described that they became more brave, forgiving and kinder to themselves as a result of the training. Many participants mentioned having raised awareness of their own well-being, and that they started working towards increasing their well-being, with a couple mentioning they had already succeeded. One participant also described that the investment in their own well-being led to them feeling a greater sense of meaning at work. Another participant described the changes like this:

> This project has affected how much I take my own well-being into account. Especially when work feels hard, I try to pause and put my attention on positive moments and not worry about future challenges, instead believe in my own strength, and recognise that I've done the best to my abilities even though the result might not have been optimal.

A fourth of the teachers expressed that they had developed professionally as well. Half of them described how they see changes in how they view and meet students. They reported that they felt that it was easier to see all students' individual strengths and to understand how they think with methods of positive education. Many participants stated that this change was the most visible with challenging students. One teacher explained: 'I think I have become better at strengthening the weak students and having more patience with them.' Many of the participants also described becoming better at communicating these things to the students. Some commented that they felt that they got new ways to praise the students, in more constructive ways. Some also pointed out that they learned new ways to support students that are facing challenges in their learning:

> I have started using the lines 'this is a bit challenging for you right now' and 'this thing you don't quite master yet' and notice that it changes the way students look at their own learning processes.

Nine participants described changes in the collegiality. The statements both mentioned the general atmosphere and the participants' own attitudes towards their colleagues. They described how they learned to focus on the positive more often, also during stressful times. They also reported the atmosphere being more open, and that colleagues shared more ideas, literature, materials and successes from the classroom. Some participants pointed out that positive education contributed to the colleagues being better at showing respect and listening to one another. They also felt like they became better at giving each other feedback and appreciating the feedback they got, both positive feedback and constructive criticism:

> We have become better at seeing each other and giving feedback. We try to point out the positive things that have happened during the week. Try to solve problems together. Feels like we have a warmer and more positive atmosphere at school.

Almost 30% of the teachers also noticed changes in their students. Ten participants pointed out students' emotional development, while the others commented on the social interaction between students. The participants described seeing how students have increased self-esteem, self-efficacy and well-being. Some saw these changes mostly when students faced challenges and failures:

> I see changes in the students that I work with now when they haven't yet reached their goals – but slowly move towards them because of praising the process, constructive criticism and demanding engagement and effort – not flawlessness and focusing on the teaching process, and see how they slowly start believing in themselves and reaching their goals.

The participants also described that the students seemed to know themselves better and have an increased self-awareness. One teacher also described how the methods were useful when working with a student diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Moreover, teachers noticed differences in the students' social interaction. They described positive changes such as 'my students have a softer way to communicate because of this course, and I feel like they see each other with more patience and love' and 'I hear spontaneous comments such as "thank you for filling my bucket!" and "now you really used your perseverance!"' Some reported that the atmosphere in the classroom became better and more open because of positive education.

Summary and interpretation. Statements answering this research question showed that positive education contributed to changes for the participating teachers, their students and their colleagues. Teachers described both personal and professional development, which in our interpretation support one another. We also interpret that the professional development has made it possible to see positive changes in students' emotional and social abilities. These results are in accordance with the model that GGS uses, and changes that have been noticed in other studies on PPIs (Roth et al., 2017; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Shoshani et al., 2016; Suldo et al., 2015). This points to the students internalising the metaphorical buckets and the character strengths. The changes in collegiality could, in our interpretation, stem from the participating teachers discussing and sharing their newfound knowledge about positive education with their colleagues and therefore engaging the whole school. To thoroughly embed positive education into the whole school, it's necessary to get engagement from leadership and to create common guidelines (Hoare et al., 2017). However, in our interpretation, the schools associated with the participating teachers have not reached this level of engagement.

Challenges teachers faced in the work with positive education

The challenge that was most visible in the learning diaries was lack of time. The reasons for this varied: some had many different projects going on concurrently at their school, others noticed the time during meetings with colleagues was not sufficient for presenting the new methods. The teachers also spent varying amounts of time with their students, and some did not feel they had enough time with the students to implement the methods:

> It is difficult to execute a bigger project with strengths when you meet your students only once or twice a week. It would be much easier if you had your own class and met them more often. Then you could work with strengths as a long-term process.

About 10 statements also commented that the support from the workplace was insufficient, which became a challenge in the work with positive education. Some felt they did not have the space to present positive education to their colleagues, while others were not satisfied with the way colleagues or leadership reacted to the new methods. It led to many feeling alone in the work with positive education, which was perceived as challenging. The students' reactions were also challenging for many teachers, especially when presenting subjects that were more personal, such as strengths and the metaphorical buckets. They recognised that some students ruined it for others by not taking the exercises seriously and laughing them off. One teacher also reflected that the issue might not lie in positive education, but in the students' inability to change their own thought patterns. The main issue, however, was to include everyone in the discussions, and make them feel safe about speaking about personal aspects. Another teacher reflected that group sizes and compositions could affect how comfortable the students would feel sharing about personal subjects.

The last challenge that a few teachers reported was a lack of personal resources to execute the methods. The reasons for this varied, and were not always explained, but one teacher described it as being due to illness. Others felt too stressed, and had hence not got started with the methods. Another participant described that their workload already took too much of her energy.

Summary and interpretation.   The challenges that the teachers faced were lack of time, support and resources in different ways. According to the statements, we interpret that the workload that teachers experience in general played a big part in the challenges that the teachers experienced with positive education. It also seems like the different categories that were presented to this research question are linked, and that it is often the same participants who have experienced many of the challenges. The teachers in this study pointed out the importance of the colleagues' attitudes towards positive education, although interestingly only few mentioned the principal, even though they have the primary responsibility about their school's methods of teaching. Otherwise, according to the statements, it seems like most of the teachers had the will and ambition to implement positive education on a larger scale, even though they had no outside pressure to do so. However, we interpret that the pressure they put on themselves contributes to the experienced challenges in this group.

Important to note is that the majority of the participants did not point out any challenges in their learning diaries. In addition, all teachers who reported challenges had also worked successfully with positive education in some way, which in our interpretation indicates that the challenges are not obstacles, but a threat to the teachers' long-term engagement for positive education.

Table 4. Significant results from the questionnaires.

|	Sample size	Range	Baseline		Follow-up		p-value	Effect size (Cohen's d)
			Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
PERMA overall well-being	65	0–10	7.80	.90	8.09	.79	<.001	.34
PERMA positive emotion	65	0–10	7.99	.95	8.22	.87	.020	.25
PERMA engagement	65	0–10	7.30	1.29	7.70	1.06	.008	.34
PERMA relationships	65	0–10	8.18	1.25	8.52	1.04	.001	.30
PERMA accomplishment	65	0–10	7.19	1.15	7.55	.93	.003	.34
PERMA health	65	0–10	7.05	1.34	7.41	1.38	.010	.26
MBI-ES personal accomplishment	65	0–48	37.66	5.29	39.40	5.31	<.001	.33

Teachers' well-being

In order to analyse the quantitative measures, paired t-tests were conducted on IBM SPSS 26 Statistics for the PERMA questionnaire, containing eight subscales, and for the MBI-ES questionnaire, containing three subscales. The power analysis for paired t-test suggests that the sample size of 65 reached the optimal minimum required sample size given statistical power of 0.6 for PERMA overall well-being, positive emotions engagement, relationships, accomplishment and health, as well as for MBI-ES positive accomplishment. However, for PERMA meaning and negative emotion, as well as MBI-ES emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, the optimal sample size was not reached with the current study.

The results from the paired t-tests showed that all PERMA scales were statistically significant except meaning and negative emotion. Therefore the subscales overall well-being ($t(64) = -3.76$, $p < .001$), positive emotion ($t(64) = -2.39$, p = .020), engagement ($t(64) = -2.73$, $p = .008$), relationships ($t(64) = -3.572$, $p = .001$), accomplishment ($t(64) = -3.06$, $p = .003$) and health ($t(64) = -2.64$, $p = .010$) showed a significant increase, although only with small effect sizes ($d = .25–.34$). The MBI-ES questionnaire, which measures burnout symptoms, did not show significant differences, and neither did the subscales emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. However, the subscale personal accomplishment showed a small significant effect ($t(64) = -3.94$, $p < .001$, $d = .33$). All significant findings support the idea that the intervention increases teachers' own well-being and decreases burnout symptoms. The means and standard deviations of all group measurements are presented in Table 4, while the results are visualised in Figures 1(a,b) and 2.

Furthermore, as the participating teachers had varying amounts of experience with teaching, it was of interest to further examine whether it influenced how the intervention affected their well-being. Two groups were formed based on experience: teachers with experience of 15 years or less (40.6%), and teachers with experience of 16 years or more (59.4%). Mixed ANOVA analyses were made regarding PERMA overall well-being and personal accomplishment. Personal accomplishment was analysed further as it was the only burnout subscale that showed significant results of the intervention. However, the analyses showed no significant interaction effects between time and group, meaning that teachers benefited equally from the intervention.

(a). Significant results from the PERMA questionnaire
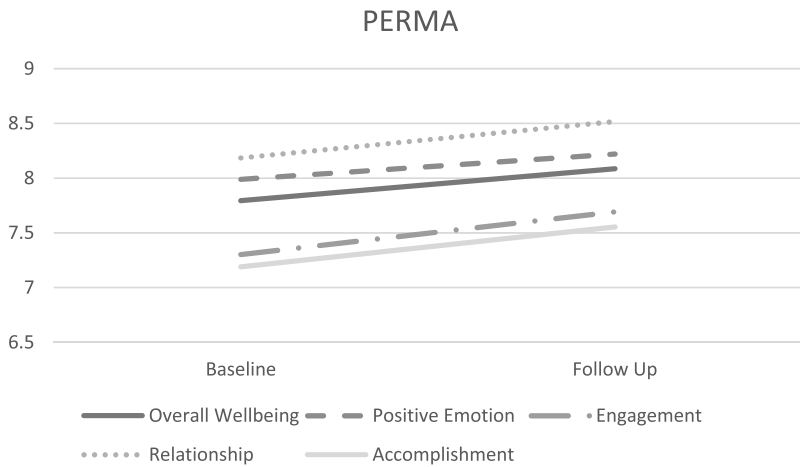
(b). Significant results from the PERMA questionnaire
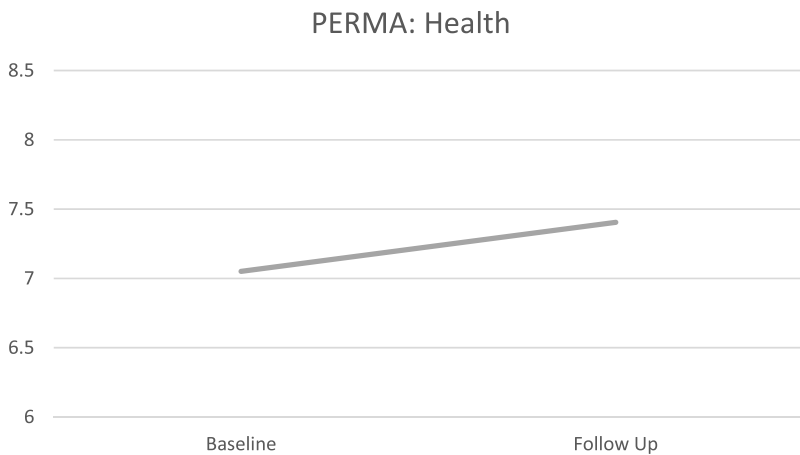
Figure 1. (a) and (b) Significant results from the PERMA questionnaire.

Discussion

In general, participants experienced positive education as a positive and rewarding experience, while some also described challenges. From a well-being point of view, it is evident that two main themes have been affected the most by positive education methods, namely positive emotions and positive relationships. Engagement, meaning and accomplishment have also been brought up, especially in how teachers describe working persistently towards a goal, and seen results in the students. These themes cover all the elements in the PERMA theory. Furthermore, the challenges the teachers describe also often touch upon the same main themes: positive emotions and positive relationships. It

MBI-ES: Personal Accomplishment
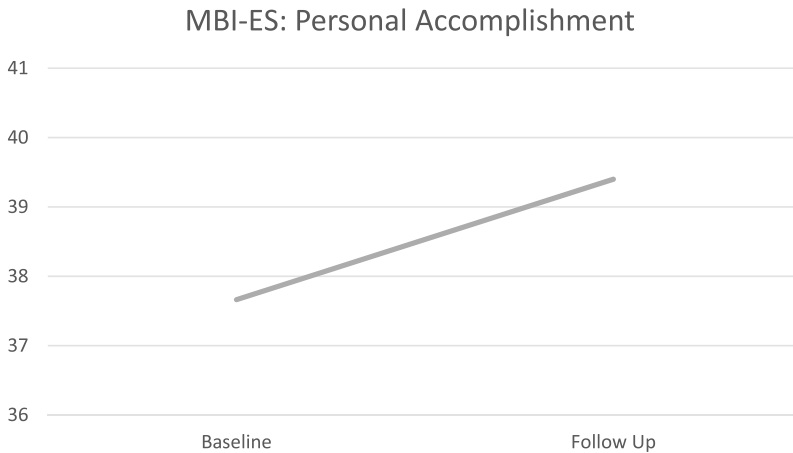
Figure 2. Result from MBI-ES subscale personal accomplishment.

is not surprising that the results mainly focus on these two themes, since the intervention also focused mostly on them. In the following sections the findings will be discussed in further detail.

Positive education supports personal and professional development

In accordance with earlier research (The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019) participants in this study described that they have experienced both personal and professional growth because of positive education. Many of the participants reported that positive education has contributed to some aspect of well-being, such as feeling stronger or having a more positive outlook on life. This is also supported by the quantitative well-being measures used in this study, showing that teachers' overall well-being, their positive emotions, their engagement, relationships and sense of accomplishment had increased during the intervention. The amount of experience the teachers had with their work did not affect the outcome. These results are in line with earlier research, showing that positive psychology interventions lead to more frequent positive emotions, higher life satisfaction and flourishing for teachers (Rahm & Heise, 2019). Results from the current study were, however, a bit smaller in effect size in comparison to earlier research. Moreover, it is important to note that this study had no control group, so the quantitative results should be interpreted with caution, as a change in well-being could also depend on other factors apart from the intervention. Nevertheless, the teachers' learning diaries still point to positive education methods having contributed to this change. An increased subjective feeling of well-being can in turn support the teacher to develop professionally.

The teachers used positive education for many aims, indicating they were able to implement the new methods that were introduced during the training, which is in line with earlier research (Isopahkala, 2019). The teachers reported professional growth, but not only by learning and integrating new methods. Hoare and colleagues (2017) describe positive education as a philosophy of education, which in this study could be noticed by

how teachers began seeing students in a different light. Some teachers especially pointed out being more understanding towards students with difficulties, which is also backed up by earlier research (Vuorinen et al., 2019). This, in turn, changed how teachers communicated with their students, now by encouraging engagement and reminding students that even though they might have failed at something at the moment, they can still manage to do it in the future. In other words, the teachers became more aware of the importance of supporting students to have a dynamic mindset, which, according to Dweck and colleagues (2015), makes students more resilient. This subjective feeling of professional growth was also reflected in the results from the questionnaire measuring burnout symptoms. While symptoms of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation did not change due to the intervention, teachers experienced an increased sense of personal accomplishment at their workplace. Thus, tools from positive education fostered professional development, which in turn was reflected upon teacher well-being as well.

The professional development of the participating school staff also led to changes in student behaviour, and even though a few participants reported having difficulties reaching students, they still felt they had succeeded in the work with positive education. The changes that were noticed in students were mostly of an emotional and social nature. The emotional changes were tied to a more dynamic mindset and the work with character strengths, while the social changes were associated with the work with positive emotions and character strengths. According to Fredrickson's (2013) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions support us to expand our ways of thinking and thus to build personal resources, such as social resources. However, since the changes in the students are only measured by the teachers' statements, the results cannot directly be compared to earlier research, even though they indicate results in the same trajectory (Laakso et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2017; Shoshani et al., 2016; Suldo et al., 2015; The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019).

To summarise, the teachers have experienced increased well-being and more strength despite the challenges. By working with positive education, the teachers started seeing students in a different light, which led to changes in communication with the students. The professional growth also elicited positive changes in the students. Positive education has therefore supported teachers' personal and professional development.

Support from the workplace is crucial

One aspect that was brought up by many participants was the importance of support from the workplace. Some describe experiencing improved collegiality, that they are more open and respectful after the intervention. This has led to the positive education spreading to more teachers at schools. Because of this, teachers have been able to support one another in implementing positive education. Positive changes at the workplace are described by about 10 participants, but just as many reported having challenges in the work with positive education because of insufficient support from their colleagues. Some felt like they didn't have the space to reach out to their colleagues and some felt the colleagues reacted negatively. This phenomenon has been noticed in earlier studies too (Isopahkala, 2019), resulting in less or no engagement with the work in positive education. Especially in situations where teachers reported not having enough personal resources, the colleagues were of even greater importance.

Earlier studies reported leadership's engagement being a crucial factor for positive education to succeed (Isopahkala, 2019; The Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School, 2019), but only few participants from the current study mentioned the principal. Their principals did not react negatively towards positive education, but the participants wished they would have engaged more in the project. Leadership plays a central role in engaging the whole school in positive education, but it requires consistent engagement. Engaging a whole school would also require the whole personnel to participate in a course in positive education, just as the GGS model entails (Hoare et al., 2017). One challenge is the lack of time the teachers experience, as well as the already big workload. With the results regarding lack of time, it is evident that the participating teachers in the current study felt they had to prioritise other things before positive education, which is why it would be crucial to embed it into the school culture (Hoare et al., 2017; Isopahkala, 2019). If positive education would be a part of the school culture, time must be set aside for learning about and discussing positive education with colleagues. The lack of time and support could also be a reason for some quantitative results, namely how two of the main elements of burnout remained unchanged for the participating teachers. Even though teachers experienced more personal accomplishment, due to the intervention, the amount of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation was not affected. Maybe, if teachers had enough resources and support, positive education could affect these symptoms of burnout too, just as teachers in GGS feel less stressed compared to other Australian teachers (Institute of Positive Education, 2019).

Strengths and weaknesses

This study used both qualitative and quantitative measures to investigate teachers' experiences with positive education. Since the study's aim is to deepen the understanding of a phenomenon, a qualitative approach was justified, while the quantitative measures provided measurable and a more objective way of looking at teachers' well-being before and after the course. Participants wrote a freely worded learning diary during the intervention, which gave participants freedom to write about anything related to positive education in their school, instead of summarising experiences into answers to some specific questions. However, this approach led to learning diaries differing in both in length and content. Much of the content was also not relevant for the current study, and since we were not able to ask follow-up questions, much interpretation went into the analysing of the statements. However, we have explained how we have interpreted the statements, to make the analysis open and transparent to readers. This study used no control group, so the quantitative measures should be interpreted with caution. However, when taken together qualitative and quantitative results point in the same direction as participants ascribe their increased well-being to positive education and the methods provided during the training.

When using qualitative content analysis it is important to note that our own preconceptions might have affected the interpretation and analysis of the data. Our preconception was that positive education could potentially foster both students' and teachers' well-being, as well as give schools new tools in supporting the students' social and emotional development. Nevertheless, we also recognised that there might be

challenges, especially with the lack of time that teachers often experience. To make the process transparent and apparent for the readers, our interpretations were clearly communicated.

Moreover, the participants in the current study were teachers who voluntarily participated in a continuing professional development course. This could indicate that the participants already were motivated by positive education. It is possible that the participants' experiences would differ if they did not have an interest in the subject beforehand. However, starting with smaller interventions is advantageous before knowing whether the intervention has an effect or not. With these favourable results, the intervention could be trialled on larger populations, e.g. on a whole-school level.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine teachers' experiences with positive education. School staff participated in five full days of training spread over 11 months They wrote learning diaries throughout the intervention period, and were asked to fill out a questionnaire before and after the training. The results from this study show that positive education has contributed to both personal and professional growth for the teachers, as well as positive changes in the school context. Teachers' perception of their own well-being has improved, as well as their feeling of personal accomplishment. For future studies, it would be important to study the long-term effects of a positive education intervention for teachers. It would be of interest to see what factors contribute to whether teachers continue to use methods of positive education. This would be important for creating tools and supporting participating teachers during the process.

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Geological information

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Appendix A: Support questions for the learning diary

Questions for the learning diaries during the course

What are you planning to implement at work?

What did you implement at work? Reflecting on working with [theme, e.g. strengths] at school?

What has changed since you started working with positive psychology, for yourself – for your work – for your students?

What benefits did you gain from learning about [theme, e.g. strengths]?

Questions for the learning diaries after the end of the course:

Has the course affected you and your well-being? How?

Has the course affected you and your colleagues? How?

Has the course affected your students' well-being? How?