



## Short Reports:

# Positive Education in Dubai: A Pilot Study of Teacher Experiences

Samways, M., Teasel, S., Waldrop, R. J., Chiao, E.- L., & Warren, M. A.

**Citation:** Samways, M., Teasel, S., Waldrop, R. J., Chiao, E.- L., & Warren, M. A. (2019). Short reports: Positive education in Dubai: A pilot study of teacher experiences. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(1), 97-104.

**Abstract:** Positive education programs have been at the center of many studies, yet few have assessed the occupational wellbeing of the teachers delivering them. Such programs may buffer against teachers' occupational stress by increasing exposure to uplifting content. This pilot study qualitatively explores the experiences of seven teachers in the city of Dubai, United Arab Emirates after their first semester teaching a positive education curriculum. Results showed that teachers were enthusiastic about experiences with their students when engaging in positive education activities, strengthening their relationships with them, and observing the positive relationships that students formed with each other. Yet, they experienced stress and concern when students unwittingly over-disclosed stories of adversity and felt they lacked the training to handle such disclosures. Although limited in sample size, this study offers early insight into the experiences of an overlooked but critical group – teachers – in positive education.

**الخلاصة:** كانت برامج التعليم الإيجابي هدفاً للعديد من الدراسات التجريبية ، ولكن قلة منها قامت بتقييم الرفاهية المهنية والفردية لهؤلاء الذين يقومون بتدريس هذه البرامج. ينبغي أن تعزز برامج التعليم الإيجابي النتائج الإيجابية للمعلمين. ولكن ما هي التكلفة؟ مثل هذه البرامج قد تحمي من الإجهاد المهني والتنظيمي عن طريق زيادة التعرض للمواد الإيجابية وزيادة الكفاءة الذاتية. من ناحية أخرى ، قد يؤثر الدعم الاجتماعي على الرفاهية بما يتجاوز العوامل الفردية ومستوى الفصل الدراسي. تلقي هذه الدراسة نظرة نوعية على تجارب مجموعة من سبعة مدرسين في مدينة دبي ، الإمارات العربية المتحدة بعد فصلهم الأول في تدريس مناهج التعليم الإيجابي. مع الأخذ في الاعتبار نهج الأنظمة الكاملة ، أظهرت النتائج أن المعلمين كانوا متحمسين للتجارب الإيجابية مع طلابهم عند الانخراط في أنشطة التعليم الإيجابي ، وتعزيز علاقاتهم مع طلابهم ، ومراقبة العلاقات الإيجابية التي شكلها الطلاب مع بعضهم البعض. ومع ذلك ، فقد تعرضوا للتوتر والقلق عندما قام الطلاب بالإفصاح عن كتب عن قصص الشدائد التي مروا بها وشعر المعلمون أنهم يفتقرون إلى التدريب للتعامل مع مثل هذه الإفصاحات. على الرغم من محدودية حجم العينة ، تقدم هذه الدراسة نظرة ناقدة عن التأثير على المعلمين عند تنفيذ برنامج تعليمي إيجابي.

**Keywords:** positive education; occupational health; qualitative; organizations; wellbeing; teachers; United Arab Emirates

**About the Authors:** Mark Samways and Sheridan Teasel lead the positive education program at Dubai College, Dubai (UAE). Mark is a school psychologist and currently completing a Master's in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching at The University of East London. Sheridan is a teacher of Mathematics and holds a first-class BA in Physics from the University of Oxford and an



MSc in Psychology from the University of Derby. Rachel Waldrop has an MA in psychology from Western Washington University (Bellingham, WA, USA). Dr. En-Ling Chiao is an Assistant Professor of Psychology from Simpson University (Redding, CA, USA). Dr. Meg Warren is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management, College of Business & Economics at Western Washington University (Bellingham, WA, USA).

**Address correspondence to** Mark Samways: [mark.samways@dubaicollege.org](mailto:mark.samways@dubaicollege.org) or Sheridan Teasel: [sheridan.teasel@dubaicollege.org](mailto:sheridan.teasel@dubaicollege.org)

**Declaration of Interest:** The first two authors and the Editor of the MEJPP, Dr. Louise Lambert, were co-developers of the Dubai College positive education program. All data were analyzed, interpreted and reported by independent researchers unaffiliated with the program.

**Research in positive education** aims to promote positive outcomes, wellbeing, and strengths in schools to supplement academic success with the healthy emotional and psychological development of students (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Positive psychology interventions (PPIs), the empirically validated strategies used to increase such positive mental health and emotional outcomes, have been used in a variety of educational settings. Regional research from a 14-week student program in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) showed improvements in hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing, as well as lower levels of fear of happiness three months post intervention, compared to a control group (Lambert, Passmore, & Joshanloo, 2019). In a control-trial study in Kuwait, Lambert, Passmore, Scull, Al Sabah, and Hussain (2019) showed that relative to a control group, university students reported greater eudemonic wellbeing after eight weeks, and secondary students achieved greater gains in hedonic wellbeing. Although evidence supports that positive psychological tools benefit the recipients of programs, there is little research on the experiences of teachers associated with such efforts.

Globally, almost half of teachers leave their profession within the first five years (Ingersoll & May, 2012). They experience unique job stressors as their day-to-day expectations are occupationally taxing in the traditional sense, as well as emotionally taxing. Occupational stressors among teachers include balancing a heavy workload, feeling pressure to meet educational standards, addressing and disciplining classroom behavior (Hansen & Sullivan, 2003). They report individual-level stressors such as having to engage in emotionally incongruent behaviors (e.g., expressing enthusiasm even when tired) and feeling low self-efficacy. Both individual- and occupational-level demands contribute to the high emotional exhaustion and turnover rates observed (Näring, Vlerick, & Van de Ven, 2012). Positive interventions may counteract such effects by decreasing the frequency of negative interactions in which teachers might feel the need to engage in emotionally exhausting, regulatory functions (Ross et al., 2012). In the current study, we explore the experiences of teachers in delivering a positive education program. As wellbeing in educational institutions is now a priority for the UAE government, this is a timely inquiry.



## The Present Study

### Participants

All 40 teachers delivering the positive education program were invited to participate in the focus group, out of which seven teachers (two male; five female) agreed to participate. Years of service ranged from new staff to six years and ages ranged from 27 to 49 years. All participants were British and Irish nationals. Year levels 8 to 12 received the program and a representative teacher from every year participated in the qualitative focus group<sup>1</sup>.

### Method

This focus group serves as part of a larger assessment of the school's positive education program (Lambert, Draper, Warren, Samways, & Teasel, forthcoming), which involves a year-long weekly delivery of PPIs on topics such as gratitude, positive reminiscing, self-compassion, mental contrasting, and acts of kindness. Other interventions focus on the reduction of worries and self-defeating negative beliefs. PPIs were grounded in the literature and designed to be short and easy to follow, with few resources needed (e.g., Shankland & Rosset, 2017). At three months into the program, teachers were invited to take part in a one-hour focus group, which was audio-recorded and transcribed by the first two authors. The aim of the focus group was to gather the views of participating teachers and make needed adjustments to their training, workload, or other aspects of their experience. Open-ended questions included their impressions of the program to date, what was working well, and perceived student changes. Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used to analyze the data, whereby frequently noted comments and perceptions were tentatively grouped and collated into themes with descriptions and verbatim commentary to support them.

## Results

### Positive Outcomes

*Better relationships.* The most common theme that emerged was that teachers of all grade levels reported developing richer relationships with their students as a result of the activities. Teachers at higher grade levels reported that even though they had known their students for several years, they developed stronger personal connections than before which seemed to benefit them as well as their students. The following quote provides one example:

*"I feel like I've gotten to know them on a much deeper level. I've known them for two years and I've spent a lot of time with them, but my understanding of them as individuals has certainly developed and has taken it to a new level which I've really benefited from."*

Teachers, new and experienced, seemed to positively benefit from getting to know their students better. Among new teachers, engaging in the positive education material led them to feel like they could be closer to their true selves with their students. The following quote highlights this:

---

<sup>1</sup> To maintain the group's anonymity, we chose not to identify the grade level of each teacher's responses.



*“I really enjoy it. I’m brand new, I’m new to them and it’s been good for me to get to know them, just initially and on a personal level. Actually, it’s quite nice out of the academic context, it puts us and them on a level playing field. Obviously, it’s nice to go over stuff that’s not connected to the classroom, trying to get a feel for who they are personally and to get people to talk about, well, just to talk and have no pressure of a right or wrong answer.”*

Teachers also reported feeling more comfortable to express their authentic selves and felt more understood by their students. One teacher expressed, “I counteracted [the conversation] from the teacher’s point of view and they responded, ‘oh, I never thought of that.’” In this way, teachers spent less time suppressing their emotions and displaying superficial positive behaviors and more time engaging in non-academic dialogue, at least during the activities.

*Positive material.* A second theme that emerged was that the positive education material itself positively impacted teachers. By discussing prompts such as “Think you know your family?,” teachers and students reflected on weird and funny things about their families. When students were reluctant to engage, teachers would often start the activity by sharing personal stories. In doing so, teachers felt like they shared aspects of their lives and felt good about engaging in the material. One teacher reported that although students were reluctant to start, the conversation “generated a really nice feeling in the room.”

Even when discussions took a less positive turn, teachers found strength in reflecting on these subjects. For example, when reflecting on the prompt “What’s the worst thing you can think of,” students would offer responses such as “Well, I might not live until I’m 18” or “I lost a relative recently.” Although the initial discussion brought up discomfort, the teacher reflected, “Actually, I could see it was good for me. I went through this process and thought about what is the worst thing that could happen to me...and how I could handle that...how I would actually respond. It was a really good thing and I could see the positive in it.” Thus, even though some material may have engendered discomfort, the program encouraged participants (in this case, teachers) to utilize positive tools they had learned to address these circumstances themselves.

### Shortcomings

*Lack of training.* Although teachers were pleased with the benefits of the program, they also felt as though they lacked the skills, or perhaps necessary practise to facilitate some of the activities and discussions. During some activities, conversations on less positive topics spontaneously arose. For instance, topics such as family or personal accomplishments sometimes triggered memories in which hardships occurred (i.e., family members passed away, students received serious medical diagnoses, etc.). In these instances, teachers were worried about their lack of ability to adequately address their students. The following quote displays this stressor:

*“I think you need to be a trained professional and you need to have adequate training to deal with people when they are expressing themselves at that level.”*



Many teachers shared this feeling. Their fear was that they would be letting their students down if they could not properly address a concern. They wanted to be able to connect with their students more effectively; however, they wanted additional training to know how to properly respond.

Combined with these perceptions, teachers were also unclear as to who was responsible if a conversation took a dark turn and whether they were alone in their responsibility. This concern extended to content arising outside of the positive education program. The following exchange highlights teacher's concerns about their ability to effectively support students.

*"I ask them if I can collect them (booklets) and most of them are fine with it. I was going to do a quick flick through them but I actually ended up reading them and the comments that they made... in my old school we had a system, and there was a whole area for pastoral concerns, so not necessarily the big things, but sometimes a child said something and if there was somewhere we could feed into, it helps to build a bigger picture, so for instance, they've said this to that person last week and now they've said this to me. I don't know, I think there's things that could be said, and I think, do I do anything with that or don't I?"*

*"I think that goes beyond the PosEd program. I think we've all got a responsibility to be aware of that as teachers - "*

*"- but, how can we be aware?"*

*"I think perhaps we need to be careful not to confuse our duty as a teacher, yes, of course, look out for those students and those signs and confuse that world with what they are writing in a PosEd book. Perhaps to be conscious of that - "*

*"So, clarity over the rules and procedures about whether we should be looking there or not looking there would be good for everybody, I think."*

*Lack of time.* Another theme that emerged was the lack of time to be able to fully engage in some of the activities. Some teachers reported that students are reluctant to begin conversations and by the time they open up, there is little time left. Others shared that although there were able to elicit conversations right away, they still ran out of time. Due to time constraints, they were sometimes unable to revisit a conversation until another two weeks had passed. When this occurred, they felt frustrated that they were not able to properly engage the material.

*"I've found timing a constraint for us as we've had to finish that topic and then it's a week or maybe we've not had an activity until two weeks later and we've not revisited that and we've moved on."*

*"It seems a shame, you're just getting into and it's quite good and you enjoy it."*



Among older students, time presented a different issue. The program replaced some of the independent study time that older students used to prepare for exams and therefore, generated resistance from these students. When the implementation of the material feels like a burden to students, teachers do not report as many positive outcomes.

### Discussion

Findings revealed that implementing positive education in the classroom allowed teachers and students to build better relationships. This is aligned with Rogers' (1959) conceptualization that an environment of unconditional positive regard characterized by acceptance, genuineness, and empathy can promote growth and psychological wellbeing for teachers and students. Combined with Bandura's (1986) theoretical framework of reciprocal determinism, it follows that the actions of teachers in connecting with and caring for students can foster their engagement and wellbeing, which in turn rewards teachers' efforts to build relationships with students and increases their wellbeing. At the same time, teachers perceived a need for more training. As schools offer further additional professional development training, mentoring, or even coaching programs for teachers, effectiveness in the delivery of such programs can be increased. This makes the use of time more efficient and puts teachers at greater ease.

Based on these early results, we make two recommendations. First, to encourage teachers to implement positive education as a new program, schools should create a psychologically safe environment for growth as teachers do for their students. Second, administrators should regularly communicate with teachers to evaluate their workload and make necessary adjustments, particularly early on in the journey, so that teachers do not feel alone or overwhelmed in their efforts. Being clearer about whether positive education lessons and student wellbeing is the priority or academic performance and continued attention to the standard curriculum, could reduce any ambivalence or internal conflict around teachers' time management. As student learning becomes more productive as a result of greater teaching effectiveness and efficiency, teacher frustration and student perceptions of burden should decrease. Soliciting solutions from teachers themselves can empower them to take greater ownership of the program. Finally, explicit attention to improving the wellbeing of teachers is increasingly becoming an avenue of interest given that greater employee wellbeing translates into many positive system-wide outcomes (Donaldson, Lee, & Donaldson, 2019), and student outcomes of a cognitive and emotional nature (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Organizations may benefit from aiming their wellbeing efforts at students and teachers.

### Strengths and Limitations

Although our sample size was small, our findings nevertheless make a contribution to the literature as to date. We echo previous recommendations that more positive education scholars should study teachers as their experiences play a large role in the success of positive education programs (Domitrovich et al, 2016; Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017). Further, this paper makes an important contribution to the regional knowledge generation of positive education programs. This is particularly vital as much of the current research on positive education is situated in Western countries and we know little about how these practices play out in the MENA context.



Despite its strengths, the paper should be viewed in light of its limitations. There is a risk of self-selection bias. As the sample is comprised of individuals who elected to participate, participants' experiences may be more similar than those who were not part of the focus group. Thus, the results may not be representative of the whole. Researcher bias, participant bias, and a desire to conform to the group may also have come into play; yet, as the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize, but provide an understanding of subjective experiences, our results remain insightful.

### Conclusion

Whether positive education is truly positive is not only determined by the means (materials and pedagogy) and ends (experiences of the students), but also the impetus (experiences of the teachers). This study suggests that to help students flourish, schools need to offer further and continued support for teachers to do so themselves. We hope our findings help school administrators and applied researchers gain insight into teacher's experiences of delivering positive education and develop ways to optimize its implementation by maximizing its strengths and minimizing its shortcomings. As wellbeing efforts in education continue to flourish in the UAE and beyond, we hope our early contributions also provide school systems in the region additional factors to consider in improving the wellbeing of students and teachers alike.

### References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Clarke, V., & Braun V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(3), 297-298.
- Domitrovich, C. E., Bradshaw, C. P., Berg, J. K., Pas, E. T., Becker, K. D., Musci, R., ... & Jalongo, N. (2016). How do school-based prevention programs impact teachers? Findings from a randomized trial of an integrated classroom management and social-emotional program. *Prevention Science, 17*(3), 325-337.
- Donaldson, S. I., Lee, J. Y., & Donaldson, S. I. (2019). Evaluating positive psychology interventions at work: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology, 4*(3), 113-134.
- Hansen, J. I., & Sullivan, B. A. (2003). Assessment of workplace stress: Occupational stress, its consequences, and common causes of teacher stress. In J. E. Wall & G. H. Walz (Eds.), *Measuring up: Assessment issues for teachers, counselors, and administrators* (pp. 611-622). Greensboro, NC: CAPS Press.
- Hoare, E., Bott, D., & Robinson, J. (2017). Learn it, live it, teach it, embed it: Implementing a whole school approach to foster positive mental health and wellbeing through positive education. *International Journal of Wellbeing, 7*(3), 56-71.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & May, H. (2012). The magnitude, destinations, and determinants of mathematics and science teacher turnover. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 34*(4), 435-464.



- Lambert, L., Passmore, H. A., & Joshanloo, M. (2019). A positive psychology intervention program in a culturally-diverse university: Boosting happiness and reducing fear. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 20(4), 1141-1162.
- Lambert, L., Passmore, H. A., Scull, N., Al Sabah, I., & Hussain, R. (2019). Wellbeing matters in Kuwait: The Alnowair's Bareec education initiative. *Social Indicators Research*, 143(2), 741-763.
- Näring, G., Vlerick, P., & Van de Ven, B. (2012). Emotion work and emotional exhaustion in teachers: The job and individual perspective. *Educational Studies*, 38(1), 63-72.
- Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2016). Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students. *Social Science & Medicine*, 159, 30-37.
- Rogers, C. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A study of a science - Formulations of the person and the social context* (pp. 184-256). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Ross, S. W., Romer, N., & Horner, R. H. (2012). Teacher well-being and the implementation of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14(2), 118-128.
- Seligman, M. E., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35(3), 293-311.
- Shankland, R., & Rosset, E. (2017). Review of brief school-based positive psychological interventions: A taster for teachers and educators. *Educational Psychology Review*, 29(2), 363-392.