

Nurturing Positivity

A Positive Psychology Intervention to Enhance Well-Being, Engagement, and Achievement among At-risk Students

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Two positive psychology interventions (PPIs) developed specifically for academically at-risk students (i.e., those who face the risk of continued low academic performance) and for classroom implementation by teachers can be used as an additional resource in fostering positivity in their classrooms.
- The results of the study can guide educators in selecting PPIs that suit the needs and profiles of their subjects: the Gratitude PPI, which focuses on cultivating grateful thinking, can help in boosting well-being; the Hope PPI, which underscores setting, mapping and working towards goals, can be utilized to promote students' use of adaptive learning strategies and prevent the decline in student' intrinsic motivation to study.

BACKGROUND

This study was conceived given the importance of promoting well-being, an important correlate of learning and future life outcomes, among school youth who are at higher risk for a wide range of maladaptive outcomes compared to adults and children. We utilized insights from positive psychology, which is a movement that focuses on promoting the positive aspects of human functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005), to develop an intervention programme designed to improve students' well-being and school outcomes.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This research aimed to (1) develop a positive psychology intervention (PPI) programme tailored for lower achieving students, and (2) evaluate the effectiveness of the programme in terms of improving both non-academic (i.e., well-being) and academic (adaptive learning strategies, motivation, engagement, and achievement) outcomes. The programme comprised the Gratitude, Hope and Strengths PPI, each involving five core activities.

KEY FINDINGS

Two out of the three PPIs developed in this study were found to have beneficial effects. The Gratitude PPI was found to be effective in enhancing students' life satisfaction and reducing self-reported depressive symptoms while the Hope PPI was found to be useful in preventing the increase in students' depressive symptoms. The Hope PPI was also found effective in increasing students' use of adaptive learning strategies (i.e., those that encourage deep learning and elaboration) and preventing the decline in students' intrinsic motivation to study. The positive effects of PPIs may take a while to manifest.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for Policy and Practice

The present study is one of the few studies that provided some evidence supporting the

effectiveness of PPIs among local students and the capability of local teachers to implement PPIs in a classroom setting. The study focused on the development of three PPIs, two of which were found effective in promoting academic and non-academic outcomes. Teachers may adopt the PPIs as stand-alone activities during Citizenship and Character Education (CCE) classes, as was done in this study, or integrate the PPIs into their classroom lessons. Policymakers may use this study as empirical anchor for introducing positive psychology principles and activities into the school curriculum.

Proposed Follow-up Activities

The effectiveness of the PPIs can be tested further in relation to different samples, such as students from other streams and age groups. This is to ascertain the boundaries within which the PPIs can generate positive effects. The research team may also work with school representatives to further modify and improve the PPIs to suit particular profiles of students.

RESEARCH DESIGN & PARTICIPANTS

The study involved 305 students and 26 teachers from five secondary schools in Singapore. They participated in one of the six sub-studies designed to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the three PPIs developed in the study. Two sub-studies were conducted for each PPI. The first sub-study involved two intact classes assigned as either intervention group (i.e., participated in the PPI) or control group (i.e., attended usual CCE lessons). Both groups took surveys a week before and after the completion of their assigned activities. The second sub-study followed a similar approach but it involved random assignment of students to the groups and an extended timeline for the administration of post-intervention surveys.

REFERENCE

Gable, S.L., & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology? *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 103–110.

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