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Positive Education Programme for Promoting Students' Well-Being: A Case Study in a Hong Kong SAR School during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Since 2019, students in Hong Kong SAR have encountered significant challenges stemming from socio-political unrest and the pervasive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges, coupled with the Confucian tradition of prioritizing academic achievement, have intensified academic stress amongst adolescents. To mitigate these adverse effects, this study investigates how a positive education programme, based on Seligman's PERMA model can improve students' well-being. A mixed-method sequential explanatory research design was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Flourishing Life programme, which integrates positive values into formal and informal curricula. Data were collected via surveys from students in Grades 7 to 11, aged 12 - 18, in 2019 (n = 592) and again in 2021 (n = 590). This was followed by focus group interviews (n = 7). The study's findings confirmed that the Flourishing Life programme effectively enhanced student well-being, particularly amongst junior students. Recommendations suggest implementing more interventions that focus on positive cognitive appraisal and an optimistic thinking style in future programmes. The study supports the relevance of the PERMA model for adolescents in a Chinese cultural context.

Keywords

Academic Stress, Positive Education, PERMA Model, Well-Being, Curriculum, Mixed-Method Research Design

1. Introduction

Academic stress is a perennial issue among students in Hong Kong SAR, spanning

from primary to tertiary education levels. Excessive stress can lead to various mental health issues, including depression and anxiety disorders. The purpose of this study is to review the severity of academic stress experienced by Hong Kong SAR students and explore potential interventions to mitigate its negative effects. Specifically, this paper introduces positive education programmes that emphasise the application of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) as a strategy to reduce academic stress. The effectiveness of the Flourishing Life programme is assessed using a mixed-method sequential explanatory research design. By integrating the PERMA model into formal and informal school curricula, the study aims to provide empirical evidence on the programme's effect on student well-being. This research contributes to the broader discussion on academic stress and mental health in educational settings, particularly within the context of Hong Kong SAR.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Academic Stress in Hong Kong SAR

The issue of academic stress amongst Hong Kong SAR students is pervasive and persistent. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2015, Hong Kong SAR was ranked second in East Asia in overall scores, which included reading literacy, mathematics and science. Despite this high academic performance, students reported relatively low levels of life satisfaction (OECD, 2017; Information Note from Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018: p. 9). This trend persisted in the 2018 PISA report, where Hong Kong SAR students demonstrated poor self-reported well-being, including low life satisfaction, high fear of failure and frequent feelings of sadness (OECD, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to other OECD participants, Hong Kong SAR students showed relatively weaker performance in perseverance and cooperation. Hong Kong SAR was also amongst the places with the lowest level of empathy, as measured by the PISA index of empathy, indicating a significant need to enhance students' well-being (OECD, 2022).

Several factors might contribute to this phenomenon, including familial expectations and academic pressure. Rooted in Confucian traditions, Hong Kong SAR parents often implicitly encourage their children to excel academically, believing that academic success will bring honour to the family and ensure future prospects. A survey conducted by Lingnan University in 2016 revealed that primary to secondary school students spent an average of 10 hours studying on a typical school day (Ho, & Early Childhood Development Research Foundation, 2016). In addition, the 2015 PISA report indicated that 15-year-old students in Hong Kong SAR spent an average of 46.4 hours per week on academic activities, ranking fifth in the East Asian region. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning have exacerbated academic burdens. Tsang and Fong (2022: p. 30) reported a local survey done by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups and found that 51.9% of the 3669 interviewed secondary school students exhibited emotional symptoms

of depression. University students were similarly concerned, with worries about their career prospects after graduation, leading to anxiety (Lee, 2020). Ng et al. (2016) reviewed extensive literature related to academic stress amongst Hong Kong SAR undergraduates and found that students had a significantly negative appraisal of stress, highlighting the prevalence of academic pressure. Chan (2009) reported that Hong Kong SAR college students experienced higher levels of stress compared to their peers in other countries, particularly first-year undergraduates who faced higher rates of anxiety due to new social and intellectual challenges (Wong et al., 2006). Overall, these findings indicate that academic stress is a critical issue affecting students across all educational levels in Hong Kong SAR, necessitating effective interventions to improve student well-being.

2.2. Severity of Academic Stress in Hong Kong SAR

The Mental Health Review Report (Food and Health Bureau, 2017) revealed that 16% of Hong Kong SAR students aged 13 - 15 exhibited symptoms of mental disorders in 2008, a rate higher than the global average of 13%. The number of psychiatric cases managed by the Hospital Authority surged by 69% over five years, reaching 32,000 in 2016-2017 (Information Note from Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018: p. 7). This alarming increase in student suicides prompted the government to establish a Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides in 2016. Beyond mental health concerns, Ng et al. (2016) identified additional detrimental effects of academic stress, such as feelings of helplessness, internet addiction, insufficient and poor-quality sleep and unhealthy dietary habits. Students often toil diligently and dedicate all their time to revision, leading to poor eating habits and a preference for unhealthy, energy-dense food (Emond et al., 2016).

In summary, Hong Kong SAR students face high levels of social tension and anxiety, exacerbated by academic stress. This situation is further complicated by the socio-political unrest of 2019, and the challenges posed by social distancing and online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards. These additional burdens have intensified the already overwhelming academic pressure, influenced by heavy workloads and individual negative appraisals shaped by high familial expectations and traditional Chinese culture. Addressing the adverse effects of adolescent stress remains a crucial agenda for educators and psychologists.

2.3. What Accounts for the Poorer Well-Being of Hong Kong SAR Students?

The diminished well-being of Hong Kong SAR students results from a combination of excessive academic workload and individual negative appraisal. When students perceive that the demands placed upon them outweigh their available resources, they are more likely to experience stress. Personality psychology theories suggest that individual personality traits can influence evaluative appraisal and emotional reactivity, thereby increasing stress levels (Chyu & Chen, 2022). Academic stress is closely linked to heavy homework loads, frequent tests and

attending lectures, and it serves as a predictor of chronic stress amongst university students (Pozos-Radillo et al., 2014). Mulyadi, Rahardjo and Basuki (2016) explained that students experiencing high academic stress tend to have lower self-esteem, which negatively affects their overall well-being. A stressful academic life can lead to severe negative outcomes, such as suicidal tendencies. Lee et al. (2006) reported that an undesirable academic life is a predictor of suicidal ideation because students were highly concerned about meeting their parents' expectations. In Hong Kong SAR, many students are driven by the desire to gain social approval from significant others, a motivation rooted in Confucian tradition. Students with a higher level of social-oriented achievement motivation experience more examination stress as they worry about how their significant others evaluate their performance (Tao & Hong, 2014). By contrast, Western societies tend to view academic achievement as an individual endeavour, encouraging people to pursue goals that meet their own needs and preferences. Overall, the review indicates that students' mental health has become an increasingly critical issue in Hong Kong SAR, prompting heightened concern amongst psychologists and educators to implement positive education programmes to combat mental health challenges.

2.4. Review of Positive Education Intervention Programmes

Waters (2011) reviewed 12 school-based positive psychology intervention programmes and found substantial evidence linking these initiatives to improved student well-being. Notable programmes include the Penn Resiliency Programme (Seligman et al., 2009), the Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman et al., 2009) and the 'You Can Do It' programme (Bernard & Walton, 2011). Particularly, the Geelong Grammar School (GGS) and the Maytiv positive psychology school programmes stand out for their comprehensive, whole-school approach, both grounded in the PERMA model (Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017; Shoshani et al., 2016). The GGS model promotes student well-being by focusing on six key areas: positive emotions, engagements, accomplishments, purpose, relationships and health. These areas are implemented through a four-level strategy: learn it, teach it, live it and embed it (Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017). Duan, Chen and Ho (2020) reviewed studies on the PERMA or PERMA-H positive education models and found positive outcomes, particularly in promoting subjective well-being and learning behaviours amongst preschoolers in Israel (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Positive psychologists developed the SEARCH positive education framework to guide intervention programmes. The SEARCH framework includes strengths, emotional management, attention and awareness, relationships, coping, habits and goals (Waters, 2019; Waters & Loton, 2019), providing a comprehensive guide for programme practitioners.

Referring to the Chinese context, Zhao et al. (2019) studied the effectiveness of a positive education intervention programme aimed at preventing adolescent depression in a middle school in Sichuan, China. Their findings indicated that the programme could protect participants in the experimental group from increased

depression. The participants developed a habitual style of positive thinking by recalling happy or positive memories and maintained intrinsic learning motivation. Lai et al. (2018) studied a multidimensional PERMA-H positive education model and its relation to general satisfaction of school life and character strengths amongst Hong Kong SAR senior primary school pupils. The authors found that positive education programmes in schools could produce intended positive outcomes, such as enhanced well-being and reduced levels of depression in students. Despite queries concerning the effectiveness of positive education programmes, a substantial body of research indicates their efficacy across various age groups, including preschoolers, primary pupils and secondary to tertiary students.

2.5. Role of Schools in Promoting Well-Being

Seligman (2011) posited that the nurturance of well-being originates from the environment, making schools ideal settings to teach well-being, as adolescents spend a significant portion of their time there. Three scientific grounds justify the teaching of well-being in schools. Firstly, enhancing positive strengths amongst adolescents—such as positive emotions, engagement and meaning in life—serves as an antidote to depression, increases life satisfaction and facilitates improved learning and positive thinking (Seligman et al., 2009). Yates (2007) argued that beyond traditional skills, education should aim to assist adolescents in developing the skills and abilities to live well and enhance social cohesion. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) emphasised that children's emotional well-being and social capabilities are closely linked to their cognitive and academic abilities. These findings suggest that teaching well-being in schools is crucial for promoting mental health amongst adolescents. Schools play a critical role in socialisation, cultivating positive values, promoting holistic development and facilitating well-being in a positive classroom environment. Teachers can serve as role models, fostering the development of a "whole student" in social, moral, emotional and intellectual dimensions (Waters, 2011). Norrish et al. (2013) also emphasised the importance of schools in nurturing a positive environment and cultivating well-being to promote physical and mental health amongst students.

Amongst various positive education programmes, Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) stands out due to its robust supporting evidence. The model has demonstrated its applicability in real school and classroom settings (Kern et al., 2015; Norrish et al., 2013; Shoshani et al., 2016). The model proposes five elements of well-being derived from positive psychology, which can be incorporated into the school curriculum to promote student well-being and enable them to flourish while mastering traditional academic skills. The five elements are: positive emotions (encouraging feelings such as joy, gratitude, interest and hope), engagement (experiencing flow, promoting full absorption in activities and utilizing skills to meet challenges), relationships (fostering positive relationships), meaning (instilling a sense of belonging and motivation to serve something greater than oneself, similar to the Japanese concept of "ikigai") and accomplishment (pursuing

success, achieving goals and gaining mastery). The present positive education programme was known as Flourishing Life. The English term "flourish" comes from the Latin *florere*, meaning "to bloom, blossom or flower". Flourishing refers to the vigorous growth or development of life. This approach underscores the vital role schools play in fostering a positive and nurturing environment that supports students' holistic development. Through this programme, schools can help students build the skills and resilience needed to thrive in their academic and personal lives.

2.6. Flourishing Life Programme

The Flourishing Life programme was implemented from December 2019 to May 2021 in a co-educational grammar secondary school. It integrated character strengths and positive values such as gratitude, optimism, cherishment, self-contentment and resilience into the formal and informal curricula. Various school activities, campaigns and competitions were designed to reinforce these positive values. Notable initiatives included the Gratitude Campaign (November 2020), social services activities (April-May 2021) and the "I Admire You" Campaign (March-May 2021). By embedding the principles of the PERMA model into curricular and extracurricular activities, the Flourishing Life programme aimed to cultivate a holistic educational environment that nurtures students' emotional well-being.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Question and Research Design

To what extent does the positive education programme based on the PERMA model operate effectively amongst secondary school students?

The study utilised a mixed-method sequential explanatory research design, including pre- and post-surveys, followed by focus group interviews. The strength of this design is to use qualitative focus group interviews to provide updated data that complement the quantitative data analysis, thereby generating a more robust and credible data source (McBride et al., 2019; Creswell et al., 2003; Morse, 1991). The independent variables in this study include students' forms, gender and other demographic factors such as family and religious backgrounds. The dependent variable is the well-being of students, which is assessed through their life satisfaction scores and flourishing scores.

3.2. Samples

The survey subjects consist of all Forms 1 - 5 students (Grades 7 - 11) from 22 classes, as detailed in **Table 1** and **Table 2**. For the focus group interviews, the subjects are randomly selected from Form 2 (Grade 8) and Form 5 (Grade 11) students.

3.3. Procedures for Selecting and Processing Data

Several steps were undertaken for data collection.

Table 1. Number of participants from each form in Cohorts 1 (2019) and 2 (2021).

Form	No. of students in Cohort 1	No. of students in Cohort 2
Form 1	129	127
Form 2	121	125
Form 3	120	119
Form 4	112	112
Form 5	110	107
Total	592	590

Table 2. Number of male and female participants in Cohorts 1 and 2.

	Male	Female	Missing	Total no. of participants
Cohort 1 (2019)	294	286	12	580
Cohort 2 (2021)	294	293	3	587

1. Baseline data collection (Cohort 1): In December 2019, quantitative data using the Flourishing Scale (*FS*) and Satisfaction With Life Scale (*SWLS*) were collected to establish a baseline level.

2. Post-programme data collection (Cohort 2): The same measurement scales were administered again in May 2021 to evaluate the effect of the programme.

3. Focus group interviews: Two subsequent focus group interviews—one with junior form students and one with senior form students—were conducted after the administration of the quantitative surveys in May 2021. Qualitative data were collected from students' feedback during interviews.

3.4. Quantitative Approach

Measures

Two standard international measures were adopted in the survey (see **Appendix 1**). These measures, commonly used in many positive education studies to assess overall student well-being, are the Flourishing Scale (*FS*) (Diener et al., 2009) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (*SWLS*) (Diener et al., 1985). The *FS* has been shown to be psychometrically adequate in various countries (Diener et al., 2010; Hone et al., 2014) and consists of eight Likert-type items ranging from the strongest negative preference (strongly disagree) to the strongest positive preference (strongly agree), using a scale from "1" to "7". A high score indicates a person with many psychological resources and strengths, with scores of 33 or above indicating satisfactory responses (Diener et al., 2010). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this study is 0.94. The *SWLS* was developed to assess overall satisfaction and happiness with life. This global measure consists of five Likert-type items, also ranging from the strongest negative preference (strongly disagree) to the strongest positive preference (strongly agree), using a scale from "1" to "7". The Cronbach's

alpha coefficient for the sample in this study is 0.91. Overall, the two scales have been proven to be valid measures for assessing students' well-being levels.

Data analysis:

ANOVA and t-tests were used to identify any mean differences across various student groups with respect to their life satisfaction and flourishing scores. Correlational and multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships between students' demographic variables (such as forms, gender and family background) and their well-being.

3.5. Qualitative Approach

To further interpret the quantitative findings, two focus group interviews, each lasting 30 - 40 minutes, were conducted with Forms 2 and 5 students after the survey in May 2021. Seven students from each form volunteered to participate in these interviews. Each session included 13 open-ended questions (see **Appendix II**). For ethical reasons, prior consent was obtained from the students and their parents. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the participants' native language, and audio-recorded, with the transcripts translated into English. The constant comparative method was used to analyse the data (Au & Chow, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4. Results

4.1. Results from the Quantitative Data Analysis

In Cohorts 1 and 2, about 95% of the subjects were born in Hong Kong SAR, and 28% identified as having a religious background. No gender differences were observed in both cohorts. The means and standard deviations for the *FS* and the *SWLS* for Cohorts 1 and 2 are presented in **Table 3** and **Table 4**.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the FS in Cohorts 1 and 2.

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
Items	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
1. I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	5.01	1.21	4.76	1.26
2. My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	5.00	1.26	4.93	1.18
3. I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.	4.94	1.24	4.72	1.25
4. I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.	4.85	1.23	4.76	1.23
5. I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	4.93	1.25	4.81	1.24
6. I am a good person and live a good life.	5.09	1.28	4.95	1.25
7. I am optimistic about my future.	4.87	1.31	4.65	1.31
8. People respect me.	5.09	1.26	5.17	1.17

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the SWLS in Cohorts 1 and 2.

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
Items	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	4.86	1.23	4.72	1.28
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.	4.88	1.23	4.78	1.26
3. I am satisfied with my life.	4.83	1.31	4.70	1.35
4. So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	4.80	1.34	4.77	1.34
5. If I could live my life over, then I would change almost nothing.	4.23	1.66	4.11	1.62

Correlational and multiple regression analyses

Correlational analysis revealed that in both cohorts, grade level was the only variable significantly correlated with the *SWLS* and *FS* scores (r = −0.23 and −0.23 in Cohort 1, and −0.16 and −0.11 in Cohort 2, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Other demographic variables (including gender, place of birth, religious background and family status) did not show significant correlations. The results indicated that students in higher grades had lower levels of well-being.

To predict students' well-being, multiple regression analysis identified two significant predictors: grade level and the number of family members. As shown in Table 5 and Table 6, for Cohort 1, the predictors for *SWLS* were B = −0.115 and B = 0.548, $p < 0.001$, and for *FS* were B = −0.072 and B = 0.692, $p < 0.001$. For Cohort 2, the predictors for *SWLS* were B = −0.091, $p < 0.01$, and B = 0.570, $p < 0.001$, and for *FS* were B = −0.040, $p < 0.05$, and B = 0.679, $p < 0.001$. In Cohort 1, the two predictors regressed against the well-being measures resulted in an F value of 51.79 (7, 579), $p < 0.001$ for *SWLS*, and 197.45 (7, 579), $p < 0.001$ for *FS*. In Cohort 2, the F values were 46.91 (7, 562), $p < 0.001$ for *SWLS*, and 163.29 (7, 562), $p < 0.001$ for *FS*. The two factors explained 39% of the variance for *SWLS* and 71% for *FS* in Cohort 1, and 37% of the variance for SWLS and 67% for *FS* in Cohort 2. In summary, grade level negatively predicted the two well-being scales, whereas the number of family members positively predicted them in both cohorts. Senior students reported lower levels of well-being compared to junior students. Conversely, students with more family members reported higher levels of well-being, possibly due to increased familial support.

Comparison of different forms of students in Cohort 2 using ANOVA (2021)

To evaluate the impact of the positive education programme using the *SWLS*, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results showed a statistically significant grade effect, F (4, 585) = 4.28, $p < 0.01$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean scores of Form 1 students (mean = 4.96, SD = 1.08) were significantly higher than those of Form 3 students (mean = 4.55, SD = 1.23) and Form 5 students (mean = 4.43, SD = 1.17). However, no significant grade effect was found when using the *FS*.

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analysis with demographic variables regressed against the SWLS in Cohorts 1 and 2.

Cohort 1							
Predictors	B	SE B	β	*t*	R^2	*df*	*F*
Grade level	−0.115	0.028	−0.138	−4.161***	0.39	7, 579	51.79***
Gender	−0.089	0.077	−0.038	−1.150			
Borin in Hong Kong SAR	−0.103	0.357	−0.019	−0.287			
Born in China	−0.125	0.407	−0.020	−0.306			
Born in Macau SAR	−0.844	0.999	−0.030	−0.845			
Number of family members	0.548	0.031	0.582	17.541***			
With religion	−0.105	0.084	−0.041	−1.243			
Cohort 2							
Predictors	B	SE B	β	*t*	R^2	*df*	*F*
Grade level	−0.091	0.028	−0.110	−3.249**	0.37	7, 562	46.91***
Gender	−0.046	0.078	−0.020	−0.586			
Born in Hong Kong SAR	0.135	0.285	0.028	0.475			
Born in China	0.088	0.344	0.015	0.256			
Born in Macau SAR	−0.606	0.979	−0.022	−0.619			
Number of family members	0.570	0.033	0.586	17.349***			
With religion	0.006	0.086	0.002	0.069			

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Results of multiple regression analysis with demographic variables regressed against the FS in Cohorts 1 and 2.

Cohort 1							
Predictors	B	SE B	β	*t*	R^2	*df*	*F*
Grade level	−0.072	0.017	−0.096	−4.174***	0.71	7, 579	197.45***
Gender	−0.063	0.048	−0.030	−1.303			
Born in Hong Kong SAR	0.104	0.222	0.022	0.468			
Born in China	0.196	0.253	0.035	0.773			
Born in Macau SAR	0.241	0.621	0.009	0.388			
Number of family members	0.692	0.019	0.820	35.652***			
With religion	−0.006	0.052	−0.003	−0.111			
Cohort 2							
Predictors	B	SE B	β	*t*	R^2	*df*	*F*
Grade level	−0.040	0.017	−0.057	−2.312*	0.67	7, 562	163.29***
Gender	−0.047	0.049	−0.023	−0.952			
Born in Hong Kong SAR	0.180	0.178	0.043	1.016			
Born in China	0.367	0.214	0.072	1.712			
Born in Macau SAR	−0.457	0.610	−0.019	−0.750			
Number of family members	0.679	0.020	0.811	33.212***			
With religion	−0.014	0.054	−0.007	−0.267			

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Comparison between Cohorts 1 and 2 using independent t-test on all items of the two scales

The report indicated no significant difference between Cohorts 1 and 2 in the *SWLS* scores. However, significant differences were found in Items 1, 3 and 7 of the *FS* between the two cohorts. For Item 1 ("I lead a purposeful and meaningful life"), the mean score was 5.01 (SD = 1.21) in Cohort 1 and 4.76 (SD = 1.26) in Cohort 2. For item 3 ("I am engaged and interested in my daily activities"), the mean score was 4.94 (SD = 1.24) in Cohort 1 and 4.72 (SD = 1.25) in Cohort 2. For Item 7, the mean score was 4.87 (SD = 1.31) in Cohort 1 and 4.65 (SD = 1.31) in Cohort 2. The lower *FS* scores in Cohort 2 might be related to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in Cohort 2 may feel less optimistic about their academic work due to school suspensions and the uncertain development of the pandemic, unlike those in Cohort 1, which experienced no such disruptions.

4.2. Results of Qualitative Data Analysis

4.2.1. Students' Perception on the Effectiveness of the Flourishing Life Programme

All interviewees (7 out of 7 students) considered the programme effective. Junior form interviewees reported gaining positive experiences and values such as "gratitude", "cherish", "positivity" and "optimism" from the lessons. Their comments reflect these views.

> "I think happiness is something abstract. It is hard to define it. After the positive education lessons, … I learn more about gratitude, to cherish, be positive and optimistic. These elements together make us (our life be) happy". (A3 student)

Students also emphasised how the positive education lessons helped them handle daily life challenges, interpersonal relationships and academic pressure:

> "I will think positively even when I cannot achieve a satisfactory result in the exams. I will think that is not the last chance for me to have exam. I can do better next time. …I will not give up all the chances in the future". (A1 student)
>
> "I always think that my parents should take care of me as it is their duty. But after the lessons, I have done reflection and understand that I should feel grateful to my parents as they often taking care of me". (A2 student)

Senior form students also benefited from the Flourishing Life programme, particularly in managing stress and overcoming adversity:

> "Positive attitude reflects that you have a positive mind to handle daily hassles. It serves as an anchor in our life. We would not be ruined by negative thoughts". (B1 student)
>
> "It can help me to deal with adversity and to understand myself. Previously, I am afraid of doing things wrong… afraid to be teased by others. … (After the positive education lessons) Even when I do something wrong. It is also a

chance for me to learn from it. Optimism makes me be brave enough to participate in different activities". (B1 student)

"Positive education is effective as it suggests that we can use different methods, …use multi-perspectives to handle problems". (B2 student)

"I think the programme is effective. …the gratitude tree recorded our grateful events when we are facing COVID-19. … It reminds all of us to be grateful". (B3 student)

Overall, interviewees from junior and senior levels found the programme to be effective. They learned to think from multiple perspectives, maintain a positive attitude and embrace positive values to handle stress and adversity in life.

4.2.2. Factors Affecting Students' Engagement in the Flourishing Life Programme

Several factors influenced student engagement in the programme. Firstly, student interest played a significant role. 75% of junior form interviewees indicated that by incorporating mini games into lessons would increase their attention and motivation. The participation of social workers and form teachers in delivering the lessons was perceived as innovative and interesting. Senior form students remarked that their interest drove their participation in programme activities. They enjoyed activities such as teaching children to draw, creating gratitude jars with paper stars and building a gratitude tree.

Secondly, the programme's usefulness and meaningfulness were influential. Student expressed their opinions as follows.

"I engage in it as it will teach us to handle our life affairs positively. It also helps me to understand the emotions of my friends and others". (A1 student)

"We organise the activities is to let others learn something meaningful (from the programme). I join the service because of OLE hours. I think I am quite pragmatic". (B1 student)

Lastly, commitment and responsibility were key factors. Senior form interviewees, who served as committee members organising positive education activities, expressed a sense of responsibility and dedication to participating in the programme and encouraging other students. They also highlighted the importance of school promotion efforts and teachers' support, especially from form teachers. In summary, students' interest, the meaningfulness of activities, the acquisition of the hours for the Other Learning Experience (OLE), a sense of commitment and responsibility and support from the school and teachers were crucial reasons for their engagement in the Flourishing Life programme.

5. Discussion

5.1. Effectiveness of the Flourishing Life Programme in Promoting Students' Well-Being

This study takes an evaluative approach to assess the effectiveness of the

Flourishing Life programme. The findings revealed that the programme was particularly effective for junior form students, who achieved higher scores on both well-being measures (*FS* and *SWLS*). Notably, Form One students demonstrated the most positive attitudes and received the highest ratings, whereas Form 5 students received the lowest scores on both measures. These findings results are consistent with previous studies suggesting that students' well-being decreases in senior forms due to heightened stress and anxiety from increasing academic demands (von der Embse et al., 2013; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Högberg et al., 2019; Konu, 2002; Chamberlin et al., 2023). The imminent threats of final exams, regardless of gender, may contribute to reduced well-being at the end of the school year (Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019).

No significant gender differences exist in Cohorts 1 and 2. However, cohort differences emerged in several *FS* measure items, specifically Items 1, 3 and 7. Students in Cohort 2 became less optimistic about their future, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. School suspensions significantly influenced students' perceptions of the future and their well-being (Horita et al., 2021). Optimism training could be a beneficial addition to well-being programme, as research shows that teaching optimism can prevent depressive symptoms in at-risk children (Jaycox et al., 1994; Seligman et al., 1995). Cognitive training and social problem-solving enable students to adopt an optimistic perspective, reducing depression more effectively than control groups over a two-year follow-up.

The present study supports the effectiveness of cognitive appraisal training in helping students face challenges with optimism. Positive feedback from focus group interviewees indicated that the Flourishing Life programme help them adopt positive attitudes, be flexible, and use multi-perspective thinking to handle daily hassles and even adversities. Overall, facilitating a smooth transition to the new normal should be a priority for school authorities. Collaboration with parents is essential, as familial support is positively correlated with students' well-being.

5.2. Effectiveness of Positive Education Curriculum

The Flourishing Life programme successfully integrated positive education in harmony with the existing curriculum. Survey results from 2016 indicated that the programme enhanced students' well-being (Au & Kennedy, 2018). Focus group interviews further affirmed the programme's beneficial effect, with participants reporting better interpersonal relationships, positive interactions with teachers and the adoption of values such as gratitude, appreciation, positivity and optimism, all of which contributed to their overall happiness. Senior form students also explained how the curriculum helped them develop multi-perspective thinking and manage daily life and academic pressures.

Learn it and teach it

The Flourishing Life programme infused positive values into the curricula. The explicit teaching of values and the implicit social norms conveyed through the hidden curriculum effectively socialised students into adopting positive attitudes

(Eisner, 1994; Hoare, Bott, & Robinson, 2017; Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Seligman et al., 2009). Elements of PERMA and character strengths were integrated into moral and life education, as well as various academic subjects. The interviewees reported learning positive appraisal and multi-perspective thinking from subjects like Languages and Visual Arts. This suggests that positive education can offer a more balanced approach by incorporating academic, emotional and social learning, leading to more well-rounded and resilient students.

Live it

Hong Kong SAR teachers, influenced by Confucian culture, place a high value on the teacher-student relationship. Similarly, positive education underscores the importance of a positive student-teacher relationship. Teachers are significant role models for students in the school environment. Imparting positive values and practices to students becomes considerably more effective when teachers grasp the essence, pedagogy or skills of positive thinking styles. Training teachers in cognitive-behavioural interventions will enhance their ability to prevent depression and other negative outcomes in students.

Embed it

Positive values and practices were embedded in school activities, such as Thanksgiving celebrations, social service projects and writing gratitude journals. These activities enhanced students' interpersonal relationships, team spirit and academic resilience. Additional positive education programmes were implemented to encourage parents to extend the positive environment at home. Collaboration with parents is essential, as familial support positively correlates with students' well-being. In a Confucian cultural context, parents often have high academic expectations for their children. However, positive education encourages parents to create a more balanced and supportive home environment by emphasising their children's well-being and happiness.

5.3. Implications

The present study has several important implications. Firstly, positive education can complement Confucian cultural values by promoting a more balanced approach to education that embraces academic success and students' well-being. This synergy facilitates students' holistic development and improves their mental health. School authorities should continue promoting positive education programmes through formal and informal curricula. Secondly, more resources should be allocated to senior forms to alleviate students' academic pressures. By focusing on positive values education, resilience and optimism, schools can effectively facilitate students' learning. Furthermore, schools should provide more interventions, workshops and regular lessons to teach students stress-coping skills. Teachers, particularly class teachers, play a crucial role in creating a loving and caring school environment. Quality interactions can help in effectively identifying and managing at-risk students. Lastly, schools should collaborate with parents to extend the positive environment into the home.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the implementation schedule of the Flourishing Life programme. School suspensions and the shift to online teaching and activities likely affected student performance, as evidenced by the results from the Cohort 2 surveys. Secondly, the quantitative assessment in this study relied on two general well-being scales. Future research should include more specific measures of mental health and other well-being measures to assess students' engagement and relationships with others, thereby providing additional empirical support. Thirdly, systematic follow-up qualitative interviews and longitudinal studies are recommended to distinguish between high- and low-life satisfaction groups. This would offer more detailed evidence, enabling school policymakers to tailor future positive education programmes to better meet the diverse needs of students.

6. Conclusion

The Flourishing Life programme has demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing student well-being, especially amongst junior students. However, increased support for senior students is needed to address challenges arising from academic stress and external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the programme was seamlessly integrated into the existing school curriculum, and with the support of teachers and families, it has the potential to foster a holistic environment conducive to student well-being. Future modifications of the programme should focus on refining strategies and approaches to meet the evolving needs of students. Specifically, greater emphasis should be placed on intervention training that promotes positive cognitive appraisal and an optimistic thinking style in future positive education programmes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix 1: Flourishing Life Survey

Part I: Personal Particulars

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Form of study (F. 1 = 1; F. 2 = 2; F. 3 = 3; F.4 = 4; F. 5 = 5)	O	O	O	O	O
2.	Class of study (A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, D = 4, E = 5)	O	O	O	O	O
3.	Gender (1 = Male 2 = Female)	O	O	O	O	O
4.	Place of birth (1 = Hong Kong SAR; 2 = China; 3 = Macau SAR; 4 = Others)	O	O	O	O	O
5.	Number of family members living with you, except yourself (1 = 1; 2 = 2; 3 = 3; 4 = 4; 5 = 5 or more than 5)	O	O	O	O	O
6.	Religious background. (1 = Yes 2 = No)	O	O	O	O	O
7.	Religious background, if applicable. (1 = Buddhism; 2 = Christianity; 3 = Islam; 4 = Others)	O	O	O	O	O

Part II: Survey

7—Strongly agree; 6—Agree; 5—Slightly agree; 4—Neither agree nor disagree; 3—Slightly disagree; 2—Disagree; 1—Strongly disagree

Satisfaction with Life Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. In most ways, my life is close to ideal.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
3. I am satisfied with my life.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
4. So far, I have the important things I want in life.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Flourishing Scale

1. I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2. My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
3. I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
4. I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
5. I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
6. I am a good person and live a good life.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
7. I am optimistic about my future.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
8. People respect me.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Appendix II: Interview Guides for Focus Group Interview

Part I: About the students' learning in positive education through the Flourishing Life programme

1. Do you remember the elements of the PERMA model? Explain with examples.
2. Which aspect(s) of the PERMA model help you most? Explain with examples.
3. Have you used what you have learnt from positive education in your daily experience?
5. Have you used what you have learnt from Form Teacher Periods or School assemblies in your daily experience?
6. If you feel stressful or have despair in life, do you think positive education enable you to be positive?
7. Do you think the positive education programme can help you understand yourself, your character strengths and ways to face adversities?
8. Do you think the positive education programme is effective to all students? Provide evidence.
9. What are the factors affecting your participation in all the positive education activities?

Part II: About the assessment and evaluation of the programme

1. Do you think the post-lesson assessment can help you understand the topic more? Why? How? Give examples.
2. What is your opinion on the results of the Flourishing Life Survey?
3. What is your opinion towards the positive education programme that we implemented this year?
4. Do you have any suggestions for improvement (for example, Form Teacher Period, School Assemblies or any school activities)?