Transforming our Schools Together: A Multi-School Collaboration to Implement Positive Education

Denise M Quinlan

Denise M Quinlan, Positive Education Consultant, 4 Sim St, Māori Hill, Dunedin 9010, New Zealand. Email: denise@drdenisequinlan.com

Abstract   This chapter outlines the story of the decade-long collaboration by a cluster of low- to mid-SES state schools that implemented positive education and transformed their school cultures. In the process they developed more cohesive staff teams and supported leadership development at principal and teacher level, as well as enhancing student and teacher well-being. The Cluster schools embedded gratitude, strength spotting, and appreciative inquiry as core practices in their schools and introduced and developed programmes and activities aligned with positive education. Factors contributing to the success of this collaboration included the shared values of a leadership group committed to improving student flourishing, an inclusive and flexible approach to planning and implementation, and recognition of each school's particular context and priorities. This group of schools overcame numerous challenges providing evidence that low- to mid-SES schools can successfully collaborate to implement positive education with significant benefits for students and staff.

Keywords: positive education, positive psychology, staff well-being, student well-being, whole school well-being, positive relationships, strength spotting,

1 Introduction

'He oranga ngākau he pikinga waiora'.
[Positive feelings in your heart will enhance your sense of self-worth].

It is almost a decade since the label *positive education* was coined to describe the adoption of positive psychology in schools with the explicit goal of supporting

student well-being (Norrish 2015). Since the mid-2000s the scientific literature on positive education has grown as programmes and practices for schools have been developed and researched (e.g., Green et al. 2007; Norrish et al. 2013; Oades et al. 2011; Seligman et al. 2009; Waters 2011). Schools however, are not laboratories and the myriad of factors on which they can differ means conducting randomised controlled trials is problematic. Programmes that are not effective in a brief controlled trial may work well over a longer time period, as a component of a broader well-being effort, in a different teacher's classroom, or in a different school environment. Fortunately, there is much we can learn from the experiences of schools that have implemented positive education.

The positive education journeys of schools provide important information and inspiration for other schools. Geelong Grammar School, an elite Australian school that pioneered implementation of positive education, has shared valuable case studies, rich details of activities, and insights from staff and students in the story of its decade-long journey (Norrish 2015). However, less is known about how lower-SES schools have managed to support well-being on limited budgets or how schools have collaborated to achieve their well-being goals. This chapter[1] outlines the story of the decade-long collaboration of a cluster of low- to mid-SES (socioeconomic status) state schools that successfully implemented positive education to transform their school cultures. To our knowledge, this is the first collaborative cluster to implement positive psychology across their schools. This collaboration has helped build cohesive staff teams, supported leadership development, and enhanced student and teacher well-being. We hope that some of the lessons learned and benefits obtained may be of use to others in education that serve similar communities.

2 Background to the Well-Being Cluster

The South Dunedin Schools Well-Being Cluster was formed in late 2006 to support student wellbeing through social and emotional learning. The Cluster comprised nine primary and intermediate schools ranging in size from approximately 100 to 300 students. All schools were coeducational and one school was affiliated to a church. The schools served low- to mid-SES populations in a city of 130,000 people in New Zealand where the school year comprises four 10-week terms that run from February to December.

Almost one in five New Zealand children live in medium to risk households (exposure to 3-4 risk factors) and a further six percent live in households exposed to five or more risk factors (high risk) such as living in an area of high deprivation, being victims of crime or discrimination, having poor mental health, feeling isolated, or having multiple housing problems (Statistics

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[1] This chapter is dedicated with heartfelt gratitude to the principals of Te Wai Pounamu Well-Being Cluster: W. Cormick, M. Hillerby, R. McQuillan-Mains, J. Sinclair, D. Smith, G. Tenbeth, and S. Turnbull.

New Zealand 2012). Cluster principals were concerned for the welfare of their students, a number of whose families experienced intergenerational unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic abuse, or poverty. Principals observed the growing number of students with socio-emotional behavioural and learning difficulties, without a corresponding increase in school behavioural support resources.

The Cluster successfully applied for a government education funding stream to address learning difficulties (including emotional and behavioural difficulties) and used this funding to implement a circle time programme across the Cluster (Mosley 2005; Roffey 2006). Teachers learned how to lead classroom circle or group discussions about feelings, challenges, or conflict. This process created opportunities for children to practice respectful communication, and empowered students to find peaceful ways to resolve conflict. As an extension of the programme, the schools also introduced playground games and activities that encouraged cooperative play and reduced playground conflict.

Within 2 years, Cluster schools' principals could see positive changes in students and staff. Students were learning to take turns, listen, and express their feelings in a safe environment. Teachers were leading classroom discussions about feelings and values, and becoming more understanding of the factors underlying challenging student behaviour. A number of schools had implemented values-based programmes and were working to embed them through Circle Time discussions. The Cluster schools were united in their desire to continue in this direction. The commitment, through Circle Time, to a safe environment and development of socio-emotional competency of teachers and students prepared the ground for positive education to take root successfully in the Cluster schools.

3 The Implementation of Positive Education Across the Cluster

This section outlines how positive education was implemented in Cluster schools from 2009-2014. It describes the main professional development undertaken by the schools and some of the activities introduced for staff and students. A presentation on positive psychology in March 2009 by the author sparked teacher interest and enthusiasm. The author's focus on gratitude (Emmons and McCullough 2004), strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004), and Appreciative Inquiry (AI; Cooperrider et al. 2003) as tools for growth and change resonated with Cluster principals (illustrated in Figure 1). Discovering a shared vision of compassion, connection, and mindfulness in schools and a commitment to 'looking for the best in each other rather than fixing the worst', the Cluster began what became a long-term partnership with the author to explore and embed positive education in their schools.

Fig. 1. Building a positive environment: Tools for growth and change (D. Quinlan ©)

In October of 2009 principals and a senior behavioural support teacher from six Cluster schools visited schools implementing positive psychology in education in Melbourne, Australia. This week-long visit created a shared experience that brought this leadership group closer together and has been often referred to by the principals as pivotal in developing the trust and open communication that allowed the group to work effectively together.

The group were impressed with how Geelong Grammar School and other nearby private schools were implementing whole school programmes to support student and staff well-being. They were perhaps most inspired however by their visit to a low-SES Melbourne school whose charter of positive 'trademark behaviours' for the staffroom, supportive and warm staff interactions, classroom tools such as the 'catastrophe gauge' to help students find perspective, and confident, articulate students impressed them deeply. This school had a similar demographic with similar challenges and the Cluster was optimistic that if positive education could take root here, it could work as well in New Zealand.

3.1 Introducing Positive Education to all Staff

If positive education was to become embedded in their schools, then the principals believed it needed to be shared with all staff. In 2010, the renamed Te Wai Pounamu Well-being Cluster began its implementation of positive education at a professional development day for all staff including teacher aides, support staff, and caretakers. Staff were given an overview of positive psychology that outlined the contribution of well-being to beneficial life outcomes including academic achievement (Lyubomirsky et al. 2006; Seligman et al. 2009), models of well-being (Ryff and Keyes 1995; Seligman 2002;), and the role and influence of

positive emotions (Fredrickson 1998; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002; Fredrickson et al. 2008). Staff had completed the VIA Inventory of Character Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson and Seligman 2004) prior to the training day and explored how well-being can be enhanced by identifying and developing character strengths (Govindji and Linley 2007; Linley et al. 2010; Seligman et al. 2005; Quinlan et al. 2015). They also learned why practices such as gratitude (Sheldon and Lybumirsky 2006; Froh et al. 2009) and kindness (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005; Otake et al. 2006) influence well-being.

Soon afterwards each school conducted staff meetings to discuss how they would begin to implement this information in their school. Plans emerged through responding to five questions:

- What have we learned?
- What are we most excited about?
- What's the best focus for our school? (Where in our school might we most easily and successfully implement this information?)
- What are our concerns?
- What's the next smallest step we can take?

These questions enabled staff to share their enthusiasm and concerns and to focus implementation on each school's particular context and the staff capacity to make immediate small-scale change. Priorities were to foster gratitude in children, to increase awareness and experience of positive emotions, and to focus attention on staff well-being. Across all schools there was enthusiasm for learning more about strengths and sharing this with students and staff.

The Cluster principals had agreed that teachers should be given time to learn about positive psychology and use it personally and as a staff group before introducing it to the classroom. The focus for the first year was staffroom behaviours, starting staff meetings by sharing 'what went well' for each participant, and using an AI approach (Cooperrider et al. 2003) for strategic planning and reviews. In practice, teachers were soon asking to take positive education to their students. Most teachers wanted to share gratitude practices and strengths information with the students, and supported noticing 'three good things' to start or end the day and the introduction of 'strengths assemblies'. A number of teachers introduced discussion of strengths into their classrooms. This was based on their own initiative and not part of a required programme.

3.2 Small-Scale, Teacher-led Initiatives

Rather than focusing on the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification (which principals thought would be overwhelming for teachers as well as students), Cluster schools focused on developing five strengths shown in some research to support relationships and well-being (gratitude, love, hope, curiosity,

and enthusiasm) (Park et al. 2004). Lead teachers from each school facilitated staff meetings to identify what staff could do to support these strengths in their interactions with each other and with students. Each school identified a range of activities that teachers and support staff implemented over that year. These included emphasising gratitude through the school day by looking for 'what's good' during challenges as well as good times and having more celebrations of successes. Among other suggestions were allowing time for students' 'burning questions' and tangents in the classroom; staff modelling positive behaviours to each other and to students; unpacking what each of the strengths meant with students; using inspirational figures/videos to inspire hope in students; encouraging students to take an active role within school decisions (e.g., school council and policies regarding toys and activities at school); having one of the strengths as a collective school 6-weekly goal; and having more games where teachers relinquished their leadership role to play directly with students. Implementing ideas proposed by teachers' enabled many small initiatives to be implemented in a short period of time. Teachers were supportive of the initiatives and engaged by the inclusive nature of the process used.

Over the next year schools gradually introduced the 24 VIA character strengths to students through school assemblies and class discussion. At some school assemblies, teachers told stories about times they had used a strength (or had failed to – self-deprecatory stories were popular with students!). In other schools, senior students led assemblies where they explained strengths to their peers and teachers through music, stories, or graphics.

Each school found language and examples appropriate for its context to explain the character strengths. For example, prudence was variously explained as 'making good choices' and 'saving for a rainy day' and by the daredevil skateboarders at one school, 'look before you leap'. Most Cluster schools acknowledged strengths in action at their weekly assemblies. Rewards were as simple as applause, time with the Principal, or having their photograph added to the principal's 'wall of wonder'. At one school students could nominate another student and specify the strength they had observed.

3.3 Strengths and Stories

To help embed strengths language and understanding in the classroom, Cluster principals and lead teachers attended workshops on strengths spotting and on storytelling. Teachers learned to recognise strengths in themselves and in their students, using games and activities. They noted that sharing strengths stories with their colleagues brought them closer as a staff group. They found it helpful to see the strengths in their students' favourite activities and saw how being able to comment on these strengths could benefit their students and build connections with them. Teachers resonated with the author's description of the VIA strengths as '24 ways to like a difficult child'. They found the practice of identifying

strengths in a challenging student was often instrumental in building connection and finding a way through previous impasses.

Lead teachers learned to tell stories and to teach students to do the same. Identifying and discussing the strengths of characters in stories usually led to discussion of issues in students' learning and home lives. For some of these teachers storytelling soon became an integral element of their teaching, while for others it was a new skill acquired slowly with practice and support. As with other aspects of positive education, each school encouraged teachers to try new approaches and see if they worked for them. No teacher was required to implement a practice or activity they were not comfortable with.

3.4 Positive Relationships: Strength Spotting, Kindness, and Respect

What quickly emerged as a priority for the Cluster however, was the requirement for teachers to display kindness and respect in their interactions with students. To support this, teachers were encouraged and supported to notice strengths in their students. The Cluster emphasised this direction in 2011 when positive relationships were the focus for the year, beginning with a staff training day on skills and strengths that support relationships. Staff shared their interpretations of love, fairness, friendship (the VIA nomenclature for the strength of social intelligence was adapted for school use), forgiveness, gratitude, and kindness. They discussed times they had been the recipient of these strengths and the effect of this on their relationships. Teachers discussed how they practised, noticed, and acknowledged these strengths in the classroom, identifying the strengths they found easiest or most challenging to express. The author shared with the group a model of different pathways through which strengths could influence behaviour and well-being in a classroom. Set out in Figure 2, this model proposed that strength spotting by teachers (and students) could influence class morale, relationships, well-being, and learning. (For simplicity the model does not show the influence of engagement and class climate on well-being). Subsequently, research has shown that almost all beneficial student outcomes from a strengths programme were mediated by teacher attitude, motivation towards, and frequency of strength spotting (Quinlan et al. in preparation).
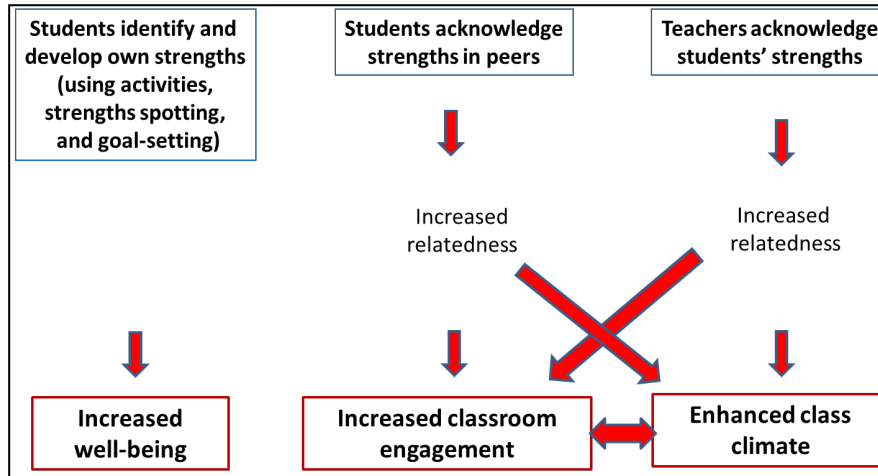
Fig. 2. Proposed model: Effects of strengths identification and strength spotting in the classroom

      The Cluster implemented the Awesome Us strengths programme in Terms 1 and 2 for Years 5 and 6 (9-12 year olds). Introduced to the classroom over a 6-week period, the programme used games and activities to help students work with their peers to identify their strengths, to recognise strengths in others, and to use strengths to pursue personal goals. Teachers enjoyed participating in the programme, observed positive changes in their classrooms, and were keen to continue using programme tools and activities, such as ending each day with 'what strengths have you spotted in this class today?', strength spotting in funny or inspiring video clips, and discussing current events from a strengths perspective. For example, students discussed what strengths would be helpful if you were trapped in a mine or above ground waiting for a family member and debated which strengths were most useful when going shopping for family gifts at Christmas. The Awesome Us programme was demonstrated to enhance well-being, classroom engagement, class climate (reducing class friction and increasing class cohesion), and relatedness and autonomy need satisfaction (Quinlan et al 2015).

3.5 Relationship Management Rather Than Discipline

As the Cluster developed its focus on relationships, characterised by kindness and respect, the leadership of the Cluster began evaluating school practices. They believed a punitive approach to discipline was inconsistent with the ethos of positive education and the principles they had adopted. They resolved to introduce a restorative approach to discipline issues (Blood and Thorsborne 2005) that were framed as relationship management. Cluster principals agreed that in managing any incident or challenge with a student the goal was for it to be resolved with the

relationship intact or improved. Teachers were encouraged to presume positive intentions on the part of those involved in discipline and conflict management issues, and asked to consider the resources of the student and teachers involved to resolve the issue. Cluster training explained how relationship skills were at the heart of this approach to discipline. Lead teachers from a number of schools attended training in restorative practice during the year and Cluster workshops included training in strategies to enhance relationships (e.g., active constructive responding (Gable et al. 2004)), encourage perspective and forgiveness, and using strengths to build relationships and resolve challenges.

Implementing positive psychology in the classroom required self-awareness and reflection on the part of teachers. For a small number, it was challenging to adopt a way of thinking that emphasised the positive in a situation or a person. To support teachers to demonstrate greater flexibility in their thinking, staff participated in workshops that explored thinking styles and some common thinking traps (Reivich and Shatte 2002). Teachers recognised that being able to separate an event from their thoughts or beliefs about it was a skill that could help prevent angry outbursts or fighting for some of their students, and would support self-regulation, relationships, and resilience for all. Learning to be flexible in their thinking and identify more than one possible explanation for a problem situation was useful for teachers, both personally and to share with students. 'Have you fallen into a thinking trap?' became a popular question in some schools.

3.6 Inquiry, Reflection, and New Development

In 2012, the theme of building connection and community was used to encourage reflection and sharing on past Cluster experiences. The Cluster used its annual staff training day to conduct an AI of Circle Time practices and share the results of the Awesome Us programme with all staff. Staff reported feeling inspired by this reflection that gave them new insights and ideas for classroom practice. Reflection and sharing continued through the year and helped staff groups maintain connection, engagement and enthusiasm for future plans.

By 2012, the strengths-focus, Circle Time, and storytelling, along with other practices, such as gratitude and kindness, were being used on an ongoing basis in each classroom as well as in assemblies, staff meetings, newsletters, and parent evenings. A new programme aligned with positive psychology was introduced in March when a lead teacher training day was held on 'The Art of Possibility' (Zander and Zander 2000). This programme provided teachers with alternative ways to think about finding the 'positive core' or strengths of each student. It encouraged teachers to examine the structures and routines of their classrooms to ensure they were consistent with the positive, enabling environment teachers wanted to create for their students. Storytelling in the classroom was boosted by a visit from a UK expert in storytelling and strengths (Eades 2008). A storytelling workshop held for Year 5 potential young leaders was very effective.

These students subsequently led storytelling in their classrooms the following year.

3.7 Relationships and Community

Relationships and community have been enduring priorities for the Cluster. From 2010, schools had shared information on positive education with families through school newsletters, assemblies, awards, and homework assignments. Although schools focused primarily on students and staff they were looking for ways to share positive education with their parent community. The staff training day in 2013 provided an opening to do so. An education psychologist specialising in the neuroscience of development and learning presented the scientific evidence for the importance of strengths-based practices, kindness, and love at home and in the classroom. The importance of loving parental relationships proved to be a topic of great interest to the community who engaged with a number of meetings on this topic through the year.

Community engagement increased in 2014 when the Cluster theme was 'Inclusion and Well-Being'. Staff meetings explored how the schools could better support well-being and achievement for Māori students (New Zealand's indigenous people). Community and staff attended Māori-led workshops that shared what well-being means for Māori students and their families. There is a high degree of congruence between positive education and the holistic relationship-focused approach to education that Māori wish for their children. This is an area ripe for further exploration and development in New Zealand.

3.8 Professional Development Aligned With Positive Education

The Cluster responded to teachers' concerns over student anxiety stemming from learning or home challenges by introducing a new programme in 2013 that brought relaxation and mindfulness to the classroom. The programme used stretching, massage, breathing techniques, visualisations, and mindfulness to help students be relaxed and calm in the classroom. Introducing mindfulness to classrooms was consistent with the goals and vision of positive education and with the Cluster priorities for enhancing students' ability to learn. This programme provided new information and practices that were adopted by teachers who were comfortable with this approach and found it easy to integrate into their classroom routine. Further mindfulness programmes have subsequently been implemented in other Cluster schools.

By 2014, long-serving staff needed stimulation and development in positive education, and accordingly, programmes such as Pause, Breathe, Smile (a mindfulness in schools programme), Relax Kids (relaxation and mindfulness), and

Play is the Way (social and emotional competency through play) were adopted to meet this need. However, staff turnover meant that there was also a need to introduce new staff to the basic tenets of positive education and up skill them in practices and approaches now standard across the schools (such as Circle Time, strengths, storytelling and Appreciative Inquiry). To meet this need experienced teachers were encouraged to take leadership roles on particular topics, developing their expertise and sharing it with staff. Lead teachers' meetings also began to dedicate time for sharing programmes and resources.

4 The Te Wai Pounamu Well-Being Cluster: Fertile Ground for Positive Psychology

Collaboration offers a way for schools to overcome funding difficulties and share scarce resources, such as staff expertise in specific areas. By combining their professional development budgets, the Cluster was able to attract overseas and national experts to train staff and to fund staff travel to training and development opportunities at home and internationally. Expert teachers regularly inspired their colleagues from different schools in staffroom presentations and training. However, pragmatic drivers may not be sufficient to ensure successful collaboration. A number of factors stand out as having enabled the Cluster's successful implementation of positive education, development of a network of supportive colleagues, and extended community of caring. These included shared values, shared leadership, an inclusive and flexible approach to planning and implementation, and recognition of each school's particular context and priorities.

4.1 Shared Values

The principals of the Cluster shared a passion for their children to become resilient children and flourishing adults. Each group member was committed to developing children's well-being and resilience. The state-funded school-based support services for children with emotional and behavioural challenges (Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour; RTLB) was doing good work for the most severely affected students but lacked sufficient resources for all students' needs. The group was in agreement that 'until these children are psychologically well, we can't teach them successfully'. They wanted to encourage more empathy from staff for children with challenging home situations and appreciation for the strengths some students were required to draw on just to get to school each day. The Cluster's guiding principles, set out below, reflected core beliefs and formed the standard against which proposals were evaluated.

Principles of the Cluster

- The school deals with the whole child – a holistic approach.
- We all, children and adults, deserve respect.
- Children are not problems to be solved but mysteries to be understood
- Everybody has strengths; we can use these to help with challenges and solutions.
- We believe that we deal best with problems when we identify and acknowledge strengths and look for solutions.
- Mistakes are part of learning.
- It's OK for every child and adults to make and learn from our mistakes.
- We can choose how we think about and respond to others and events.
- We have the capacity to be flexible in our thinking.

The strengths of individual principals encouraged sharing and growth. Each principal demonstrated great empathy and kindness for others, willingness to be vulnerable and reflect on their own practice. They were characterised as 'low ego people that didn't blow their own trumpets', were open to experience, had strongly held opinions but were always willing to listen to others and take on new information, and a commitment to grow and change.

Although Cluster schools collaborated closely they respected each other's autonomy. After initial shared training, each school separately identified how positive psychology could be implemented in their school. For some schools creating peace and calm in the classroom and the playground was an essential first step, while for others being able to express feelings and resolve conflict were top priorities.

4.2 Inclusive Emergent Development

From the start, positive education was implemented in an inclusive way. All staff were trained in the approach and over the years, staff have been an integral part of progress review and planning. In the first year of learning about well-being, the focus of professional development was on staff using positive psychology for themselves. This had the dual benefit of allowing teachers test this potential 'fad' and focus on their own well-being. The attention paid to staff well-being is credited with bringing school management and staff closer and building more cohesive teams. Furthermore, as support for positive education grew, it was teachers who pressed for earlier implementation in the classroom.

Although the Cluster had a clear well-being mission, it remained open as to the methods used. From the outset the Cluster held a full staff training day to set the theme for the year. Together, each staff group agreed how new skills or practices would be implemented in their school. Lead teachers received further

training through the year and shared successful implementation practices from each school. They returned to their schools with what one teacher described as 'a treasure trove of teacher-tested ideas and tools'. This model for developing skills and sharing information through the Cluster evolved over time. Quarterly principals' 'summit meetings' were added to the calendar and by 2014 several whole-Cluster meetings (after school or evening) were added to inculcate new staff in the ethos of positive education and to strengthen staff ties between schools.

Each year staff reviewed progress and agreed priorities for action. Programmes or training aligned with the Cluster principles and current priorities could then be proposed. This approach has enabled the Clusters' development to evolve in response to staff and community priorities and needs, and to take advantage of available resources and opportunities.

4.3 Support and Leadership Development

Principals and staff from each Cluster school work closely with their peers, offering support and advice across school issues beyond positive education. These close relationships became an important source of support as principals' group members encountered personal and professional challenges over the years. When group members faced school closures, mergers, and family illness, principals held weekly breakfast meetings and maintained close contact to sustain and support each other. The group provided invaluable leadership development opportunities, in contrast to the isolation experienced by many of their colleagues. It provided a safe forum in which to share concerns and challenges. The honest and sometimes challenging feedback available to each principal from trusted peers has been described as a 'taonga', a treasure beyond measure.

Through their role as pivotal drivers of positive education at the classroom level, lead teachers have gained valuable professional and leadership development. They, and other interested teachers, have been encouraged to develop and share their expertise in topics of interest, with professional development now frequently provided by staff. Teachers have presented on teacher well-being, restorative justice, and relationship management to a variety of audiences. Cluster schools have been asked to share their experiences with schools taking part in a Ministry of Education-led School Wide Positive Behaviour for Learning (SWPB4L) programme. The Cluster has also hosted visitors from New Zealand and Australia keen to see how schools can collaborate to support well-being for children from low-SES backgrounds.

4.4 An Appreciative Approach

It is fundamentally difficult for a school to implement positive education whilst operating from a deficit mindset, using deficit-focused thinking and administrative structures and policies. The Cluster principals adopted an appreciative approach to planning implementation of positive education, and over time aligned school practices with an appreciative approach.

The use of AI began in 2009 on the principal group's visit to Melbourne – where it was used to reflect on the strengths of each school, to identify what most captured people's attention, and the steps they would need to take to apply specific practices in their schools. Following the introduction of positive education in 2010, staff each school conducted small-scale AI processes, identifying the positive core of their school, staffroom, and classrooms. They then envisaged their ideal vision for the school, and identified the next smallest steps that would take them closer to the vision. This enabled each school to choose the elements of positive education that would best supporting their school vision.

When the Cluster agreed to move from a behaviour management or discipline paradigm to one of relationship management, staff mapped their way forward using appreciative questions:

- What has been your most positive experience of discipline in a school, where you saw self-esteem, relationships, and well-being rise for those involved as a result?
- What has been your most positive experience of a problem or conflict being dealt with at school? How was it handled? What was the result?
- What models or practices that are consistent with positive education do you already use?
- What steps to manage conflict or harm would be consistent with positive education?

To acknowledge its foundations in Circle Time Cluster schools conducted an appreciative inquiry to distil Circle Time learning and identify its role in embedding positive education. Each year staff used an appreciative approach to review classroom and whole-school positive education, sharing their peak moments. These discussions then formed the basis for establishing priorities for the following year and fed in to school planning.

5 Challenges for the Cluster

The Cluster's shared values and commitment to well-being faced numerous challenges. Although government funding provided initial support in 2007, this one-off funding stream ended several years later when government priorities shifted to literacy and numeracy. Funding has been an ongoing challenge. In 2013-

2014 the Cluster generated income by hosting training and events for other schools.

Introducing positive psychology to schools has its challenges. Some teachers were irritated by the label 'positive education', saying it devalued existing teaching practices as 'negative education'. In introducing positive psychology, the Cluster emphasised how this research provided evidence supporting what good teachers have always done. One school began its positive education journey by celebrating the 'good work we already do'.

Most staff became supportive after learning about the science of positive education or when they realised their well-being was now a priority for school management. A number of staff found the principles of positive psychology of enormous benefit in their own lives, and the implementation of positive education was accompanied by development of self-awareness and openness for many staff. For a very small number, acknowledging the influence of their emotions and relationships on teaching outcomes remained a challenge.

One teacher expressed concern at introducing new models into an already crowded curriculum. One Principal mapped how positive education related to core elements in the school's operation and links between them (See Figure 3). These included values, character strengths, curriculum programmes, and key competencies (New Zealand's National Curriculum requires every school to demonstrate how it develop these competencies in students).
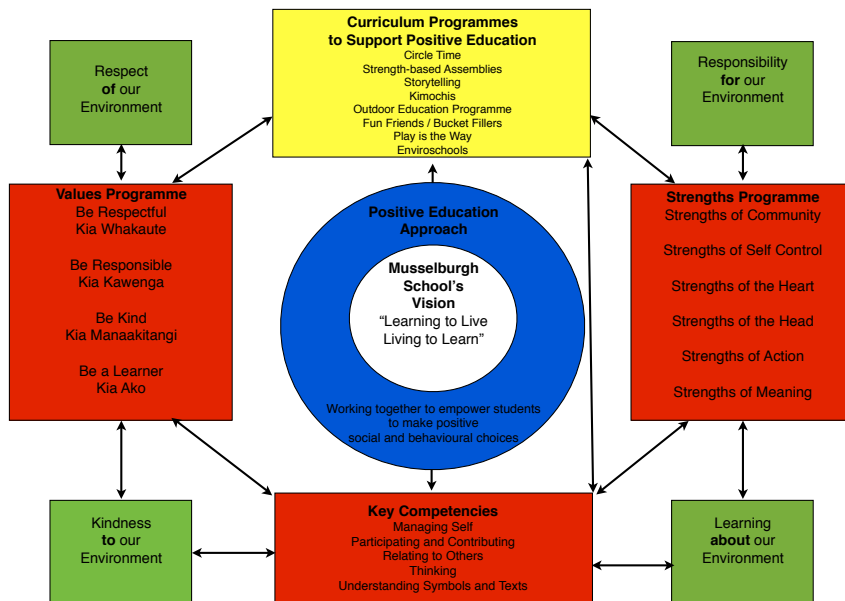

Fig. 3. Integration of positive education with School Vision (With permission from D. Smith, Principal, Musselburgh School, Dunedin, New Zealand)

Principals acknowledged the ongoing importance of a supportive Board Chair to approve budgets for professional development and programmes required for successful implementation. One principal described winning Board of Trustees support after presenting research evidence and examples of leading schools using positive education. Very rarely, a challenge came from the community. A small number of families left one school concerned that positive education was 'too soft on kids' and didn't include sufficient punishment for inappropriate behaviour.

An ongoing challenge is the training of new staff not familiar with positive education. Some schools' staff job descriptions now requirement that staff are open to the positive education approach and knowledge of related programmes is an advantage. More significant than staff turnover however is the annual change in the school community. School values and practices need to be communicated to new families each year, without growing stale for the longer-standing community. The principal of one school commented, 'the strengths approach, kindness, and forgiveness are so embedded in our schools, that we sometimes forget how novel this approach is for some families'. Communicating with families and bringing them on board remains a significant challenge for some schools.

6 Highlights

When asked to reflect on highlights of their experiences in the Cluster, each principal commented on the overall change in the school tone. Some described this as 'building school-wide understanding, knowledge, and a shared language'. For others it was 'the development of a positive, inclusive culture that is "owned by everyone and is everybody's responsibility"'. One principal observed that 'staff, students, and parents learned new and more loving and kind ways to speak and listen", and that the flow on effects of this change were significant for the school.

Positive education research improved board and management understanding of the importance of teacher as well as student well-being. Teachers appreciated professional development focused on their well-being and increased awareness of their personal strengths and the role they can play in teaching. One school developed a *korowai* (a culturally significant traditional Māori cloak of feathers that confers protection and respect on the wearer) of the behaviours they wanted to see and hear in the staffroom. Staff commented that the leadership of the school wanted to hear their voice and 'they had a new language to express that voice and the feelings behind it'.

Benefits for students were identified from the beginning of the Cluster journey, where the Circle Time process gave children a voice and an opportunity to express their feelings and problem solve for themselves. As children's awareness of their strengths and those of their peers strengths grew, how they viewed and interacted with each other also changed in many positive ways. Teachers reported that after the Awesome Us strengths programme not only had classroom teasing of one student stopped, but her classmates were standing up for

her in the school playground.

The impact of teachers modelling strengths-focused language and positive relational behaviour was a powerful positive influence on students who in turn influenced each other. Younger students looked up to and learned from senior students who ran school assemblies. The strengths language gave students new ways to express themselves as well as viewing themselves more positively. Watching students show how their strengths 'look' at school assemblies, hearing teachers and students praising and encouraging each other, and seeing students confident enough to stand apart from their peers were all indicators for school principals of a more positive, supportive school culture. Senior students have had greater opportunities to develop leadership skills as students were encouraged to take on responsibilities within the school previously managed by teachers such as running assemblies, resolving peer conflict, and deciding on school policy regarding scooters and skateboards.

7 Future Directions for Cluster Schools

Since the Cluster began its well-being journey in 2007 two schools have been closed, a further three schools were merged, and one school dropped out of the programme after the original funding was exhausted. Each of the remaining schools has changed principals since that time. Against this backdrop of change it has been very challenging to maintain a cohesive group. New principals do not share the group history and understanding of the journey. They have their own priorities and naturally need to focus on getting to know their own staff.

A core group that included a current principal and two recently retired principals discussed the Cluster future earlier this year. They wondered if positive education would no longer be a priority for some Cluster schools. Attending Cluster meetings soon afterwards, they were surprised to hear how strongly lead teachers supported the positive education philosophy and continued to implement a strengths-based approach in their classrooms. In contrast to change at the principal level, lead teachers have remained the same. They offer continuity, commitment and connectedness for the Cluster.

There is an inevitable forward momentum in schools. Professional development budgets are allocated each year. Once the staff has been trained in an area over a number of years, there is a tendency to look for something new. The Cluster schools have focused on new areas aligned with their principles and the philosophy of positive education, and extend their ability to support student well-being and development. This has included training in the neuroscience of attachment and brain development (aligned with the Cluster focus on relationships), mindfulness, and relaxation (aligned with previous support for positive emotion, and resilience building through self-awareness and self-regulation), and guide physical play activities to support social and emotional learning (building self-awareness and self-regulation outside the classroom). The Cluster principals commented that it can be helpful to have a range of programmes

aligned with positive education so that there is flexibility for both teachers and students in finding approaches that work well for them. However, staff and principals agree that kindness, gratitude, and a strengths-based approach with students are now an integral part of school functioning. These practices now underpin all new programmes.

One of the catch-cries for positive education has been 'Live it, Embed it, Teach it' referring to the need for the philosophy to be lived by staff and embedded in school practice as well as being taught to students. Even if well-being were not to be taught explicitly in these schools in the future, it has been embedded in school practices and is lived in teacher behaviour towards students. It informs how students and staff are considered at the whole school level and how teachers interact with students in the classroom and playground. One cluster teacher appreciated the depth of the changes at their school when new students and staff were surprised by how tolerant and accepting students are of each other, while another realised it when a neighbouring home owner commented that the school playground was a happier place with fewer arguments and more positive language.

8 Conclusion

'Ma whero ma pango ka oti ai te mahi.
[When everyone does their part the work will be complete].

In Te Wai Pounamu Well-being Cluster everyone did their part and the outcome was more than the sum of the parts. The Cluster demonstrates that schools with limited budgets can successfully collaborate to implement positive education, bringing about significant positive change in school culture and practices. The shared vision and commitment of school principals was pivotal to initiate and provide momentum to the process of change. However, once change was underway, the commitment of lead teachers to drive the process at a classroom level was essential to keep it going. Now, after almost a decade, it may be these teachers that ensure the ongoing development of positive education in their schools.

Most importantly, teachers have seen how students can grasp concepts like strengths and gratitude and benefit from being encouraged to focus on what is right with them rather than what is wrong. Students have demonstrated repeatedly that they can engage with, understand and benefit from this appreciative approach to education. At times their understanding and insight has awed their teachers and increased their respect for students, such as when a 10-year old girl described going outside to see beauty in a cherry tree's blossom to calm her anger. Or when one 11-year old boy, previously bullied and from a challenging background, described feeling grateful 'because you know, we get to live this life'.

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