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## **Teaching practices that are conducive to supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education**

### **Keywords**

Emotional well-being; teaching practices; post-compulsory education; positive psychology; positive education; PERMA.

### **Abstract**

Emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education is a growing concern for educators. There has been a continued increase in mental health difficulties amongst young people over the last decade (The Association of Colleges (AOC) 2021, The Mental Health Foundation 2022). In an attempt to be part of the solution to this growing concern, this study explores the theories of positive psychology and PERMA (Seligman, 2011) (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) and the implementation of this theory within teaching practices in post-compulsory education. The aim was to be able to evaluate the impact of teaching practices that had the potential to have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of learners within this sector. This study took place in a large further education college with eight participant teachers across a range of subjects and their first-year learners. The data was collected through online questionnaires, group interviews, and classroom observations. Findings revealed which teaching practices were most conducive to supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners.

### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, there has been a rise in mental health illness among learners in post-compulsory education. The Mental Health Foundation (2022) reported that in any given year one in ten children are believed to have a diagnosable mental health

disorder, with the World Health Organisation (2022) reporting that 20% of adolescents throughout the world experience mental health problems in any given year. Papyrus (2022) identify that suicide is still the biggest cause of mortality in young people and research conducted by the Association of Colleges (2021) has recognised that 60% of 16-18-year-olds report an increase in mental health illness over the previous three years. With the number of A&E attendances by young people aged 18 or under with a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition more than tripled between 2010 and 2018-19 (YoungMinds, 2022) and with the pandemic on top of an already challenging situation, over one in three young people (34%) have said that their mental health has got much worse during the pandemic (YoungMinds, 2022). These figures highlight a growing problem for the population of young people in the UK.

Dr Martin Seligman (2011), an American psychotherapist, scholar and educator, believes that positive psychology can be integrated into education and could support the positive emotional well-being of young people. Over the last two decades and since the development of 'positive psychology' (Seligman, 1990) there has been an increase in positive education programmes which are packages of tutorial-type lessons that teach young people skills such as positivity, happiness and resilience. These have been developed through organisations such as the International Positive Education Network (IPEN) ([ipen-network.com](http://ipen-network.com)) and the Positive Education School's Association ([pesa.edu.au](http://pesa.edu.au)). However, these education programmes are designed to be whole institute approaches rather than specific teaching practices that can be delivered by teachers in each classroom. This also points to a gap in the theoretical literature. There appears to be a distinct lack of research into teaching practices that can be employed in post-compulsory classrooms to promote the positive emotional well-being of each learner. To date, there has been a focus on those with a clinical

diagnosis of mental health illness and a reactive response to support rather than a proactive, preventative approach to supporting positive emotional well-being in all learners.

This led me to question what role teachers can play in supporting positive emotional well-being during lessons for all learners and therefore the research question of ‘which teaching practices are conducive to supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education?’ was developed. There is always a need for specialised pastoral care and support for learners that should be available in education by trained professionals. It is important to be clear that this research was never about supporting teachers to become trained mental health support workers but was about exploring teaching practices that can be employed during lessons that can promote the positive emotional well-being of all learners in their classes. The research has been a marrying of positive psychology and teaching practices. When exploring the concept of ‘teaching practices’ there are many definitions that relate directly to student teachers and their learning process. Whereas here we are building on definitions such as “the instruction of a subject that takes place in a real classroom environment” (Incikabi and Kacar 2017, unpaginated) and the teaching processes which impact upon the development of skills and knowledge of learners that is traditionally defined as learning (Reece and Walker, 2003). Therefore, for this research teaching practices includes everything that happens in the classroom during lessons, such as greeting learners as they enter the classroom, teacher positivity, questioning techniques, involvement of learners in tasks, choice of activities during lessons, relationships between learners, and learners and teachers, positive praise and others. These are practices that teachers are familiar with but may not realise which practices are the most conducive to the positive emotional well-being of their learners.

Where this research aims to bring positive psychology into the classroom there is a clear focus on teachers utilising Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of positive psychology and positive emotional well-being which comprises 5 elements: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Seligman argued that these five elements are central to achieving positive emotional well-being. This theory brings elements of positive psychology together into 5 measurable elements of what is required by individuals to develop positive emotional well-being. As young people spend a significant amount of time in the care of their teachers, they are therefore well placed to support the positive emotional well-being of their learners rather than guest speakers in assemblies. Continued research is therefore required to explore teaching practices that are conducive to supporting and developing positive emotional well-being in all learners. Research to date regarding the emotional well-being and mental health of learners in education has focussed on schools, universities, and specialist support (DCSF, 2011; Weare, 2015; DfE, 2017). Post-compulsory settings have been excluded from much of this previous research. This research aims to bridge the gap in current knowledge into teaching practices that have the potential to promote the positive emotional well-being of learners in the post-compulsory sector.

### **Emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education**

There are many definitions of emotional well-being and a vast amount of literature exploring the concept of well-being and what it includes or should include. As Seligman (2011) identified there is difficulty defining well-being as much literature constitutes its elements but does not define it as an entity, however, there is a common theme that relates to states of health and happiness. Steele (2003) identifies that emotional well-being encompasses an individual's sense of satisfaction, purpose and control. Similarly, Weare (2015, 3) argues that emotional well-being "involves a sense

of optimism, confidence, happiness, clarity, validity, self-worth, achievement, having meaning and purpose, engagement, having supportive and satisfying relationships with others and understanding oneself and responding effectively to one's own emotions”.

The UK government recognises the wave of mental health issues faced by teenagers and the impact this is having on educational establishments, but their suggested solutions are far from ideal. Their response to these issues is to embed well-being and meditation lessons and tutorials into timetables (Challen et al. 2011). The NHS 2017 survey of ‘Mental Health of Children and Young People in England’ highlighted the situation of children and adolescent mental health at the time, identifying that more than one in seven aged between 11-19 had one or more mental health issues (NHS, 2018). Then Covid-19 happened, and the world was gripped by a pandemic that brought about national lockdowns, isolations and social restrictions which was inevitably going to have an impact on emotional well-being across all individuals. Therefore, a follow-up survey of ‘Mental Health of Children and Young People in England’ was again conducted by the NHS during the pandemic in July 2020. The findings showed that this time it was found that one in six 11-16-year-olds (17.6% of this age group) and one in five 17 – 22-year-olds (20% of this age group) had a probable mental health disorder with anxiety and depression being the most common. Research regarding emotional well-being in education to date focuses on primary and secondary school environments and support strategies for those with disclosed mental health disorders (DCSF, 2011; Weare, 2015; DfE, 2017; AoC, 2017).

The 'Me and My School' research study commissioned by the DCSF (now the DfE) in 2008-2011 was a national evaluation of the Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TaMHS) programme. The report identified that there was not enough evidence to

conclude if teacher delivered or psychologist interventions were more effective. The research was aimed at primary and secondary schools and whole school reactive strategies for those with identified mental health issues rather than preventative daily teaching practices. More recently the report 'What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools?' was published in 2015 and written by Professor Katherine Weare. The report raised some important issues; however, it is focused exclusively on secondary school environments whereas the TaMHS project report explored both primary and secondary environments, but neither included post-compulsory settings. The report expressed the importance of both whole institute reactive approaches (those targeted at learners with disclosed mental health illness) but also classroom teacher-led approaches. Classroom-based approaches included creating supportive classroom climates, feeling accepted, respectful communication and supportive peers. However, there was no reference made in the report to how these approaches can be incorporated into daily teaching practices. The focus of previous research has been whole school approaches and has neglected to explore the role of classroom-based practices that could potentially have positive impacts on learners' emotional well-being for all learners and not just those with diagnosed mental health illnesses. Any links between teaching practices and the emotional well-being of learners has, to date, been largely unresearched and is therefore the focus of this research.

More recently the DfE commissioned the research 'Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges' in 2017 covering primary and secondary schools and colleges in the UK. The research found that 64% of respondents felt that promoting positive well-being was part of daily routines with strategies including the development of emotional literacy and resilience, however, the research found that preventative

measures employed were targeted whole institute approaches such as through pastoral or tutorial systems rather than through teaching practices within the classroom. Likewise, The Association of Colleges (2017) research into supporting mental health in education concluded that a range of whole-college approaches are being used including mindfulness, healthy eating and stress management through tutorial programmes. A report conducted into how schools in England promote positive emotional well-being among their pupils (Vostanis et al. 2013) identified most support approaches were reactive rather than preventative. These reactive strategies were more prevalent in secondary age groups as “72% reported focussing in the main on helping children who were starting to develop or already experiencing problems as opposed to preventing problems arising” (Vostanis et al. 2013,155). The research highlights the need for systematic preventative interventions to be developed but doesn’t elicit what these interventions could be. Teachers would be best placed to employ preventative strategies as they have the most contact with learners.

A review of the NHS surveys (2017, 2020) also specified the new preventative measures being implemented to improve emotional well-being in adolescents as “early intervention, including promotion and prevention strategies, has the potential to produce the greatest impact on young people’s mental health and wellbeing by taking action before mental health problems worsen and preventing the onset of mental disorders” (Clarke, Pote and Sorgenfrei, 2020, 1). It can be seen from the rising statistics regarding the emotional well-being of those in education it is of paramount importance that supporting the emotional well-being of learners is high on the agenda for policymakers and implementors of educational programmes and “when done well it can enhance attainment, reduce exclusions, re-engage students who have

experienced problems, build good relationships, attract and retain staff and raise standards” (Stirling and Emery 2016, 2).

### **Positive psychology, PERMA and positive education**

Psychological interventions in education have been around for more than 70 years, however, the move towards positive psychology in education and the notion of positive education is a relatively new one in comparison (Shankland and Rosset, 2017). In his 2011 book, ‘Flourish’ Dr Seligman discussed his theory of positive psychology as having 5 elements that make up the ‘PERMA’ theory. The five elements are Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Seligman argued that these five elements were central to achieving positive emotional well-being. Positive emotion covers features such as gratitude, joy, forgiveness and hope. Research and literature distinguish links between positive emotion and other positive outcomes in life, including job success, better relationships and improved physical health (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005; Howell, Kern and Lyubomirsky, 2007). Engagement includes flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), the pursuit of goals, and full concentration. Relationships consist of belonging, connectedness, empathy and cooperation. Meaning covers sense of purpose within the community and work-related goals. Accomplishment incorporates achievement, making progress and success. Seligman (2011) explored the notion that well-being is not a single measure but has various aspects that are more readily measured through the five elements of PERMA and later (2018) concluded that the elements interrelate with one another.

Literature exploring the integration of positive psychology and the PERMA theory within education has been focused on school-age children and viewed as a whole school approach through designated ‘happiness’ lessons, tutorial programmes or

assemblies (Norrish et al. 2013; Kern et al. 2015). Many professionals within the education sector recognise that learners' emotional well-being is an important part of their achievement. Positive education has developed more momentum and a recognition that educational psychology needs to focus more on strengths rather than weaknesses (Kristjansson, 2012). Moore (2020) summarises positive education as the uniting of traditional educational principles and methods with those of positive psychology with Waters (2011) ascertaining that positive education aims to "teach both skills of well-being and the skills of achievement" (Waters 2011, 77). The current approach to supporting emotional well-being in schools and colleges in the UK is the stand-alone approach of lessons taught separately from the main educational programmes. These are often delivered within the Personal, Health, Social and Emotional (PHSE) programmes in schools and the tutorial programmes in colleges (Weare, 2015). There have been some suggestions about how to incorporate positive education into the classroom (Pawelski, 2016) such as looking at gratitude through key literature in English, but again these suggestions steer away from the direct role of the teacher and delivery of lessons.

The Public Health England (PHE) publication *Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* (2021) recognises that emotional well-being impacts cognitive development and learning and devised 8 principles to promote the positive emotional well-being of learners in schools and colleges. However, yet again this targeted approach is based on whole school or college support delivered from the top-down and "which, if applied consistently and comprehensively, will help contribute towards protecting and promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing" (PHE 2021, 3). The impact that teaching practices could have on supporting positive emotional well-being has to date been largely unexplored and

could be a piece of the puzzle for the prevention of mental health illness in young people. The PERMA theory and the notion of positive education can give an excellent starting base to help identify teaching practices that are used or can be developed to support the positive emotional well-being of learners. Through their research, Kern et al. (2015) applied the PERMA theory to adolescence and concluded that it is most applicable to positive education. The theory helps to dissect positive emotional well-being, what this can consist of and therefore teaching practices that support it can be explored and identified.

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical perspective**

The ontological paradigm of this research is constructionism (Bryman, 2012) as the knowledge gained will be constructed by humans (or as Bryman refers to them, 'social actors') through social interaction. Constructionism "asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman 2012, 33), or to put it another way how knowledge develops as a social construction (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This research aims to develop an understanding of the perspectives of individuals through interactions with participants to identify teaching practices that support the positive emotional well-being of learners. The exploration of multiple perspectives and subjective meaning leads to a construction of what is occurring and is reflected in the focus of interactions between individuals, the classroom environments and the lesson contexts within this research.

Reflecting on this ontological position places my research within an interpretivist epistemology by developing an understanding of individual's experiences and as the researcher, I will have my own experiences as an insider to this research topic. "The

researcher adopts a reflexive stance to knowledge involvement in and impact on the research process itself, and values are integral to the research” (Elliott et al. 2018, 95). Knowledge is developed through interactions with the participants and to generate knowledge and understanding of the experiences of my participants, there is a need to explore and gather data about their feelings, perceptions, and interactions.

The data collection methods employed generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Combining both qualitative and quantitative data had the potential to enrich the analysis of the data and “the purposes of which are to give a richer and more reliable understanding (broader and deeper) of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield”. (Creswell and Plano Clarke 2011, 4) Where there is an over-reliance on one approach to data collection then gaps can occur in the weaknesses of that approach, however where data is collected from a variety of methods that collect both qualitative and quantitative it supports the strengths and weaknesses of the various collection methods. As Cohen et al. (2018) argue both qualitative and quantitative data further ensure the reliability and validity of the said data which enables more concise conclusions to be drawn from the data collected.

The design for this project draws on that of action research. Cohen et al. (2018) have previously identified that action research comes in many forms such as participatory action research, critical action research, diagnostic action research, practitioner research, empirical action research and classroom-based action research, amongst others. But the one aspect that the different forms of action research have is to make a change to practice. This research used Maroni’s (2011) action research model as it was felt to be the best fit with a correlation in data collection stages as seen in fig 2 below:

Fig 2

Moroni's procedures:	Translated to this project's procedures:
1. Diagnosis of the problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor emotional well-being of adolescence in education which affects their life outcomes.</li> </ul>
2. Planning an intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stage one - Identifying teaching practices that support positive emotional well-being using PERMA theory and carrying out past learner online questionnaires.</li> <li>• Stage two – Gathering participant teacher interviews regarding teaching practice that are conducive to supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners.</li> </ul>
3. Action the intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of identified teaching practices within classrooms over 12 weeks.</li> </ul>
4. Assessment of the intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stage three – Gathering data through classroom observations.</li> <li>• Stage four – Gathering data through learner and teacher online questionnaires.</li> </ul>

5. Critical reflection and communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analysing data.</li><li>• Writing of research report and development of recommendations for further development.</li></ul>
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## Context

The research took place in a Further Education (FE) college that operates over five sites. The college delivers a wide range of courses from A-levels to professional short courses to over 3000 learners. The courses available range from foundation level to degree level. The field research began at the start of the autumn term of 2021 with new cohorts of learners of the participant teachers. The autumn term starts the academic year and allows for starting fresh approaches to teaching practices with these learners. This term is also a term with little deviation from the normal timetable due to exam periods. This allowed for a fresh start with a new cohort of learners. Teachers would be able to implement teaching practices with first-year learners who would start college with limited expectations of what to expect from teaching practice.

## Participants

The past learner questionnaire link was distributed via the college's social media sites. Any previous learners could respond to the questionnaire, with a total of 62 responses received. The sample of teachers included eight teachers, with five from one site and three from another. Two teachers deliver solely A-level qualifications, three teachers deliver solely vocational courses, with two of these covering levels 2 and 3, and two teachers deliver both A-level and level 3 vocational courses. The sample covered a range of teachers from both A-Level and vocational provision (levels 2 and 3) and

those that spend a varying amount of teaching time with their learners. It also included a balance of teachers, which should always be considered (Hayes 2006), from various subject areas, and included three male and five female teachers. An invitation email was sent to the teaching staff at the college and the participants were selected 'on a first come, first serve' basis covering the variety of courses and gender of teachers. Field research was carried out with new cohorts of first-year learners of the participant teachers; this equated to approximately 136 learners. The learners were predominately aged 16 to 18 years old with only approximately 5% of these learners aged over 18.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As part of the first stage of the data collection, a questionnaire was devised and published online and shared via the college's official social media platforms. This was aimed at the public that had previously, at any point in their life, studied within post-compulsory education such as an FE college. This questionnaire aimed to gather previous post-compulsory learners' views regarding teaching practices that had an impact on their positive emotional well-being during their time in college. By devising an online questionnaire for past learners, it would allow the gathering of individuals' attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings on their experiences of post-compulsory education. The framework of the questions was dictated by each aspect of Seligman's PERMA theory by extrapolating participant views, feelings and opinions about the teaching practices that they had experienced in post-compulsory education that they felt had had a positive impact on their emotional well-being by supporting their Positive emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), and by giving Meaning (M) to their lessons and helping them to develop a sense of Accomplishment (A). The results of the online questionnaires were analysed to identify the teaching practices

that previous learners had identified as being those that supported their positive emotions, their engagement in lessons, the building of effective relationships, the development of meaning to the context of lessons and supported their sense of accomplishment and achievement. The data gathered from this questionnaire was analysed using the analysis tools available within the JISC online tools for exploratory purposes. The teaching practices that were commonly identified by frequency in the multiple-choice questions provided quantitative data to this effect. The open-ended questions that provided qualitative data were analysed by coding the teaching practices into themes of occurrence. The results of this data analysis fed directly into the interview schedule for the next stage of data collection and were used for this informative purpose only.

Stage two of the data collection involved interviews with the eight participant teachers to help identify the teachers' views and ideas regarding teaching practices that could support each aspect of Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory and therefore have the potential to encourage positive emotional well-being of their learners. These were conducted as group interviews. It is worth mentioning here that there is a difference between group interviews and focus groups although the terms are often interchangeable in the research literature. "The generic term 'group interview' has tended recently to be used interchangeably with 'focus group' because of the latter's popularity, even though it has specific characteristics." (Robson, 2011, 293) However focus groups, with origins in marketing, tend not to have an interview schedule and are managed with little interaction from the researcher as the group exchange ideas in a structure more akin to a discussion. Whereas an interview has a schedule of questions or topics and is managed by the researcher, so the method used in this research is most definitely a group interview and not a focus group. Conducting

interviews gave another dimension to the data collected from the past learner questionnaires and would complement the learner perspectives. Therefore, to gain a fuller picture of teaching practices it was important to gather the views of the participant teachers also. The interviews were recorded on Dictaphones and the recordings were transcribed. These transcriptions were then analysed using a coding thematic analysis for this qualitative data to identify teaching practices that have the potential to support the positive emotional well-being of learners. As Patton (2002) explains there is no one right way to analyse qualitative data and a main consideration should be that whichever method is chosen is fit for purpose. This is reiterated by Koshy (2010) but the emphasis here is that the analysis method chosen should be systematic. The coding process started with open coding by reading and re-reading the data and attaching colour coding. Axial coding developed this by making connections and then selective coding highlighted themes identified, which is flexible and supported summarising (Robson 2011). These codes were reviewed for repetitions.

The interviews conducted gave insightful perspectives of teaching practices that are potentially conducive to supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners from the viewpoint of the teachers and their breadth of professional experience across years of cohorts. Completing the interviews in groups allowed participants to bounce ideas off one another and prompt responses from each other and provided in-depth thoughts on a relatable topic with their shared professional knowledge. The interviews were an effective supplement to the online questionnaires for past learners for a picture to evolve regarding teaching practices that were valued as conducive to the positive emotional well-being of learners by both past learners and participant teachers. The group interview transcripts were then analysed to further narrow the range of teaching practices that were most conducive to supporting the learners'

positive emotions, engagement in lessons, the building of positive relationships, a sense of meaning in lessons, and a sense of accomplishment and achievement. The data analysed from the past learner questionnaires and the teacher group interviews resulted in 30 possible teaching practices being reduced to 13. These 13 teaching practices were categorised by those that met each of the elements of PERMA. The practices that were identified as having the potential to encourage positive emotions in learners were greeting learners as they entered lessons, picking up on positives rather than negatives, positive descriptive verbal praise, standing and moving around the room to teach, finishing the lesson on a positive and regarding learners as they leave the lesson. The teaching practices that were identified as having the potential to engage learners in lessons were using interactive technology, standing and moving around the room to teach, group activities with teacher interaction, a variety of activities, current affairs and news in activities, linking lesson content to learner interests and work experiences. The teaching practices that were identified as having the potential to build positive relationships were using a 'think, pair and share' method to answering questions in whole class discussions and group activities. The teaching practices identified as having the potential to give meaning to lessons for learners were using current affairs and news in activities, using interactive technology, a variety of activities, current affairs and news in activities and linking lesson content to learner interests and work experiences. The teaching practices identified as having the potential to support learners' sense of accomplishment and achievement were written teacher feedback, positive descriptive verbal praise and written teacher feedback. It is worth noting here that it is evident that some teaching practices were identified as supporting more than one element of the PERMA theory. These 13 teaching practices

were identified as the practices that would be implemented by the participant teachers for a term and informed the next stage of the data collection.

The next stage, stage three, of the data collection was the observation of lessons where the identified teaching practices were being implemented. Each participant teacher was observed implementing the identified teaching practices in two different lessons, to help assess the impact that the teaching practices have on learners' positive emotional well-being within each class. Each observation was an hour long and would therefore result in 16 hours of observations. Observation "offers the investigator the opportunity to gather first-hand, 'live' data in situ from naturally occurring social situations." (Cohen 2018, 542) They are an important exploratory tool that allowed me to observe the practices being implemented as each teacher is different and has different teaching styles. For example, teacher positivity had been identified as an important practice when supporting the positive emotional well-being of learners, but what does teacher positivity look like in practice? There is no generic definition for 'teacher positivity' however Davis (undated) defines positivity as "the practice or tendency to be positive or optimistic in life." It is hoped that this research will be able to elicit elements that constitute 'teacher positivity'. Observations give context to the research which notes everyday behaviour, in a natural environment within events as they happen and are able to get to what Robson (2011) refers to as the 'real life' of research and data collection and these first-hand accounts have the potential to yield valid and authentic data (Cohen et al. 2018). These observations allowed me to note first-hand how the identified teaching practices were being implemented in classrooms and how learners responded, noting verbal and non-verbal responses. Each observation was recorded using an observation schedule and data was collected in a typed narrative format. Each observation was then analysed using

the same thematic coding method as that used for the interview transcripts. The observations provided a perspective on how the teaching practices can be implemented effectively and their potential impact on the positive emotional well-being of learners. Following the implementation of the identified teaching practices for 12 weeks, the next stage would be the evaluation of the impact of these teaching practices on learners' positive emotional well-being within the framework of PERMA, from both the learners' and the teachers' perspectives. This led directly to the fourth and final stage of the data collection.

As part of stage four of the research, online questionnaires were once again used as a data collection method. Two different questionnaires were designed, one for participant teachers and one for their first-year learners. These questionnaires aimed to gather their views and opinions regarding the impact of the teaching practices that had been implemented in the lessons during the autumn term and the perceived impact on the positive emotional well-being of the fore-mentioned first-year learners. These were published online following the implementation period of the identified teaching practices within first-year lessons. It was always acknowledged that the teachers' perceptions of the impact of the teaching practices would potentially be different from the learners, and while the learners' perceptions are central to this research the teachers' perceptions must be also considered to enable more valid and rounded conclusions to be drawn regarding the research question. These questionnaires were analysed with the same process as the past learner questionnaire.

## **Ethics**

The ethical approval processes of the supporting university were fully adhered to for this research project. Due to the complexity of this research project, ethical approval had to be sought in the following phases:

Phase 1. Ethical approval was granted for the online questionnaire for past learners and the gatekeeper's consent. Written gatekeeper consent was obtained from the principal and deputy principal at the college. Informed consent was ensured for the online questionnaires.

Phase 2. Ethical approval was granted for the teacher 'participant information sheets' and consent forms. The interview schedule questions were also considered, and approval granted.

Phase 3. Approval for the observation structure and schedule were granted, along with the 'participant information sheets' that were issued to all first-year learners, and parents of those under 18, that were in the classes of the participating teachers.

Phase 4. Approval was granted for the online questionnaires that were issued to all learners in the observed classes and the participating teachers.

All participants were fully informed of the research, its purposes and related procedures through the participation information sheets. Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were adhered to by eliminating the personal details of all participants. Interviews, online questionnaires, and observations were designed to ensure there was no discomfort to participants and that their privacy was always protected.

Professional guidelines were adhered to throughout such as BERA (2018) along with the university's guidelines and procedures for good practice and their research ethics policy.

## **Limitations**

This research has been successful at identifying teaching practices that are conducive to the positive emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education and it has extrapolated some valuable recommendations for practice. However, as this research was implemented in one FE college with small-scale participant numbers, it was carried out with a situational participant group during a particular period and

cannot, therefore, be automatically generalised across all post-compulsory populations of learners. Many of the findings are transferable, nevertheless, some limitations need to be considered. The period in which the research was conducted was the first term back in education following a period of Covid-19 lockdowns and the full effect of the impact of this on learners and teachers is not known. Teacher personality has also played its part in this research and there were eight participant teachers, each with their own personalities. This would inevitably mean that the identified teaching practices would not all be delivered in the same way by each of the teachers. While this is acknowledged it is difficult to measure teacher personality and impossible to standardise it. However, these limitations do open up suggestions for future research looking at the impact of Covid-19 on learners' emotional well-being and also the impact of teacher personality on the emotional well-being of learners.

### **Findings and discussion**

As the data collected from the past learner questionnaires and participant teacher group interviews were analysed solely to inform the subsequent stage of the research, this discussion is therefore based on the findings of the participant student and teacher questionnaires. The responses to the questions were evaluated reflecting the elements of the PERMA theory and therefore as the teaching practices that were most perceived as supporting the positive emotion of learners, the engagement of learners in lessons, the building of effective positive relationships, developing meaning in lessons, and learners developing a sense of accomplishment.

Firstly, a teaching practice that was perceived by both the learners and the teachers, to have supported the positive emotions of learners was the teacher moving around the classroom when teaching. The observations revealed that when the teacher circulated the learners, they could offer support and guidance on a more personal level

and give individualised verbal praise. This was particularly supportive for the learners who were potentially struggling with the instructions of the task. The interactions between teachers and learners during these observed periods were positive and upbeat in all of the observed lessons. A teacher's position in the classroom can convey powerful positive messages to their learners (Cox, 2019). It was also identified from the results of the teacher questionnaire that teacher movement and interaction with learners also aided the building of rapport and created a supportive environment. The teachers also felt that this teaching practice supported the less confident learners as individualised feedback could be given rather than publicly in front of the class. The comments analysed from the learner questionnaire also supported this view that the less confident learners felt supported and felt included when they didn't feel confident enough to speak out in class. The learners also identified that the movement of the teacher during lessons was motivating as they knew that additional help would be available if they required it. The observations did recognise that the layout of the classroom plays a part in the effectiveness of these movements and interactions. Therefore, the layout of the classroom needs consideration to allow free movement around tables. As Reece and Walker (2003) explain, we need to move away from lecture-style classrooms and facilitate a more fluid environment that is flexible and can be changed to support movement and group work to support learning.

A second teaching practice that was identified as supporting positive emotion in learners was the teacher giving descriptive verbal praise. The teachers commented in the questionnaire that they felt that they needed to further develop the skills of descriptive verbal praise. Descriptive verbal praise is explaining what is right or good about a learner's answer rather than just replying with 'yes, well done' or 'yes, that's correct'. Cox (2019) views these limited responses as 'false positive' responses as

“to have any weight, praise must be specific and focused on what the student is doing and the effort they’re making” (Cox 2019, 72). The observations reflected a clear attempt from all of the teachers to embed descriptive verbal praise and the benefits were notable. Where this practice was employed in lessons there was a noticeable difference to those lessons where this practice was not observed. In the lessons where descriptive verbal praise was offered in response to learner efforts, there were no displays of unwanted behaviour evidenced. However, in the lessons where there were more negative responses to learner efforts, low-level disruptive behaviour and negative attitudes from learners were observed. Where descriptive verbal praise was given, even when an answer given was incorrect, the learners tried again and could work towards the right answer which suggests that this practice creates a safe environment to make mistakes and to develop resilience and perseverance. There were positive environments created where learner efforts were celebrated and the focus was more on effort and process rather than the answer and end product. The teachers’ responses to the questionnaire mirrored what had been observed by identifying that in their opinions positive descriptive verbal praise cultivated positive contributions from learners and encouraged them to work hard. The teachers also stated that they had seen immediate boosts in confidence in their learners as well as the longer-term building of self-esteem and confidence. While the teachers recognised that the immediate recognition was positive for learners it was also felt that positive descriptive praise could not be overused, or it would become insincere and lose its meaning. The learner questionnaires also identified how this positive praise motivated them and encouraged them to do better as they could learn from what they were doing well rather than just learning from what they were getting wrong.

Another popular choice of teaching practice that was conducive to supporting positive emotions in learners was the teacher picking up on positives rather than negatives. Much of the analysis from the observations and questionnaires echoed the effects of positive descriptive verbal praise as discussed above. However, the observations uncovered that humour also seemed an important tool for the teacher to employ. The use of humour appeared to improve the positivity in the classroom, which could also have the potential to make the positives easier to notice when a conducive learning environment is created. Where teachers noted the positives rather than the negatives during the lessons it was again recorded that there were no displays of disruptive behaviour observed and persistence was regularly encouraged by teachers. A climate of safety was observed in the lessons where teachers were upbeat and picked up on positives throughout as learners were encouraged to try again where answers were not quite correct. This approach demonstrated that it was OK to make mistakes and keep trying. Data from the learner questionnaires also showed that where a teacher picked up on positives rather than negatives during lessons it created a positive atmosphere where they felt more relaxed and comfortable. However, Cox (2019) notes that while picking up on positives is not a new idea it is not put into practice often enough. "There is a temptation in the teaching profession to look for errors and omissions, to be alert for negatives." (Cox 2019, 15).

The teacher welcoming learners as they enter the room and regarding them as they leave the room were both also identified as teaching practices that supported the positive emotions of the learners. The observations showed what these practices looked like in practice. When learners entered the classroom before the start of a lesson teachers greeted them with 'hello', 'good morning' or 'good afternoon'. Greeting each learner by name was regularly observed, and all done with a smile.

Some teachers would say 'I hope you've had a good weekend' which demonstrated interest in learners and their well-being. This was also specified by the learners as showing that the teachers were interested which in turn helped to build a good rapport with them which makes it easier to ask for help when they need it. Learner questionnaires also revealed that learners felt that this set the tone for the lesson and positively started the lesson. This was also supported by the responses to the teacher questionnaire which also identified that welcoming the learners makes them feel valued and sets the tone for a positive environment. Regarding learners at the end of the lesson was also observed and was demonstrated as teachers would say 'thank you for your efforts today', 'have a good evening', 'have a good weekend' etc. This was regularly met with 'thank you' from learners as they left the lesson. This demonstrated mutual appreciation and respect.

Moving on to the teaching practices that supported learner engagement in lessons 'think, pair and share' method of questioning was rated highly. This method of questioning was demonstrated when teachers posed a question to the whole class and would give time for each learner to think about their answer. The learners would then be given another short period to discuss their ideas in a pair and devise one answer together, with one of the pair feeding back their answer to the class. Where this questioning technique was utilised in lessons it was observed that all learners were engaged, even the less confident and quieter students. This was also echoed in the learner questionnaire where learners felt that it supported the less confident learners in the group to engage in answering questions and that it also helped to improve their answers to the questions. Data from the teacher questionnaires also identified that the 'think, pair and share' technique supported mixed abilities effectively and allowed all learners to engage by sharing ideas without directly speaking out in

front of the class. The mixed abilities can support those who are less confident in their answers as “students develop confidence if they sense that you trust them to get the answer right.” (Cox 2019, 38)

The teacher moving around the classroom to teach was also identified as a teaching practice that could support the engagement of learners in lessons as well as supporting positive emotions in learners. The observations revealed that when a teacher moves around the room when teaching, learners were attentive and watched the teacher as they moved around as eye contact was maintained. The interactions during tasks also kept learners focussed as teacher feedback enabled them to fully engage in the task to successfully complete it. When circulating the room, the teachers created a presence and commanded the learners’ attention and focus which in turn supported their engagement in lessons.

The use of interactive technology was a teaching practice that was rated highly as supporting learner engagement in lessons. Armitage et al. (2007) also identify the significant role of interactive technology as a valuable tool in creating engagement in lessons due to the very nature of the resources. There were many examples of interactive technology observed such as tablets used for research or completing online tasks and Kahoot for learners to compete in whole-class quizzes. Where the use of interactive technology was observed in lessons so were long periods of concentration in learners and full engagement in tasks was evident. This was never more evident than when competing in quizzes as motivation and concentration were at their highest during these activities in the lessons. The learner questionnaire data also showed agreement that interactive technology is conducive to supporting learner engagement as their use brings fun and engagement to the lessons for all learners and everyone

can be involved. It was noted that interactive technology also allows learners to have access to information that they would otherwise not be able to access.

Activities that are relatable to learner interests and work experiences were also rated highly as being conducive to supporting the engagement of learners in lessons. The engagement of learners during activities where they were based on interests and work experiences was notably greater than in other activities. The discussions that learners had during these activities were all on task and in-depth regarding each activity as they could make sense of the content, possibly as it was more relatable. The observations identified the activities that created a 'buzz' and supported concentration and motivation from all learners were the activities that were linked to their interests such as music, current news topics or sports etc. or were linked directly to their work experiences in the subjects where relevant. Learners also acknowledged that these activities were easier to follow and interpret as they were relatable. The teachers specified that this relatability supports learners' understanding as they can see the relevance and importance to them personally. The learners specified that these activities were the most memorable and they supported their ability to apply theory to practice while having a career focus and supporting their future development. The teachers mirrored these responses by identifying that these activities supported learner memory by bringing learning to life. It was also noted that learners felt that these relatable activities increased their interest and enjoyment of lessons.

Incorporating a range of activities throughout lessons was also rated highly as a teaching practice that supported engagement in lessons. The observations recognised that where there were a range of activities that created pace, and where often supported by timings resulted in greater learner engagement than lessons where the teacher has a more dominant role. It was observed that a range of activities does

engage learners in lessons and visual timers support learners to keep on task. Ebbinghaus's (1885) Forgetting Curve and more recently Sousa's (2001) retention model explores the need to consider the ability of the brain to retain information. Both identify the need to keep activities short, within 20 minutes each, and to regularly change activities to maintain focus and attention as well as retain the information learnt. Shorter activities appeared to keep the learners more focused with high learner activity resulting in high engagement levels. However, it was also witnessed that less 'buzz' was created during individual activities as opposed to the paired and group activities. In the observed lessons where there was less 'teacher talk' and more learner activities engagement was higher. The learner questionnaires also unveiled that a range of activities did indeed hold their interest for longer in lessons but that they also found lessons with a range of activities more engaging and enjoyable. The learners also commented that a range of activities supported a deeper level of understanding than just being lectured to. The teacher questionnaires also supported this view stating that the variety of activities in lessons captivates learners and keeps them alert and positive by limiting boredom while supporting all learning styles.

The teaching practices that were identified as supportive in building positive relationships included group activities, the 'think, pair and share' method of questioning and answering questions in pairs. It was evident in the observations that where group activities were utilised a 'buzz' was created, and the learners appeared focused on the task. This promoted communication and support between learners. This was enhanced further when teacher interaction was integrated during the group activities. Where teachers were observed circulating the groups and facilitating their learning through questions, shared ideas and sustained shared thinking the focus of all learners was maintained throughout the activity. This support appeared to keep

the learners on track while also creating positive relationships, not only between learners but also between the teacher and their learners. Hattie (2012) states the importance of these positive relationships as being central to effective learning while Thompson (1998) identifies that where relationships are positive disruptive behaviour is less likely. The teacher questionnaires identified that this made the learners feel valued and important and helped to build respect for other's opinions and ideas. It was also noted that the learners seemed to enjoy the responsibility within group tasks, and they were often encouraged to engage with learners that they may not otherwise engage with. This was also mirrored in the learner questionnaires where they also identified that the group activities, especially where the members were regularly mixed, urged them to talk to other members of the class, which in turn built new friendships. The learners also stated that they learnt from each other during group activities and developed confidence in sharing ideas and points of view, which they also believed developed their listening and teamwork skills.

Using the 'think, pair and share' questioning and paired questions were also rated highly as a teaching practice that supported the building of positive relationships. The observations noted that across all of the lessons where this practice was seen, all learners were supportive of each other and the less confident learners were supported by more confident learners, which appeared to forge learner relationships. The use of tokens was also observed where the teacher would issue everyone with a plastic token and they had to 'cash it in' at some point during the lesson by engaging through opportunities such as answering a question, asking a question or giving feedback to a task. These tokens could be 'cashed in' through paired questioning, again supporting the less confident learners to be able to 'cash in' without being put on the spot. The learners' responses to the questionnaire also showed that they felt this practice

developed communication and friendships through the encouragement of these interactions. The teachers also commented that it also helps to build mutual respect.

Teaching practices that were identified as giving meaning to lessons for learners included incorporating activities based on learner interests and work experiences, embedding activities that incorporate current real-world events, and engaging with a range of different activities during lessons. Where activities that were based on learner interests and work experiences were observed engagement of all learners was evident. This was observed where activities were based on sports teams and sports figures, current musical trends and course-required work experiences. The learners appeared to see the personal gains from a relatable activity such as CV writing as having a purpose for them and their lives outside of the classroom. The ability to link theory to practice also increased question responses in some lessons. This was also reflected in the learner responses to the questionnaire where it was identified that learners found these activities relatable and gave them a career focus. They stated that it supported them to build confidence in a working environment and they could see that this would lead to future development. The teachers also equated that these activities sparked interest in learners and inspired them as they could understand the relevance and importance to themselves on a personal level. Activities that incorporated real-world events was also rated highly as giving meaning to lessons for the learners. Where these activities were observed in lessons it gave the learners context and made more complex concepts more relatable and understandable. The learners were fully engaged in these activities in a variety of lessons observed as interest was increased when they could make meaning of ideas by relating them to the real world which can be done in a personal and subjective manner (Seligman, 2011). Learners explained that these activities also allowed them to explore their own

and others' feelings about real-world events and the possible impacts on their futures. It was also stated that real-world examples of content made it more relatable. A teacher noted that these activities promoted inclusivity by exploring changing values throughout the world.

A range of different activities within lessons was also rated highly as giving lessons meaning for learners. Learner questionnaire responses revealed that a range of activities heightened their engagement in lessons which in turn developed their understanding of the topics being taught. Increased learner focus and interest were also identified as outcomes of engaging in a range of activities throughout a lesson which increased interaction with the subject matter and resulted in deeper learning, all of which gave meaning to the lessons for the learners. This was evidenced in the lessons observed where the pace created by a range of activities improved focus, concentration, motivation, and engagement in the subject matter when compared to the lessons where the learners were more passive throughout.

Teaching practices that were identified as giving learners a sense of accomplishment and achievement included the teacher giving verbal descriptive praise and learners receiving written teacher feedback. Positive descriptive verbal praise, as discussed earlier requires teachers to move from the 'yes correct' type false positive (Cox, 2019) responses to a learner to give fuller explanations of why their answers were correct or important. This has been observed throughout as requiring some further teacher development to effectively embed this in lessons. Where this was implemented in lessons a positive atmosphere where all efforts are recognised and celebrated was created. It was observed that where teachers were positive about incorrect learner responses learners were encouraged to try again and reach the correct answer and could therefore feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Learner responses

to the questionnaire also reinforce this where learners stated that they felt pride and encouraged to make improvements to their work. They also noted that this practice enables them to know where to improve and they can therefore achieve higher than they had originally believed. This also reverberated in the teacher questionnaires where responses stated that this practice supported learners to develop self-satisfaction through immediate recognition.

Teacher-written feedback was also a practice that was identified as enabling learners to feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement. This was not so readily witnessed in the lessons observed; however, it was rated highly in the learner questionnaires and comments showed clearly showed the impact that written feedback from the teacher can have on their sense of accomplishment and achievement. Learners acknowledged that the written feedback allowed them to see what they do well and what improvements they need to make, with the written format allowing them to be able to go back over it when required. Learners found written teacher feedback constructive and helped to identify positive elements of their work but also identifying improvements that would result in them reaching their desired goals. This feedback should be constructive and identify where improvements could be made in future to feed directly into goal setting (Curzon and Tummons, 2013). When these goals were achieved, they would ultimately have a sense of accomplishment and achievement.

### **Conclusion and recommendations for practice**

To promote the positive emotional well-being of learners in post-compulsory education this research has coupled together teaching practices with positive psychology and particularly the PERMA theory of 'authentic happiness' (Seligman, 2011). This

research has explored which teaching practices support learners in each area of the PERMA theory to support the positive emotional well-being of learners. The following teaching practices have been identified and evaluated as having the potential to be conducive to supporting positive emotion in learners:

- Greeting learners as they enter the classroom
- The teacher picks up on positives rather than negatives
- The teacher stands and moves around the classroom to teach
- The teacher provides positive descriptive verbal praise
- Ending lessons on a positive and regarding learners as they leave the class.

The following teaching practices have been identified and evaluated as having the potential to be conducive to supporting the engagement of learners in lessons:

- The teacher stands and moves around the classroom to teach
- The 'think, pair and share' method of questioning
- Incorporating interactive technology
- Employing a range of activities throughout lessons
- Embedding activities which are based on learners' interests and work experiences
- Embedding activities which incorporate real-world experiences.

The following teaching practices were identified as having the potential to be conducive to supporting the building of positive relationships:

- Group activities in lessons
- The 'think, pair and share' method of questioning and paired questions.

The following teaching practices were identified as having the potential to be conducive to supporting learners to develop a sense of meaning during their lessons:

- Embedding activities which are based on learner interests and work experiences
- Embedding activities which are based on real-world examples
- Employing a range of activities throughout lessons
- Incorporation of interactive technology during lessons.

Finally, the following teaching practices were identified as having the potential to be conducive to supporting learners' sense of accomplishment and achievement:

- The teacher giving positive descriptive verbal praise
- The teacher provides constructive written feedback.

When greeting and welcoming learners to the classroom teachers should be aware of their tone of voice, body language and facial expressions as they project more meaning than the spoken word. Their tone of voice should be upbeat, with their facial expressions being smiley and their body language being open and welcoming. This is equally important for the teacher when picking up on positives during a lesson rather than focusing on negatives. The use of humour has also had an impact on the positive delivery of lessons and content that is delivered by a humorous upbeat, enthusiastic teacher can be brought to life for the learners in a positive environment. When reflecting on the positive impact on learners when their teacher stands and moves around the classroom when teaching consideration will need to be given to the layout of the room for each lesson. "Teaching from a standing position shows that you are positive and in control. It also shows you are interested." (Cox 2019, p74) The layout

will need to be conducive to learning and enable the teacher to circulate all learners equally.

Some important considerations need to be given to a teacher's use of positive descriptive verbal praise. It has become evident throughout this research that this is a practice in which teachers would benefit from training and practice as it is much more than just saying 'well done' to learners. It requires a more detailed response to learners. A teacher's tone of voice, body language and facial expressions all play a part in making this practice effective without sounding too unconvincing. Positive descriptive verbal praise needs to be genuine to be effective at supporting positive emotions in learners; if it becomes over the top, it can easily become disingenuous. Teachers' written feedback also needs to be genuine and constructive to support learner achievement. Written feedback should reflect both positive points and areas for improvement to allow learners to identify what they are doing well and where they can improve moving forward.

The 'think, pair and share' method of questioning was most effective when timers were given to each element, for example, giving learners one minute to think of their answer, then two minutes to discuss with their partner and come to a joint answer before the teacher gathers feedback from the pairs. This practice was also successful when learners were paired by mixed abilities. The use of interactive technology in lessons has been demonstrated to improve learner engagement, however, there are points of caution to consider. When learners used their phones for a quiz or online task, following the tasks some learners were observed checking their phones for non-educational purposes. This can disrupt their learning if their focus, even momentarily, is shifted. Felisoni and Godoi (2018) concluded that mobile phone use during lessons has a negative impact on the grades that learners achieve. A possible solution would

be for learners to have access to tablets within their lessons rather than having to use their phones, but this does come with its financial implications for an educational establishment.

Where lessons include a range of activities these activities must be all at the right level for all learners. A range of activities have been evaluated as effectively engaging learners in lessons, but these must be varied to limit repetitive boredom and maintain levels of engagement (Armitage et al. 2003: Reece and Walker, 2003: Cox 2019). The need for variety also indicates that they should not be time consuming activities to allow for variation within the period of a lesson. Within this variety is where activities can be devised to incorporate learners' interests and work experiences as well as reflect real-world experiences. This would require teachers to first know their learners and develop an understanding of their interests and experiences. It is also realistic to assume that due to a range of interests and experiences, it would not be possible to meet them all in every lesson but rather cater for them throughout a period.

When considering the use of group activities in lessons, to support the building of positive relationships, it may be more effective if the groups are regularly mixed to promote the forging of relationships that may otherwise not happen. Creating groups of learners with mixed abilities can also create further support between learners. During these group activities relationships between learners can flourish but so can the relationships between the teacher and the learners, however, the teacher can play an important role in this process. While interacting with groups during activities the teacher should consider the level of support offered to each group and the amount of time spent with each group so that these are offered equally.

When considering the impact of teacher positivity on learners a clearer picture of what constitutes ‘teacher positivity’ can now be given. Reflecting on the analysis of findings teacher positive could be identified as a teacher who is welcoming, interactive, displays positive and open body language and facial expressions, is upbeat, is enthusiastic and takes an interest in their learners. This is fundamentally important as “pupils draw power from the positivity of their teachers” (Cox 2019, 1). While an aspect of teacher positivity can be attributed to personality it is only an aspect of it and therefore teachers can be trained to implement these practices.

Many teaching practices in this research have demonstrated their impact across more than one element of the PERMA theory. For example, a teacher who stands and moves around the room when teaching has been evaluated as having an impact on learners’ positive emotions and engagement in lessons. If we are to truly embed positive psychology into our teaching practices we have to return to Seligman’s theory of PERMA and his claims that “no one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it” (Seligman 2011, 25). It is worth considering here that it would be unrealistic to begin to consider incorporating all of the teaching practices identified and discussed here into every lesson that we taught, however, it is reasonable to consider at least one teaching practice from each of the elements of PERMA within each lesson. In line with the research on positive psychology, this could increase the probable positive impact on learners’ emotional well-being.

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