



PROSPER: Wellbeing in Primary Schools through Positive Education

**Executive Summary
Final Research Report**

**Institute for Positive Psychology and Education,
Australian Catholic University
& Where There's A Will
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- the contribution of the Principals, staff (especially the positive education coordinators) students, and parents from the participating primary schools who have made this research possible.

The research team would also like to acknowledge the significant contribution of Dr Helen McGrath, whose advice has been help guide this project.

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Foreword

Upper Hunter *Where There's a Will* is a charity established in the Upper Hunter in 2016 to address significant mental health issues facing the community. We aim to create a mentally fit Upper Hunter community, bringing colour to lives through positive education, student leadership and community engagement initiatives. By supporting our schools to implement positive education initiatives, we can embed resilience and wellbeing into school culture and potentially change the trajectory of mental illness in the Upper Hunter.

Where There's a Will has been privileged to partner with the PROSPER research team, led by Professor Toni Noble, from the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). Through this partnership, research has been undertaken across five Upper Hunter schools to assist students in the region learn and develop the skills of wellbeing and resilience from the early years of education.

With much gratitude, we thank Professor Alex Yeung, Professor Rhonda Craven, Professor Toni Noble, PhD candidate Rose Pennington, the entire research team at ACU, the teaching and support staff of the Upper Hunter's participating schools, parents, carers and students and many others who have contributed to making this research project a reality.

This project has been a testament to the proverb "*It takes a village to raise a child*". Working together we can create a better future, for ourselves, our children and our community.

Jane Callinan
Chairperson
Where There's A Will

Executive Summary

The Research Project

This project titled PROSPER: Wellbeing in Primary Schools through Positive Education is a \$50,000 research partnership jointly funded by the *Australian Catholic University* (ACU) and the community charity *Where There's A Will* based in the Upper Hunter (UH) rural region of NSW. The research was conducted by researchers from the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at ACU. IPPE brings together the world's leading researchers and theorists to conduct rigorous research into understanding how people can flourish and thrive.

Significance

This pilot project is an important initiative by WTAW in funding research to support the charity's vision to improve the wellbeing and resilience of young children in schools in the UH. Applied research in schools is crucial to finding solutions to the mental health issues in young people today. The significance of this positive education project is that it is a unique grassroots initiative for the benefit of primary aged children in their local schools in the Upper Hunter community. The research evidence provided by this project is important for the many community supporters of WTAW who have provided funding for this project. The benefits are that having good research evidence can provide reliable and valid findings as well as raise important questions to improve our practice in positive education. This is designed to not only inform the participating school communities, but also to inform other schools in the UH and beyond.

Purpose

The goal of positive education is to help all students to thrive and flourish both academically and in terms of their happiness and wellbeing. The purpose of this research is to explore the crucial factors that contribute to students' mental health and wellbeing through the implementation of a positive education social-emotional learning program (Bounce Back) in five UH primary schools. Bounce Back is the first published positive education program globally and is now in its third edition. This project, using the Bounce Back program as a basis, was designed to serve as the basis of a larger funded grant application involving more schools.

Design

The research included the design and validation of a new measure for student wellbeing based on the PROSPER framework for wellbeing that underpins the Bounce Back program. PROSPER is defined as the ability to grow strong and health, to thrive and flourish. PROSPER is an acronym for seven evidence-based elements for wellbeing—**P**ositivity, **R**elationships, **O**utcomes, **S**trengths, **P**urpose, **E**ngagement, and **R**esilience (Noble & McGrath, 2015). This collaborative research used mixed methods involving quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The quantitative component aimed at identifying and validating the major factors indicative of success in promoting student and teacher wellbeing in the primary classroom. A pre-post design enabled the delineation of the relations of critical factors for best practice in a school setting implementing a positive education curriculum. The qualitative component was designed to identify what worked in the implementation of the wellbeing and resilience program to enhance the wellbeing of a school community and how and why it worked. The mixed-method approach enabled strong cross-validation and triangulation of findings for future scaling up of the intervention.

Research Questions (RQs) and Findings

RQ1. Can elements of the PROSPER framework be measured?

The student survey instrument developed for this project yielded five distinct factors based on the PROSPER framework. The five distinct factors are Positivity, Relationships, Strengths, Resilience and Outcomes/Purpose/Engagement. The three factors of Outcomes/Purpose and Engagement merged as one factor.

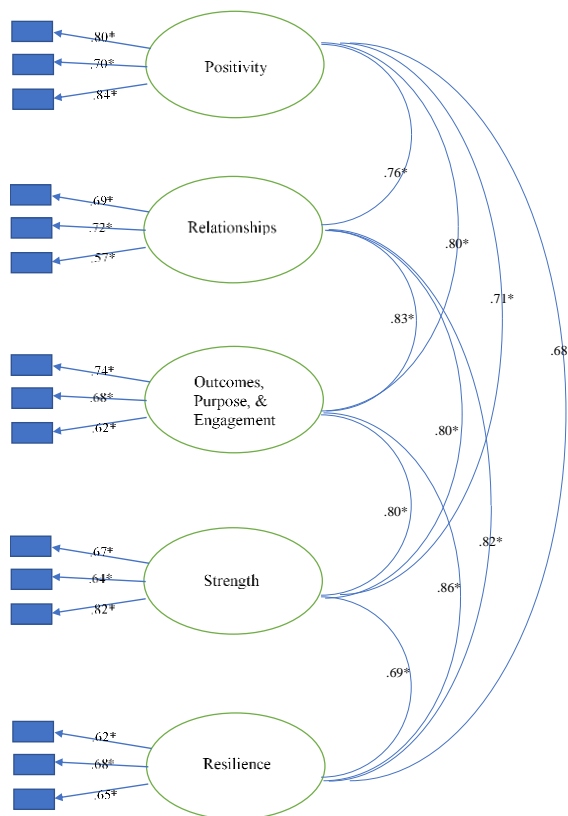


Figure 1. CFA model of PROSPER factors
Note: * $p < .05$.

RQ2. How do the PROSPER elements correlate with other general and academic wellbeing measures?

These five PROSPER factors correlate positively with Mental Wellbeing, Self-worth and Academic Buoyancy. The five factors correlate negatively with Disengagement. Positivity and Resilience (especially Positivity) are more positively associated with Andrew Martin's (2008) concept of 'Academic Buoyancy'. Outcomes, Purpose, and Engagement, being more academically focused factors, are more negatively associated with Disengagement. Hence the

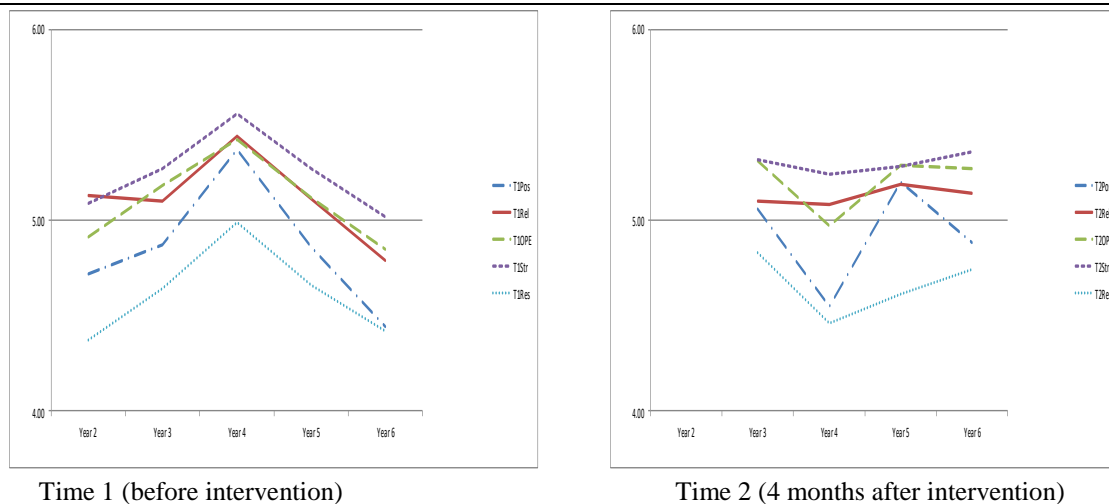
PROSPER instrument is useful for studying both general and academic wellbeing interventions.

RQ3. What is the critical year level for an intervention to maintain primary students’ subjective wellbeing?

At Time 1, prior to the introduction of the Bounce Back program, the data indicated that there was some decline in Year 5 and 6, in all of the skills related to resilience and wellbeing as measured by the PROSPER student survey. This highlights the importance of teaching these skills from the early years of schooling.

At Time 2, when students were tested in the following year after the long 8-week Christmas break, the Year 3 students (now in Year 4) did not seem to be as responsive to the Bounce Back intervention as the older years. Arguably this further indicates the importance of intervention in the early school years prior to Year 4.

The data also implied that younger primary aged children need to be constantly reminded of the key messages in a wellbeing/resilience program and provided with repeated opportunities to practise the skills and understandings to the point where they become ‘habitual’ and positively influence their wellbeing and resilience.



RQ4. Can a short (10-week) Bounce Back intervention, using the PROSPER framework, maintain students’ subjective wellbeing 4 months after intervention?

The 10-week Bounce Back program was effective in maintaining students’ subjective wellbeing even 4 months after the intervention (*and even with an additional 8-week summer break in between*). However, the research findings suggest that a 10-week program may not be strong enough to significantly improve subject wellbeing as there was no statistical difference across the year levels, and there was no statistical difference between Time 1 and Time 2 wellbeing measures. Some measures improved over time while some others dropped, but neither trend was noteworthy. These data indicate the importance of sustaining the implementation of the program for a longer period to further maintain or gain improvements in student wellbeing.

RQ5. To what extent do teachers perceive a difference in behaviour and social-emotional skills between the beginning and end of the intervention?

Ten themes were identified in the four focus group discussions with teachers in groups ranging from 3 to 10. These ten themes can be classified into three higher order categories: (1) student gains, (2) community gains, and (3) implementation issues

Student gains included three themes regarding teachers’ observations of an increase in (i) students’ *coping strategies*, (ii) in students’ *transfer of skills* (i.e., students applying social-emotional skills in different settings, and (iii) students’ *greater engagement* in class.

Community gains evolved from the implementation of the program across the whole school yielding four themes: (i) *a common language* of wellbeing and resilience among students, teachers, and parents; (ii) *safety* (i.e., an increase in feelings of safety, especially psychological safety, (iii) *cultural change* and (iii) an increase in *teacher wellbeing*

Implementation issues. Three themes emerged in regard to implementation: (i) *upskilling of staff* (i.e., an increase in teachers’ skills to teach positive education, (ii) *use of books* (children’s literature) in the program facilitates the teaching of the program’s key messages, and (iii) *differences with age* (i.e., teachers found it was easier to gain student development in wellbeing and resilience with younger grades).

The following table includes quotations to illustrate each theme.

(1) Student Gains	
Themes	Examples
Coping Strategies	“One of the big things I’ve noticed is building the resilience in the kids.... giving them strategies” “It’s giving them strategies to deal with life really. And being considerate of others.”
Transfer of Skills	“Year 2s are now much better at working at and solving friendship problems” “It’s good cause the kids are actually using it (Bounce Back skills) throughout other subjects as well”
Enhanced Engagement	“There’s been a big difference in my classroom. I think the students are more engaged. They’re more friendly to each other and it seems like a more positive environment.” “In all our conversations, everybody’s far more far more engaged and interested in what others have to say.”
(2) Community Gains	
A common language	“It’s having the common language to talk about situations in the playground.... all the grades are doing it and everyone understands” “The language is there. The language is there for the parents, it’s there for the children.” “I like that it’s giving the children a new language to use, I guess, of positive education.”
Feelings of safety	“It was a safe forum for everybody to tell the others how they cope with things, how they feel about things, how they feel when that happens, how they would deal with that if that happened.”
Cultural change	“It is starting to be immersed, even in the culture.” “The way we now approach wellbeing is very unified. I think Bounce Back has helped with that.”
Teacher wellbeing	“I put a lot of emphasis on getting everything right. It’s all well and good to say it’s okay for you not to be perfect but to recognise that no one else is perfect either has definitely helped my wellbeing this year.” “[I’m able] to walk in and say "Look, I’m actually feeling a bit ordinary" or "I need a bit of help" or "I’m a bit stressed." Whereas before I think it just would have been a bit more secretive.”

(3) Implementation Issues	
Upskilling of staff	<p>“It gives us tools, when we are dealing with situations to make sure we are using the same language”</p> <p>“It’s explicit and I think that’s what made it so engaging for the students, that it was so succinct, the lessons and it was something you could go pick up and run with”</p>
Using books	<p>“It would be really difficult, I think, for them to get their heads around some of these situations that we ask them to consider. So using books is perfect.”</p> <p>“The books have been really good when we’ve got them”</p>
Differences with age	<p>“When you’re looking at stage two and three you’re looking at more ingrained ways of communicating and interacting in your social group whereas kindergarten is a bit more flexible.”</p>

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Provide ‘take home’ student resources to teachers prior to a long break from lessons to help early primary students to maintain, remember and practise the key SEL skills for wellbeing and resilience.
2. Provide an avenue for direct communication with all teachers from the positive education facilitators and researchers to maintain smooth and prompt staff support for the project.
3. Introduce processes for more direct communication on a social media network site for teachers to share news and materials across schools and within their school community. Similarly, a Bounce Back community social network across the participating schools could also be established for students and parents.
4. Keep an online log book that is simple for teachers to use to indicate what Bounce Back lesson they taught each week. This will ensure fidelity of intervention.
5. Explore better ways to gain a high number of data returns from all stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students). A short video where a researcher and a representative from WTAW explains to parents the importance of the research and the potential benefits for every child and family may be helpful.
6. Make a video to explain to students the purpose of the survey, and the procedures for filling in the survey to help gain student engagement and support for their participation and commitment to honest responses to the online survey.
7. Given the finding that the use of books was an important part of the intervention, ensure that the recommended literature is easily accessed by all teachers, and that all resources are age appropriate to ensure rich and meaningful conversations.

Future Directions for Ongoing Community Engagement

This evaluation reflects the early stages of implementing and evaluating the Bounce Back project based on the PROSPER framework in the five participating schools. It is predicted that the benefits of this initiative will continue to grow as the teachers become more familiar with the program and the key messages continue to be embedded in whole school practices and

classroom learning processes and curriculum. Some suggestions to help maintain and expand the key Bounce Back messages on wellbeing and resilience in the broader Upper Hunter community are:

- The development of a short video clip that explains the project to the broader Upper Hunter community to be presented to the Local Councils and other community groups.
- Students from the participating schools prepare a conference/expo of the Bounce Back messages for the Upper Hunter community
- Students (in groups) teach some of the Bounce Back concepts to community groups such as parents, senior citizens, sports teams.
- Students interview, write up and publish locally their interviews with community members such as older citizens about times when they have coped with difficult times
- Conduct evenings or weekend workshops for parents and other interested community members.
- Schools present a school concert or musical on the Bounce Back themes for the whole school and local community

Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate the importance of teaching the skills for wellbeing and resilience from the early primary years. The Bounce Back project based on the PROSPER framework provided teachers with a positive education curriculum to teach their students in all primary grades the specific skills and understandings that maintained their students' wellbeing and resilience. This maintenance was achieved even after only 10 weeks of intervention and a long holiday break. This intervention is in its infancy, but from the strength of these early findings, we may envisage that a continuation of the weekly Bounce Back lessons will help to maintain or even improve their students' healthy levels of wellbeing and resilience in the long term, and hopefully for life. When teachers become more familiar with the key mental health and wellbeing messages taught through the Bounce Back curriculum, they will find many opportunities to teach these skills across the school curriculum and ways to more frequently embed the key skills and understandings in other areas of school life. By teaching these wellbeing skills, the teachers themselves will also benefit from an enhanced wellbeing and resilience.

This research enhances our understanding of the importance of the early school years in building student wellbeing and resilience. It has provided evidence that the new PROSPER instrument is useful for studying both social-emotional and academic wellbeing interventions to help us better understand how to create effective school practices to help children to thrive and flourish. It also provides feedback on the usefulness of the chosen positive education curriculum (Bounce Back) in enhancing wellbeing and resilience. This research has also raised issues as to how to better support the teachers so the implementation may be improved for optimal outcomes. Researchers and practitioners using other positive education programs may consider using a guiding framework such as PROSPER described in this report for measuring and implementing both school-related and generic facets of students' wellbeing for best effects.