



## Short Report

# Transferring a Positive Education Curriculum into Homelife in the United Arab Emirates: Supporting Parents

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**Abstract:** Positive education curricula designed to cultivate student wellbeing and academic performance are on the rise. Yet, what is being delivered in schools often overlooks stakeholders, such as parents. Expanding positive education learning outside of the school while promoting harmony at home is key. Accordingly, this study's four-week positive education curriculum program examined the perceptions of 12 participating parents, specifically focused on how it could be transferred into homelife via parent instruction and what impacts it could generate. The program included topics covered within the positive education curriculum being delivered to their children. Thematic analysis uncovered three outcomes: more meaningful conversations emerged at home; an appreciation for how expatriate life in the United Arab Emirates can impede children's social-emotional development; and the need for parental instruction on how to embed principles of positive education into homelife. The broader implications of enabling a wider community culture of schools and stakeholder families are also considered.

تتزايد مناهج التعليم الإيجابي المُصمَّمة لتعزيز رفاه الطلبة وأدائهم الأكاديمي، لكن ما يُقدَّم في المدارس عادةً ما يغفل عن إشراك الجهات ذات العلاقة وعلى رأسهم أولياء الأمور حتى الآن. لذا تبرز ضرورة توسيع نطاق التعلُّم ضمن برامج التعليم الإيجابي إلى خارج حدود المدرسة ليشمل تعزيز الانسجام الأسري. ومن هنا تم في هذه الدراسة، ضمن برنامج قائم على التعليم الإيجابي مدته أربعة أسابيع، فحص منظورات 12 من أولياء الأمور المشاركين عمومًا، والتركيز خصوصًا على كيفية نقل أثر البرنامج إلى الحياة الأسرية من خلال إرشاد الوالدين، ورصد التأثيرات التي يمكن أن يحدثها. وقد شمل البرنامج موضوعات ضمن منهاج التعليم الإيجابي المُقدَّم لأطفالهم، وقد كشف التحليل الموضوعي عن ثلاث نتائج رئيسية هي: ظهور محادثات أكثر معنى في البيت، وتقدير أكبر لكيفية تأثير الحياة كوافدين في الإمارات العربية المتحدة على التطور الاجتماعي والانفعالي للأطفال، والحاجة إلى إرشاد أولياء الأمور حول كيفية دمج مبادئ التعليم الإيجابي في الحياة الأسرية. كما تم توسيع الاعتبارات لتشمل ثقافة مجتمعية للمدارس تتعدى حدودها لتضم العائلات والجهات ذات العلاقة.

**Keywords:** positive education; parental education; parent-school relationship; parent-child relationship; social-emotional learning

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**Positive psychology has significantly grown** following the work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) introduction. Moving into schools in the form of positive education, researchers and policy administrators now acknowledge the need for a systematic application of wellbeing interventions (Norrish, 2015; White & Kern, 2018). As childhood and adolescence are critical developmental periods where skills to support positive mental health are acquired (Hoare et al., 2017), and as most mental health problems begin in adolescence (Johnson et al., 2017; Solmi et al., 2021), the role of schools continues to grow. Indeed, globally, including in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), studies show that wellbeing is in decline and mental health issues are rising (Marquez, 2022a; Marquez & Long, 2020).

Consequently, a traditional focus on academic achievement in education has undergone a paradigm shift, with educators arguing there is a need to consider the social-emotional development of students and that its inclusion can also lead to gains in learning (Morris, 2015; Shankland & Rosset, 2017). Evidence of studies conducted in schools and universities show that greater wellbeing boosts learning by as much as 11 percentage points and six months of additional learning (Bücker et al., 2018; Cárdenas et al., 2022; Dix et al., 2012; Suldo et al., 2011). In the UAE, it is also tied to stronger academic performance (Marquez et al., 2023).

Yet, despite the potential gains available from programs to boost student wellbeing, they remain few in number and where they do exist, the role of parents is scarce. They are even less often the targets of such interventions. In fact, little is known about the role of parents and their perspectives regarding programs aimed at enhancing student wellbeing, including their views on children's participation, their own wellbeing journeys, and how they could be used to support children's wellbeing. This is especially the case in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where, in the present study, parents are the intended audience for wellbeing instruction.

### **Positive Education in Practise: Where are Parents?**

The field of positive education was originally defined it as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness" (Seligman et al., 2009, pg. 293). Since its inception, its definition has broadened. The International Positive Education Network (IPEN) describes it as the "application of the science of positive psychology and related fields within an educational setting to encourage students, faculty, schools, universities and communities to flourish" ([www.ipen-network.com](http://www.ipen-network.com)). Other conceptualizations construe it as a combination of positive psychology principles and best practices in teaching designed to promote optimal development and wellbeing across broader school communities (Norrish, 2015). White and Murray (2015) position positive education as an umbrella construct under which empirically validated interventions and programs stemming from positive psychology as well as parallel traditions of socio-emotional learning impact student wellbeing. Popular topics delivered in school-based programs often include resilience (Stevanovic et al., 2017), gratitude (Butler & Kern, 2016) and mindfulness (Richie & Bryant, 2012). What is certain is that programs and interventions within schools are on the rise worldwide (Thapar et al., 2021); yet parents have played a negligible role in them.



Of the few that involved parents, Dubroja et al.'s (2016) pilot study included 24 parents within a comprehensive schoolwide positive education program and had as its aim greater parental wellbeing as well as social support and connectivity between them. Parents undertook a three-day intensive positive education intervention program which focused on teaching positive psychology strategies such as gratitude and the identification and application of character strengths. Compared to a control group after two months, the findings showed significant increases in parental wellbeing and parent school connection for the intervention participants.

Australia's Geelong Grammar School (GGS) positive education program (Hoare et al., 2017) also included parents. The program had two aims, i.e., the promotion of positive mental health for students and staff, as well as a focus on embedding wellbeing policies to strengthen a more positive school ethos. Training for all teaching and non-teaching staff members were mandated to secure knowledge of the foundations of positive psychology. Courses were also offered to parents of students to encourage a common language to be shared across the wider school community and facilitate cross-transference of skills and reinforcement of terminologies used. The study described the implementation framework of the GGS whole-school approach, but did not draw share its results, beyond stating that improper program implementation could lead to unintended outcomes.

Engaging parents in such training has the potential to enhance the overall wellbeing of children and their family units. For instance, a Finnish study by Upadyaya and Salmela-Aro (2013) identified a positive correlation between parental support and student wellbeing. High levels of parental affect predicted greater self-esteem and improved educational achievement among 16-year-old adolescents. The bonds young people have with their parents is also linked to fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, as well as greater wellbeing in many countries (Bauer et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2020; Gariépy et al., 2016). Waters and Johnstone (2022) identified parental input as pivotal across children's development, particularly during home-based online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In their case study examining one school's positive education approach, they revealed that students exhibited better stress coping mechanisms when parents supported them in identifying and utilising their character strengths. In a review of positive education efforts in the Gulf region, Nelson Christensen et al. (2022) suggested that knowledge and application of positive psychology skills would have benefitted interactions at home and helped students transition back to an in-school setting and reintegrate with other students.

Finally, an overlooked aspect of positive education programs is their ability to improve the wellbeing of parents, as well as their parenting skills. When parents themselves have fewer mental health issues, greater subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction, they benefit from improved parent-child relationships (Penetti et al., 2019). With the role of wellbeing leading to greater parental outcomes, as well as enhanced student academic outcomes (Marquez et al., 2023), many positive education programs are being offered in the UAE and wider region (e.g., Barrington et al., 2019; Basurrah et al., 2022; Khreibi, 2022; Lambert et al., 2019; Samways et al., 2019). In sum, this pilot program seemed a promising endeavour as prior studies did not include parents.

Thus, the following question guided the present inquiry: How does the provision of positive education information to parents influence its manifestation into homelife and improve the overall wellbeing of families?



## The Present Study

This research involved parents of students in a British international secondary school in Dubai, UAE. Its aim was to explore the effects of the implementation of a pilot program for parents based on existing topics from an ongoing positive education curriculum to which their children were exposed in school.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were invited to take part in the pilot study via the school information platform. Parents with students in year nine were selected as this is a transitional year leading into the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE; a UK-curriculum academic qualification), where concerns often manifest in the social-emotional development of students and when their wellbeing tends to plummet (Marquez & Long, 2020; Orben et al., 2022). Participants included 12 female expatriate parents from several countries (3 Indian, 2 Australian, 2 New Zealand, 2 British, 1 Egyptian, 1 French, 1 Romanian). Most worked full time in different sectors in Dubai.

### Procedure

The researcher designed a screening questionnaire asking about parent's current understanding of positive education and perceptions of their own wellbeing. They were asked to select four topics in which they would like sessions to be delivered, allowing the researcher to determine what elements of the curriculum parents considered important in their home life.

The delivery of the four-week program took place twice on Tuesdays each week. Recordings of the sessions, PowerPoint slides and a summary were sent to parents if they missed a session. Points raised in these sessions were used in the interviews. No more than one hour in length and conducted after the four-week program, the interviews were transcribed and coded using a three-step method to find emerging themes and sub themes following the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Materials

The content offered after the screening questionnaire included topics from the school's existing positive education curriculum, called, "GROW (Getting Ready for the Outside World)." This curriculum was developed based on the PERMA model (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and included four weekly one-hour sessions on Microsoft Teams. Parents chose the following topics: Body Image, Empathy, Resilience, Relationships/Communication. The content was created and delivered by the researcher, a qualified teacher and developer of the GROW curriculum. Parents were encouraged to engage with the content at home with their children. After the program's conclusion they were interviewed on Microsoft Teams using semi-structured interviews, which were recorded on Microsoft Teams and Stream. The automated transcripts were manually edited, coded and analysed using Microsoft Word.



## Results

The interviews resulted in conversations with parents who expressed their learnings and realisations from the program covering topics and discussions around Body Image, Empathy, Resilience and Relationships/Communication. Thematic analysis yielded three themes: more meaningful conversations emerging at home; how expat life in the UAE can limit the social-emotional development of children; and parents needing more education to embed content of the positive education curriculum into their home life.

### *More meaningful conversations emerged at home*

All parents reported that participation in the program resulted in the emergence of meaningful conversations at home, not only focused on its topics, but on wellbeing as a whole. Most noted that participation in the program assisted their understanding of what was covered in GROW lessons in school and promoted better family relationships. Further, 10 parents acknowledged responding differently during conversations with their children by being more mindful of how they engaged in conversations with their children. For example, one said that taking part in the program “made me think about how I can parent more actively” and “situations I am handling better”. Another mentioned, “I’m trying to listen more” and that “sometimes as a parent, when your child asks you something your first reaction is ‘no’ and the next answer is ‘because I said so’. It’s such a dead end in any conversation and it shuts them off and they won’t share and be really angry and resentful”. Echoing this, another expressed relief as she now tried to see the situation from the child’s view instead of instantly shutting down requests, sharing, “I’m letting it go. Am I really? I was really surprised. That’s so not me!”

Feedback from the session on Empathy uncovered a recognition of self-awareness including a concern raised by a participant that “it’s not easy to be empathetic towards your children. It’s easier to be with others”. Others found themselves becoming more empathetic to their child’s feelings and daily experience. One said “[to be] more empathetic to how they might be feeling and what they are going through. This can be forgotten about as you are so busy with work, cooking, cleaning”. Such realisations prompted more conscious thought and active listening, with one participant noting that “there has been a shift” and that “I have to make sure my behaviour reflects all the things that I have learnt”. Another shared her daughter’s reaction to her parenting changes due to the program, i.e., “she sort of thanked us for relaxing more”. Almost half of the participants reported that the most popular place for these conversations to emerge was in the car as it was “less in your face”.

### *Expat life: A barrier to social-emotional development?*

Parents saw a great need for a positive education curriculum. They felt that adolescents growing up as expatriates in the UAE experienced barriers in their social-emotional development. Nine stated that growing up in the UAE made it difficult for young people to see and experience things they would in their home countries, with some expressing concern over their children being “cocooned” or “sheltered”. One added, “I think here kids need a reality check more than they do in their home country. They are exposed to more in their home country. Here they are not”. One identified stricter rules in the country as a reason.



Another noted this as a concern when children go to their home countries for university and find adaptation difficult, specifically mentioning her husband's experience growing up in the UAE, having attended the same school as their children and going abroad for university. "I want them to be strong when they go out there because my husband had a one-year bad experience when he started university. He lost himself for a for a little while just because of, yeah, being cocooned. You know it is not that easy when you come from here". Another echoed this stating, "It's a massive shock for children going back to the UK". Yet, others expressed that with these negatives were also positives, adding that the UAE is a very safe place and provided excellent opportunities for education that were superior to that of their home countries.

A further concern was that of domestic help and how maids and nannies, common in the UAE, impacted their children's maturation process. Parents felt this inhibited their children's independence and ability to do simple chores. Views included, "I mean, there may be skills that they're missing out on here" and "maybe we're depriving them of the opportunity to make those decisions themselves". Parents also felt there was a scarcity of places for their kids to socialise. A lack of spaces, such as parks, where they can hang out was reported, resulting in "no opportunities for teens to be independent here" and feeling that "there is nowhere to go". Parents feared this led to boredom and limited social interactions with others. Still, parents were happy their children were exposed to the nation's diverse population. For example, "[it] opens up your mind to other people's cultures and backgrounds" and this exposure helped children see things from a different perspective, i.e., "they are exposed to more religions, cultural ideas and beliefs".

In sum, parents felt that conditions in the country, despite their pros and cons, made emotional skills all the more necessary.

### ***Parents need more education***

Parents felt comforted by other members of the program. Realisations that all parents shared the same experiences allowed for a sense of catharsis, with many feeling they were the only ones facing problems with their children and relieved to hear others facing similar issues. Examples included, "Listening to other parents was soothing in a way", "It's not as much of a concern if we are all going through it," and "It makes it a lot easier for me to handle it if I know other parents share it with me as well". Participants also recognised positive changes made after the program, which their children acknowledged. As "children learn from their parents", most also felt they required further education on social-emotional learning as they had not received it themselves growing up, with one noting "we were told to toughen up and get on with it".

Throughout, parents were curious about the terms with which they were unfamiliar (e.g., "gave me terminologies I did not know about") and expressed enthusiasm in doing extra reading and educating themselves in their own time. They also showed an interest in rectifying the lack of social-emotional skills in their own upbringing, i.e., "our own parents were not the greatest role models. We are the role models".

## **Discussion**

This pilot study explored the impact of a program designed to educate parents on aspects of their children's positive education school curriculum. The findings revealed improvements in



comprehension of the curriculum, its concepts and terminology, as well as mechanisms for how it could be used within a family setting. As parents were equipped to have more meaningful conversations, they were more mindful of the way they engaged with their children. Improvements in conversation helped build relationships and rapport while reinforcing what was delivered in school. Parents appreciated better understanding the topics delivered to their children, noting that they had not had such advantages in their youth. Applying these skills in their parenting repertoire further helped them support their children face unique issues that non-expatriate youth did not. Attending to the emotional needs of parents (White, 2016) revealed itself to be the key to building programs that not only help parents understand their children's curriculum but provide the skills for wellbeing that parents themselves need.

Further, given that students spend significant time in school and teachers take an '*in loco parentis*' role, parents can help them by working from the same knowledge base. A shared curriculum helps parents gain access to the ideas, terms, and skills to build wellbeing in the home, supporting teachers in the classroom and continuing to build connections between the two (Dubroja et al., 2016). When schools feel that what they offer is welcomed and supported by parents, they may also be more likely to offer such programming. There are many dismissals of the use of PPIs in schools due to cost and administrative buy-in (Morrish et al., 2018; Shankland & Rosset, 2017); yet including parents to reinforce school efforts may increase its return to children in terms of academic performance and learning outcomes as well as to the school community via greater parent support for school efforts. In the UAE, where private schools are costly and schooling options are a prime determinant of whether parents accept employment (Ko, 2014), offerings in positive education may be a significant value-added proposition.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As few studies include parents, their experience is difficult to understand; thus, a limitation in this pilot study was that not all parents could participate. This may be due to work schedules, language barriers or degree to which they are invested in their children's school. The experiences of working parents (versus non) may also have differed. Future studies can benefit from including a larger demographic, including fathers, as well as national Emirati parents who are not expatriates, but whose children also attend positive education programs. Other UAE-based cultures, i.e., Arabic or Indian parents, may have revealed other aspects of parenting, child-rearing, as well as wellbeing, known to differ across cultures (e.g., Ridge et al., 2020). Conducting studies across curriculum types is also advised as prior studies have shown that despite having the best academic performance in the UAE, British curriculum schools for example, also have the poorest wellbeing outcomes (Marquez et al., 2023). The experience of those parents may have offered other insights, as would parents from different socioeconomic status levels (Marquez, 2022b).

### **Conclusion**

Positive education is gaining popularity as a platform for fostering wellbeing in schools. However, there is a scarcity of evidence by which to assess and guide effective parent engagement with positive education. This study, while limited in size and scope, offered preliminary insights into the impact of including parents in their children's positive education experience, as well as future



opportunities for developing this service provision to parents. By concentrating on a parental program where parents learn and apply knowledge of what their children experience in the classroom, schools can accelerate student engagement, the efficacy of student programs, and overall wellbeing across schools as a whole.

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