



Abstract

Several studies¹ show that there is a connection between a student's self-perception and their academic achievements. This connection is expressed by the fact that students with positive self-perception perform better academically than students with poor or negative self-perception. We are at a time where there is an increasing focus on the achievements of students in the Danish Folkeskole², in part due to greater demand for testing³ and an increase in the number of inquiries where the achievements of Danish students are compared to the academic achievements of students in other countries. As a result, awareness of the topics of well-being, optimism, and positive self-perception is on the rise. There are several factors arguing for the need of various forms of intervention: the mission statement of the Danish Folkeskole (Undervisningsministeriet⁴, 2006) as well as the guide to student's overall development (Undervisningsministeriet⁵, 2009b), the interest for the area in research and studies, and the trend in society that more and more children and young people are referred to psychiatric treatment with symptoms of depression (Sørensen & Thomsen, 2006). The results of these interventions are being submitted to impact studies, so that the Danish Folkeskole can be prepared and qualified for working with the well-being of the students and the development of positive self-perception. It is therefore the intention of this thesis to gain knowledge and insight into how best to utilize resources and student potential in order to improve well-being, self-perception, optimism and positivity among students.

The intervention for this impact study is based on positive psychology including happiness-enhancing factors, and has led to the following research question:

¹ (Chapman, 1988), (Guay, 2003), (Harter, 1982).

² The "Folkeskole" is the Danish municipal primary and lower secondary school.

³ Suggestion for change of law for the Danish municipal primary and lower secondary school (Enhanced evaluation and use of national testing as pedagogical instrument and mandatory tests, etc.). Approved by the Danish Folketinget (Parliament) at 3rd. Hearing on March 30th, 2006.

http://www.ft.dk/samling/20051/lovforslag/L101/som_vedtaget.htm#dok (27.12.2010)

⁴ The Danish Ministry of Education.

⁵ The Danish Ministry of Education.

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- an impact study of working with well-being, self-perception and optimism in the Danish Folkeskole.



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Tel.: +45 28 70 79 20 • mail@glædeogborn.dk • www.glædeogborn.dk

What impact, if any at all, does applying positive psychology techniques including happiness-enhancing exercises, through the use of a book introduced at school, have on the well-being, optimism level, and self-perception of students?

This thesis' ontological condition is based upon a humanistic outlook where the handling of the problem of causation is seen as indeterministic and in a dialectical relation between man and living conditions. Epistemologically the thesis includes qualitative as well as quantitative methods – Mixed Methods, which implies both a nomothetic as well as a hermeneutic science ideal, and which is based upon a pragmatic approach to the collection of empirical data. The data is then analyzed from a hermeneutic and positivistic approach and with the application of critical theory and critical psychology. This impact study consists of two quantitative questionnaires for the students which are completed both before and after the intervention, qualitative interviews with students held midway and after the intervention, qualitative practice portrait-inspired questionnaires for the participating teachers which were completed both before as well as after the intervention, and finally a practice portrait-inspired questionnaire for the parents of the participating students completed after the intervention. It has been the aim to secure methodological robustness.

The intervention itself was implemented in seven 3rd-5th grade classes and a class of multilingual students from seven schools on Zealand during the period from May to June 2012. Students worked with the book "My Happy Book – 25 Exercises for Happier Children and Parents" (Tidmand 2012); the book and the exercises were introduced at school and then completed at home with the parents. The parents and the teachers were introduced to the project and its goals and the teachers were briefly introduced to positive psychology.

The impact study has provided answers to the research question as well as given us new knowledge and insight. Results were consistent throughout the analysis. Results indicate that the well-being of the students increased significantly and measurably as a result of the intervention. In five out of six parameters, the intervention generated a positive increase in self-perception and self-esteem. Students whose initial self-perception was negative especially profited from the intervention with an average increase of 82% on the raw score. The optimism level of the students

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increased as well as a result of the intervention, and students who were measured to be pessimistic or very pessimistic before the intervention profited from the work with a median positive growth of 47% on one parameter and 194% average on the other parameter. In the interviews the students expressed that they have gained new abilities and a knowledge of how to take action. They experienced a new self-understanding in which they see themselves as happier and more positive. The impact of the intervention for the well-being of the class, the self-understanding, the optimism level and learning ability of the class is valued by the students as extremely positive.

The teachers and the parents expressed that they experienced the same positive development as their own child and the group as a whole. They also indicated that they have gained a common frame of reference for comprehension and assessment of well-being, as well as concrete tools for working with well-being, self-esteem, and optimism in their classes and at home.