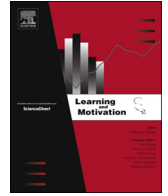




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A positive psychological intervention for failing students: Does it improve academic achievement and motivation? A pilot study



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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, positive psychology interventions (PPI) applied in both clinical and non-clinical samples have demonstrated a proven efficacy to increase positive emotions, well-being, and life satisfaction. However, few studies have used objective indicators of performance to explore the efficacy of PPI to increase students' motivation to study or to improve performance. Therefore, we developed and applied a PPI in a sample of high-school students with poor academic achievement. A pre-post study design including both an interventional and a control group was developed to compare the two groups in terms of average grades and number of failed subjects. Average grades increased significantly in both groups (repeated-measures ANOVA), but this increase was higher in the PPI group. Based on regression analyses, the two factors that explained 40% of the motivation to continue studying were allocation to the PPI group and the overall grade average post-intervention. These findings suggest that PPIs are effective in increasing motivation to study and in enhancing the academic performance of poor performing high school students.

1. Introduction

In recent years, several studies have shown that the Response to Intervention (RtI) approach is an effective preventive intervention for improving education for students in general, particularly for students at risk of experiencing learning difficulties (Jiménez, 2017; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen & Halipainen, 2009b; Tilly, 2006). RtI is conceptualized as a three-tiered service delivery approach with universal, targeted, and intensive interventions (Sailor, 2009), emphasizing the need for early identification and treatment of at-risk students. RtI offers functional behavioural assessment that involves identifying the variables that support continued problem behaviour and then designing interventions tailored to addressing those variables (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). This model is compatible with other multi-tier approaches such as those used in mental health delivery systems (Sailor, Doolittle, Bradley, & Danielson, 2009) as well as the positive behavioural interventions and support framework, which has also demonstrated its effectiveness among children and youth with emotional and behavioural disorders (Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010). Recently, several studies have also reported the use of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI) as an effective multi-tier approach for preventive and motivational purposes in educational settings. The results of those studies indicate that PPI help to improve academic performance, motivation, and attitudes toward school (Dahlin, Fjell, & Runeson, 2010; Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008; Proctor et al., 2011; Seligman, 2006; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Sheldon, 2002, 2006). The concept of

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Positive Education (Seligman et al., 2009) is the application of PPI in educational settings and it is defined as education for both traditional skills and for happiness. It aims to develop student's and teacher's cognitive, emotional and behavioural strengths to increase motivation for teaching and learning and to improve academic outcomes and school climate. This approach is in line with theoretical models of motivated learning (Schunk, 2012) that suggest that motivation is intimately linked with learning and that they can affect one another. Students' motivation influence what and how they learn. In turn, as students learn and perceive that they are becoming more skillful, they are motivated to continue learning and their academic outcomes improve. Positive Psychology is also in line with more recent contemporary models of achievement motivation (Eccles et al., 2005; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009), which moved the field of motivation to a more complex cognitive model. An important contribution was emphasizing both expectancies for success and perceived value of engaging in the task as factors affecting achievement. Contemporary models of achievement motivation reflect this subjective emphasis and, in addition, have incorporated other cognitive variables such as goals and perceptions of capabilities. These cognitive variables are a key factor for Positive Education, oriented to develop attitudes that facilitate students' the experience of motivated learning by the positive reinforcement of self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence (Seligman et al., 2009). Reinforcement is also the key element in most behaviour change programs such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (Dardig et al., 2005), concerned with applying techniques based upon the principles of learning to change behaviour of educational significance and in which student's behaviour is strengthened towards an enhancement of academic performance (Flora, 2004; Michael, 2004).

Academic performance has been largely studied in educational psychology since poor academic achievement has been identified as the most significant predictor of educational failure and it might also be an indicator of psychosocial problems or learning disorders (McLeod, Uemura, & Rohrman, 2012; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006; Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). Failing students are a central concern for educators, students and their families since underperformance might decrease the motivation to study and thus the likelihood of successful inclusion in the work structures of society (Goetz, Frenzel, Stoeger, & Hall, 2010; Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2012). In addition, poor academic performance has been linked to academic burn out (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008), depression (Bakker et al., 2000, Salmela-Aro, Savolainen & Holopainen, 2009b; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009a), and motivational problems (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012). Moreover, research has shown that students who perform poor at school begin substance use at an earlier age (Fergusson, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2003; Reddy, Resnicow, Ouardien, & Kambaran, 2007; Smart & Ogborne, 2000), show more aggressive behaviours, have greater delinquency rates, and present higher dropout rates (McLeod et al., 2012). As a consequence, such students are more likely to be unemployed, to have lower income levels, and to experience lower levels of life satisfaction (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Geary, 2011; Janosz et al., 2000; Lamb, 2011; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009).

For all these reasons, prevention programs are important, not only to improve academic performance, but also to reduce the behavioural risks associated with underperformance or absenteeism (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993). Conventional interventions to increase academic performance consist primarily of private tutoring (Berberoğlu & Tansel, 2014; Jheng, 2015). Although some studies have found that private tutoring enhances academic performance (Ireson & Rushforth, 2005), other studies have found that tutoring has no positive effect on other measures of achievement, suggesting that this approach may only have a significant and positive effect on low achieving urban students and in schools with certain educational quality (Kenny & Faunce, 2004; Smyth, 2008; Zhang, 2013). Private tutoring consists primarily of teaching and explaining school-related facts, repetition of school content, helping with homework and exam preparation, providing feedback and suggestions about how to study, and asking questions or choosing tasks (Lambert & Spinath, 2014; Wittwer, 2008). By contrast, this tutoring does not address important psychological factors such as motivation, negative emotions, self-esteem, or problem solving. Therefore, not all students will benefit from private tutoring because some students need more help in improving or developing cognitive-behavioral and/or emotional skills, which requires specialized training that cannot be provided by conventional tutoring (Lambert & Spinath, 2014; Mercer & Miller, 1992).

Positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of positive human functioning and well-being on multiple levels that include the personal, social, cultural, and global dimensions of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). During the last decade, the value of this theoretical approach has been empirically reported in various interventional and prevention programs applied in both clinical and non-clinical settings (Bolier et al., 2013; Ruini et al., 2009; Vázquez & Hervás, 2008). Applied Positive Psychology include a set of techniques oriented to increase positive emotions, to establish and achieve personal goals and a meaningful life, and to perceive and identify personal strengths, which contribute to the development of psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

PPI have demonstrated their efficacy in high-school and college students, providing empirical evidence of the significant impact of PPI in reducing disruptive behaviours, depression and anxiety symptoms, and in increasing school motivation, positive emotions, and well-being (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Ruini et al., 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). Previous studies analysing the effects of school-based PPI have yielded promising results, not only in terms of student wellbeing but also in improving academic outcomes, school climate, and teacher well-being (Shankland & Rosset, 2017; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014).

Studies conducted to date to evaluate the efficacy of PPI in academic settings have mainly used self-reported behavioural measures of performance; by contrast, the efficacy of PPI in terms of its impact on objective outcomes of academic performance has received scant attention (Knoop, 2011; Ruini et al., 2009). Furthermore, PPI have been rarely implemented and no empirical data has been reported using objective indicators of performance in Spanish educational settings (Arguís, Bolsas, Hernández, & Salvador, 2012; Jiménez, 2017). For these reasons, replication of previous research using objective outcome measures of academic achievement in samples that include participants from other cultural backgrounds is needed to confirm the benefits of PPI (Bolier et al., 2013;

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