Promoting student voice and wellbeing through Social Innovation Education

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Introduction

Policy makers, practitioners and researchers have shown a growing interest in understanding how best to promote adolescent wellbeing. This is in part due to increased concerns around adolescent mental health (i.e., depression rates; Hankin, 2015), paired with growing volumes of empirical evidence suggesting that adolescent wellbeing is positively related to academic achievement, classroom engagement, and life-long success (Gary & Hackling, 2009; Smyth, 2015). For this reason, wellbeing promotion has moved to the forefront of modern educational policy design in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019). The DES has made it a goal that by 2023 all schools within Ireland will have a dynamic whole-school *Wellbeing Promotion Process* (DES; 2019). Such guidelines require schools to promote wellbeing throughout all aspects of the school, yet teachers are not necessarily trained in pedagogical methods to achieve this. This leaves a gap in the knowledge base, and a challenge for schools and practitioners who are under continued pressure to meet changing educational policy demands. To help alleviate some of this stress, schools turn to pre-packaged curriculum programmes that advertise that they stimulate wellbeing, however little research exists to explain if, and how, such programmes are effective. This study, which is supervised by Associate Professor Jennifer E. Symonds and funded by the Irish Research Council (Project ID: EBPPG/2020/258) in collaboration with Young Social Innovators, sets out to counter such problems by exploring the impact of social innovation education (SIE) on wellbeing in secondary schools throughout Ireland.

What is Social Innovation Education?

Social innovation in its simplest form can be defined as the collaboration of ideas or use of creativity with the goal of making society better (Milley et al., 2018). The term social innovation education (SIE; Collier, n.d.) describes the process of teaching and learning about how to be socially innovative. Grounded in critical learning pedagogies (Scorza, Mirra, & Morell, 2013), SIE takes students through a series of stages, where they select a social issue, conduct research to learn about that issue, and then create, implement, and evaluate a plan of action. SIE is unique from other forms of society-focused pedagogies, such as civic education, in that SIE empowers students to make self-directed tangible social change, rather than just reflecting about social change. Anecdotal support for the benefits of SIE exists through various interventions and programmes that provide SIE opportunities (e.g., NEMESIS, CQUniversity), however, prior literature acknowledges that limited empirical research has gone into the field

of SIE and its impacts (Kalemaki et al., 2019). The unique developmental needs and milestones of adolescents provide a platform for programmes such as SIE, to impact the wellbeing of all those involved.

Introduction to Young Social Innovators

Young Social Innovators (YSI) is an Irish not-for-profit organisation that has been providing SIE programmes to teachers and students in Irish secondary (post-primary) schools since 2001. YSI believes in the transformative power of SIE and, by providing opportunities for youth-led, team-based real-life work and learning, seeks to support and encourage young people to become caring, compassionate, creative, and connected individuals who feel capable and empowered to create social change. The YSI SIE model of learning guides students and educators through the process of creating unique solutions to issues the students find important. Student projects focus on a range of social issues including, but not limited to, mental health, climate change, human trafficking, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality.

The experiences of SIE are unique to the students, who get the chance to take the lead and work together, and the educator, who acts as a guide or facilitator, works to encourage, empower and celebrate student achievements. The current study aimed to explore the lived experiences of those participating in SIE to better understand the impact of SIE on student wellbeing, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods

This research was guided by the question: *In what ways do participants experience wellbeing through SIE?* To answer this question, twenty-two participants from two best-practice secondary schools in Ireland were interviewed. Participants included ten 4th year students who were currently taking YSI (aged 14 – 15), five 6th year students who had previously taken YSI (aged 17 – 18), two principals, two YSI guides, one teacher helper, and two parents.

Interview questions were designed to openly explore hedonic wellbeing (e.g. positive feelings), and eudaimonic wellbeing (e.g. connectedness and purpose in life) (Huta & Waterman, 2014), as well as the participants' experiences of the programme. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Through an inductive analysis of the experiences of various groups within the school, a multifaceted view of the impact of SIE on students was constructed.

Analysis & Results

Throughout the inductive data extraction and analysis, over five thousand line-by-line codes were clustered into fourteen subordinate themes. These themes, listed in the table below, have been further simplified into overarching dimensions.

Superordinate Theme	Dimension
Students get to try and experience new things	**Characteristics of the Programme**
Students of all abilities can do and shine in SIE	
Student voice is promoted	**Student Voice**
Students learn to be inclusive in decision-making processes	
Students experienced increased responsibilities	**Student Skill-Related Personal Growth**
Students developed a variety of skills	
Students become more empathetic, open-minded, tolerant, and accepting	**Student Emotion-Related Personal Growth**
Students experience a range of emotions doing their projects	
Students gained confidence	
Students get to interact with others in the school and community	**Student Relationship Changes**
Students are supported by the school	
Student-teacher relationships are strengthened	
Students' awareness of and connection to social issues grows	**Student Optimism**
Students realise that they want to and can make a difference	

Table 1: Superordinate Themes that emerged from the empirical research

The next step in the analysis was to explore how the superordinate themes mapped onto existing wellbeing frameworks. The rationale for this analysis was to understand the themes in relation to common notions of wellbeing as well as to identify the fit between the results and existing wellbeing frameworks. Themes were applied to four wellbeing frameworks:

- The EPOCH model (engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness; Kern et al., 2015)

- Self Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000)

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- The social-evolutionary model of wellbeing (Symonds et al., 2021)

- Psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989).

The table below provides an overview of the dimensions that make up the four wellbeing frameworks, and how often the superordinate themes mapped onto each dimension.

Wellbeing Dimension	Number of Occurrences
Engagement	10
Perseverance / resilience	6
Optimism	4
Connectedness / Relationships	11
Competency / Environmental Mastery	9
Happiness	5
Autonomy	11
Care	5
Acceptance (from others)	8
Safety	3
Helping Others	9
Self-Acceptance	6
Purpose in life	9
Personal Growth	10

Table 2: The dimensions of the four wellbeing frameworks

Through this process, we found that every dimension in each of the four wellbeing frameworks was represented in students' experiences of SIE. The most prominent wellbeing dimension that the superordinate themes mapped onto was personal growth, which was promoted by all but two of the superordinate themes. This is evident in the transcripts, such as when one student said, "[he] wouldn't be who he is today had [he] not taken that leap and signed up for something

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[YSI]," and when another student said, "there's so many [experiences] and they all developed [her] as a person." Throughout the intervention, students were developing as people as they learned how to make a difference in society.

Engagement, autonomy, and connectedness / relatedness were also predominant dimensions. These dimensions are embedded in the intervention design, as one guide put it, "It's their project, it's their ownership." Autonomy could be seen in the students voicing their opinions, making decisions as a group, taking ownership, and creating their own project, while connectedness could be seen as the students making new friends, getting involved in the community, and witnessing others supporting them. Engagement was crucial for the whole process, as the students were doing the project themselves, and learned to keep it progressing, and as one student stated, "it keeps you busy".

Discussion

By conducting an analysis of first-hand experiences, and then applying those experiences to existing wellbeing frameworks, the current research was able to explore both how wellbeing was impacted by the SIE intervention and the functionality of specific wellbeing frameworks. These findings have several implications.

First, every dimension of the four wellbeing frameworks was represented by the participants' experiences. This is especially interesting given that we purposely designed the questions to not assume specific dimensions of wellbeing and that the wellbeing frameworks vary in their dimensions. Because of the wide coverage of wellbeing dimensions in the interview responses, it can be assumed that students' wellbeing was positively impacted by their involvement in SIE.

Second, this research explored the impact of SIE in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence of the negative impact of the pandemic on adolescent wellbeing is growing, but unique to this study is how SIE still benefited student wellbeing, even in midst of global isolation policies. Although students preferred in-person learning over online learning, they still found SIE engaging and enjoyable, even online, and several students mentioned that they engaged more in SIE, compared to other virtual classes. Even through virtual SIE, students still talk about gaining skills, engaging with each other, and working together to find ways to overcome the challenges they were facing to make a difference in the social issues they had selected.

The third implication that emerged was the power of student voice on wellbeing. Although not heavily discussed in this paper due to space limitations, through the analysis, it became apparent that voice was an enabler of student experiences of wellbeing, and the growth they experienced throughout the intervention. Students mentioned how they felt comfortable right from the start of the programme with sharing their ideas. Students mentioned that everyone's ideas were taken into consideration, and that they did not feel they would be judged when they expressed their voice. Several students mentioned how they felt comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions right from the start of the programme, when they were mapping out social issues

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important to them and deciding on their project, and how this comfort in sharing their voice helped get them engaged in what they were doing.

Last, this research highlights the importance of revisiting theoretical frameworks in real world social contexts. Modern wellbeing frameworks are focused on individual psychological and relational functioning, rather than on shared experiences of social contexts. Voice is created as an interaction between people, and this appears to be a condition for wellbeing that was brought about by students' experiences of SIE. Using these high-level inferences about the role of voice, future researchers could begin exploring how to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms for which wellbeing is created as well as why voice appears to be a conduit of wellbeing experiences. Future practitioners can begin exploring how voice can be promoted in an environment that is comfortable, safe, and non-judgmental, as experienced by the students participating in the YSI programme.

Conclusion

The importance of wellbeing promotion within schools has moved to the forefront of educational planning. The current study provided an in-depth analysis of student, teacher, parent, and principal experiences in relation to an intervention aimed at helping students make a positive social change in their communities through research and action-based projects. Key findings were that students' experiences were positive, and that students experienced personal growth and wellbeing as they progressed through the SIE intervention. These findings were evident with participants who experienced SIE both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the participants this experience was one that was new and unique, it allowed all students to shine, promoted voice, fostered both skill and emotional growth, created new and evolving relationships, and encouraged optimism even when students had their eyes opened to the harsh realities of the social challenges they were attempting to solve. Each of these outcomes were congruent with frameworks of wellbeing used with adolescent populations, and furthermore, we found that the promotion of student voice was a trigger for many of the wellbeing experiences that developed during the intervention. These findings offer researchers and practitioners insight into how to promote student wellbeing through interventions such as the YSI SIE programme, which can encourage student voice in a unique, creative, and community-focused way.

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