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How to Increase Joy at School? Findings from a Positive-Psychological Intervention at a Northern-Finnish School

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Abstract

Education in the northern region has many concerns, because in many ways, children living in the sparsely-populated North are not in the same position than children in the South. Children's well-being is one of the main concerns. In this study, a positive psychological theory of well-being (PERMA) was operationalized into classroom practices that were tested among sixth-graders (N=14) of one northern-Finnish school during the study year of 2013–2014. The data comprised of student interviews; questionnaires for students; questionnaires for students' parents; and the researcher's diary. The qualitative content analysis method was applied. The purpose was to find out what the elements of joy at school as described by northern-Finnish students are and which pedagogical practices enhanced joy at school according to students' perceptions. It was evident that practices tested in this study could increase joy at school and enhance student flourishing at many levels in schools in the North. This research provided practical examples of how to promote students' thriving, participation, and efficient learning in a way that would increase their optimistic attitude about their future in the North.

Key Words: Northern Region, Positive Psychology, Classroom Practice, Joy at School, Well-Being

Introduction

The Finnish school system has aroused world-wide interest due to the past few years' success in international student comparisons, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2016). However, the great academic achievements are accompanied by a concern over Finnish students' well-being at school as Finland scored the fifth lowest among 65 countries within this category. In addition, numerous national surveys have shown that students have reported that teachers do not listen to them or do not express interest in them (e.g., Harinen & Halme, 2012), which is also shown, for example, in Finnish schoolchildren's perceptions of having little opportunities to influence decision-making (National Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016).

In North-Finland, boys' situation has been especially concerning: the level of their academic performance has become poorer (including their literacy skills), and also numerous social problems, such as the decrease in families' social statuses, are typical in the North (Väljijärvi, 2016). It is also worrying that education in the northern region has its own additional concerns, such as accessibility and equality of education compared to southern part of the country. In many ways, children living in the sparsely-populated North are not in the same position as children in the South (see also Uusiautti et al., 2014). The children have lengthy school commutes, which means longer school days and the exceptionally low population density, which also means lower number of students and school closures in the northern parts of Finland. The availability of competent teachers in all school subjects as well as special education teachers is also a continuous issue in the North (Kumpulainen, 2014). Therefore, the attempt to achieve equal educational opportunities for children living in the remote areas is a real educational challenge (see also Bacchus, 2008). Simultaneously, basic education is one of the most influential factor of children's general well-being (Huebner et al., 2014).

Deficiencies and difficulties with school work may easily turn attention away from students' potentialities and resources, such as their personal strengths. Indeed, the latest educational discussion has focused increasingly on children's overall well-being in the school environment. For example, the new National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) emphasizes student well-being as one of the core tasks of education more comprehensively than ever before. But how to fulfill this emphasis in practice?

In this article, we will introduce an intervention that took place in a northern Finnish school located in Sodankylä (app. 130 km above the Arctic Circle). The one-study-year-long intervention tested positive-psychological methods and classroom practices (see Leskisenoja, 2016) that were based on caring pedagogical thinking (see e.g., Seligman et al., 2009).

Well-being theory and positive education

The theoretical background for the research leaned on Prof. Martin Seligman's theory of well-being (see Seligman, 2011) that he, as the so-called father of positive psychology, developed after having studied the connection between happiness and human strengths (Seligman, 2002). According to him, well-being skills, such as ability to recognize one's signature strengths, should be integrated in education. With well-being skills, people can achieve positive emotions and experiences, strengthen their relationships, and select positive coping strategies. These are especially important skills in the northern region where children and young people suffer from depression and have, for example, high suicide rates (e.g., WHO, 2016). Therefore, it is important to create means to increase and maintain these skills at school. Indeed, happiness and well-being have positive side effects that benefit not only the individual persons experiencing them but also their families and communities (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

Research has shown that promotion of children's well-being may support the development of their academic skills, too (Norrish et al., 2013). Well-being is also shown to be connected with study engagement (Lewis, Huebner, Reschly, & Valois, 2009), positive behavior at school (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010), participation in school activities (Gilman, 2001), and good relationships at school (Nickerson & Nagle, 2004). High levels of well-being systematically predict positive school paths in the sense of academic success, too (Suldo et al., 2011). Stiglbauer et al. (2013) reported that positive school-related experiences increased happiness over time.

Well-being is a complex construct that cannot be comprehensively defined by a singular measurement. In the PERMA theory (see Seligman, 2011), well-being is defined as the combination of five elements: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). *Positive emotions* mean hedonistic feelings, such as happiness, pleasure, and comfort (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015) and increase people's personal resources (Fredrickson, 1998). *Engagement* refers to deep interest in and profound absorption with one's activities (Kern et al., 2015) and usage of strengths (Seligman, 2011). *Relationships* are at the core of PERMA theory (Seligman, 2011): social support has been considered one of the most crucial conditions of well-being throughout the history and in most cultures (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011). *Meaning* refers to a person's perception of the meaningfulness of his or her life and the sense of belonging to something bigger than he or she is (Kern et al., 2015; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). According to this viewpoint, people should use their strengths to achieve greater goals and aspirations. *Achievements* refer to success, winning, and great performances. People pursue achievements even if they do not cause positive emotions, sense of meaning, or positive contribution to relationships (see Salmela & Uusiautti, 2015). However, achieving goals and completing tasks are important to human beings, and it is natural that

achievements like these tend to include absorption, positive emotions, and work for some greater purpose (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). Still, Seligman (2011) has defined achievements as a separate element of well-being that people need and pursue regardless of the other elements of well-being.

PERMA theory is closely connected with the basis of positive education and upbringing. One of the well-known applications is the Australian Geelong Grammar School where the goal is to increase the whole school community's flourishing (Norrish, 2015). The model is integrated in the everyday life at school through three levels: "Live it, teach it, embed it." "Live it" means that the school personnel has taken the well-being skills as a part of their lifestyle and act as authentic role models to students. "Teach it" refers to the active teaching of well-being skills both explicitly in special classes and implicitly as a part of the curriculum. "Embed it" means the wide-ranging inclusion of well-being into the action of school community which promotes the emergence of well-being culture among students, school personnel, parents, and the surrounding community. Similarly, Noble and McGrath's (2016) framework for the development of student well-being called PROSPER is based on PERMA but complemented by two additional components that are strengths and resilience. PROSPER is a systematic selection of classroom practices and models picked from research literature of positive psychology and educational psychology and that are to promote well-being in students and secure safe and encouraging construction of school communities.

Other previous studies have applied PERMA only to some extent. For example, Kern et al. (2015) used the theory as the basis of their research where they measured well-being among Australian students. Likewise, O'Connor et al. (2017) used PERMA to notice that the elements described well-being in the youth well and even predicted the level of well-being later in life. Similarly, Coffey, Wray-Lake, and Branand's (2016) study supported the five-dimensional construct as the descriptor of well-being. Kern, Waters, Adler, and White (2014) studied PERMA theory from the viewpoint of well-being in school personnel and found it a functional basis for measurement of well-being.

Although PERMA theory is not (yet) widely used in schools, positive psychology has gained foothold in education as schools have started to focus more on students' strengths, emotional skills, resilience, and well-being (Fox Eades, Proctor, & Ashley, 2014). Instead of the traditional problem-centered approach, positive psychology provides a viewpoint to well-being that can significantly change views on learning, schooling, and educational processes (Huebner et al., 2009). Positive psychology has been mistakenly criticized on the basis that it ignores challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, which is not correct (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Positive psychology acknowledges that also the negative experiences are important and inevitable, but positive psychology research can recognize ways to prevent and buffer against adversities in life. Teaching wellbeing is not about getting students to smile all the

time, but to help them realize the meaning in their lives and finding a healthy balance between negative and positive emotions (see e.g., Kern et al., 2014).

Method

In this study, PERMA was operationalized into pedagogical practices that focused on increasing well-being through positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievements. Seligman's theory was selected from the viewpoint of effectiveness of the research, because multi-strategical and multi-factor interventions have proved to be more efficient than developmental interventions that focus on just one factor or goal (see Noble & McGrath, 2016). The purpose was to research joy at school as a description of not only students' personal well-being but also as a contextual state influenced by, for example, teacher-student relationships. The concept of joy at school was chosen therefore to illustrate the many sides of being at school. It was introduced to students. They understood and described the phenomenon in a versatile manner. Here, joy at school was not understood as just a pleasant emotion but a multidimensional construct (including atmosphere, relationships, teaching methods, school environment, etc.) that is approached from the perspective of a well-being theory that was operationalized into pedagogical practices. The researcher's view about the concept of joy at school was not revealed to students because the purpose was to discover how they perceive it.

The following research questions were set for this study:

- (1) What are the elements of joy at school as described by northern-Finnish students?
- (2) Which pedagogical practices did enhance joy at school according to students' perceptions?

The research was carried out among sixth-graders (N=14) of one northern-Finnish school during the study year of 2013–2014. The data comprised student interviews; questionnaires for students; questionnaires for students' parents; and the researcher's diary. Qualitative methods dominated the study.

Epistemologically, the foundation of positive psychology is on positivism and quantitative research. However, as the research on the field has grown extensively, epistemological and methodological pluralism in positive psychology research has increased, too. The value of this research is, therefore, also in its contribution to the qualitative research in positive psychology. Furthermore, the intervention was based on an epistemological idea of that academic research does not only aim at describing, explaining, or understanding phenomena but to change them too (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). This kind of research can be seen as a systematic research approach that tries to find efficient solutions to everyday problems and

challenges (Stringer, 2014) and construct information that develops professional and communal practices and increases well-being (see also Bradbury, 2015; Ivankova, 2015).

The elements of PERMA were operationalized into thirteen pedagogical practices that were introduced in the classroom in four phases during the school year (see Table 1). Table 1 shows examples of the practices and how they represented each element of PERMA.

PERMA element	Pedagogical practices	Introduced in the Classroom (No = Research Cycle)
Positive feelings	What went well?	1
	Gratitude diary	1
	Acts of kindness	1
	Morning meetings	1
	Bucket filling	4
	Optimism and positivity	1
Engagement	Flow	1
	Mindfulness	2
	Peace corner	1
Relationships	Pedagogical love	1
	Cooperative learning	1
	Big buddy activities	1
	Home-school cooperation	1
	Teacher Involving Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) homework	1
	Weekly letter	1
Meaning	Strengths Gym	2
	Class meetings	2
	Students' autonomy and academic choice	1
Achievement	Goal setting	1
	Positive feedback and support	1
	Success celebrations	1
	Versatile student evaluation methods	1

Table 1. Examples of PERMA-based pedagogical practices

The data was collected with various methods to gain profound understanding about the influence and efficiency of the intervention and to eliminate the possible bias that just one research method might have had. Questionnaires were used for measuring students' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions four times throughout the school year: before the fall break, winter break, spring break, and summer break (see also Mertler, 2014). The initial level and nature of joy at school were measured with questionnaires that included statements about schoolwork that were based on PERMA. The measurement happened immediately at the beginning of the schoolyear, before the intervention took place. Students answered by using a 4-point Likert scale (1= "I strongly agree"...4= "I strongly disagree"). The option for "neutral" answer ("I do not know") was deliberately omitted so that each student would give his or her opinion on the statement.

The intermediate measurements were partly similar to the initial measurements, but were complemented by sections that corresponded to the new activities introduced during the

research cycle (see Table 1) and asking students' perceptions of them. Students were asked to describe the extent to which the different practices had brought joy to them during the preceding phase of intervention. Questions included structured Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions, which asked the students to describe what had increased their joy. These questionnaires were filled in at school during a specific lesson spared for this activity. This was apparently a functional way of collecting data because students were able to concentrate on answering the questions and ask if they did not understand some question in the questionnaire.

The main data was obtained through *semi-structured interviews* (Stringer, 2014). Students were interviewed during the first weeks of fall semester and in the spring when the school year came to its end. The qualitative interview method helped the researcher to engage with the students' own perceptions and experiences of joy at school. The interviews were semi-structured which meant that all students were asked the same questions that they could answer in their own words. It was possible to change the order of questions to ensure fluent conversation with the interviewee. The interview resembled the themed interview method because the interviews were structured according to the themes of PERMA accompanied with the theme of joy at school.

The researcher's diary was an important part of the research process. It served as the chronicle of decisions made during the process and as a register of the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The researcher's diary also helped to reflect on the values and prejudices that may direct the research and make the right decisions when situations required ethical consideration (Brydon-Miller, 2009). In this study, the researcher's diary also supported the data analysis. Children may answer a researcher's questions in a way they think they are supposed to answer (see also Chiesa & Hobbs, 2008), and therefore, the combination of various data was considered beneficial to the reliability of the research.

The data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method (Creswell, 2009). The purpose of analysis was to produce a description of the phenomenon by leaning on various categories that correspond to the research questions. In this research, themed categorization served as the form of content analysis (Mayring, 2000). Examples of the analysis are provided in Table 2.

Original expression	Reduction	Theme/category
"You always come to school being cheerful and not just walk by and say 'now we have meth' and just be there and look at us."	cheerful teacher teacher notices students	a positive teacher personality caring about students
"We have had all kinds of new, nice things such as strengths and weekly letter."	new practices	versatile teaching methods

Table 2. Examples of content analysis.

In research projects where children are the research subjects, certain ethical questions are of great importance (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). The children could choose whether they wanted to participate in the research, and they and their parents gave written permission. In addition, permission to conduct the research was applied for and granted by the school rector and the chief officer of education in the municipality. During the research, special attention was paid to securing children's anonymity and that the research caused no harm to them.

Results

Joy at school as described by students

The data showed that the students experienced joy at school and that the factors affecting it were quite stable by nature.

Apparently, children found it easy to name factors that contribute to their perceived joy at school, and the data were abundant in this sense. The analysis produced four categories that described joy at school: relationships and atmosphere, study-related factors, experience of successes, and surrounding circumstances.

The most important factor in the perceived joy at school, both in the fall and spring data among students were *relationships*—especially relationships with classmates and the teacher. In the fall, 12 students out of 14 emphasized that friends and the teacher produced the most joy at school. In the spring, 13 students brought up the special meaning of good relationships with classmates and the teacher.

The role of friends in a sixth-grader's life is crucial, and this was evident in the data. Friends spurred, advised, and comforted, and helped with homework and other school work. On the other hand, students reported that friends made school feel nicer and lighter, too. Having friends increased positive mood that was found to make concentration at school better. Lack of friends was described as a situation when school did not feel like a nice and welcoming place. All students thought that working together with classmates helped them to get better grades and made school work seem more meaningful than when working alone.

"It does get you in a good mood when everyone helps others and agree on things, and can also argue about some things. If you study in a group, at least, I learn things better." (Student no. 4)

"My joy at school is increased by acceptance and ability to collaborate. General positivity in our class and the class spirit. An accepting teacher and good mutual relationships between students." (Student no. 3)

The positive and supportive teacher was reported as an important factor in the joy at school. The teacher who was perceived as joyful, friendly, spry, and accepting aroused positive feelings in students. They appreciated the encouragement, support, and caring that the teacher provided, as well as the teacher's interest in the students' activities and feelings. In addition, the students mentioned that the teacher who created and used varied teaching methods and modern teaching equipment and did not tie lessons too much to textbooks strengthened their perceived joy. In all, the students described that a good relationship between the teacher and students increased enthusiasm, concentration, and effort at school, and was thus also connected with success at school. The teacher's role was described by one student as follows:

"For me, the component of joy at school is to have a caring teacher. The teacher spurs, helps, is honest and friendly, and cares for us.

She supports and I know that I can tell all my worries and sorrows to her, if I have something. And because the teacher is interested in our doings, others than just the ones related to school.” (Student no. 8)

Although only three students mentioned their parents as a factor increasing their joy at school, the parents' influence became evident in other data, such as the observations marked in the researcher's diary and answers in the questions about the parents' role. The parents' support, interest, help, and participation were perceived extremely empowering and had a significant role strengthening the perceived joy at school.

Secondly, the perceived joy at school was also depended on *factors related to studies and learning*. In the fall questionnaire, the students emphasized school-related factors as the second most important element of joy at school. Their answers were flooded with enthusiasm about the new kind of culture the intervention had brought in the classroom. The new pedagogical practices, such as morning meetings and strengths-spotting, increased students' joy at school considerably. Students found it also pleasing to study themes of positive psychology in addition to the study contents in the curriculum.

“Strengths-related things are my favorite, because I found out what my strengths are (I have done the test later again to see if my strengths have changed). I got to utilize them and the strength tasks were good because I learned more about strengths and how to use them.” (Student no. 9)

Turning from textbook-centered work into teamwork and collaborative learning caused inspiration and joy. It also seemed to strengthen social constructs of the class and built their team spirit. Varied teaching methods and projects that simultaneously transmitted responsibility to students and provided opportunities to autonomous learning and decision-making, motivated students and made them achieve good learning results.

“It was really nice when we studied in a versatile manner and not just read textbooks and did tasks. It was nice to do digital questionnaires, group work, and pair tests.” (Student no. 8)

“What is the best is that studying is not just the same harping but studying has become fun.” (Student no. 2)

In the spring interviews, students still reported that new kinds of versatile lessons, group work, and new methods increased their joy at school. In addition, they emphasized the meaning of learning tasks that suit their abilities and skills. The majority of students (75%) described how they enjoyed tasks that were challenging but included a chance of succeeding.

What made tasks meaningful according to the students' perceptions was that they included options and opportunities to use new technologies. Using information technology with its limitless possibilities seemed to keep up students' motivation throughout the study year.

Over a half of students reported in the fall and spring that joy at school is also made of *experiences of succeeding* at school. During the fall, the emphasis was on the pleasure that new methods produced in learning: it was combined with the element of relevance about the themes they had to learn regarding their life in general. In the spring, their answers included more emphasis on achievements. While they still felt joy of learning new things, they also wanted to achieve good grades at school. One reason for the increase in the dialogue about grades was probably that they would start middle school in the next year. Successes increased their self-confidence and optimism about their chances of succeeding in the future. They described the extreme feelings of pleasure that resulted from succeeding:

"It feels great. Like you got wings." (Student no. 14)

"My self-esteem gets better. I can do that, I know it, it has been tested with an exam, and I am good at that. You could not feel bad about it. A lovely flood of joyfulness and happiness." (Student no. 10)

The fourth most important factor was related to *the physical environment or school conditions*. Mostly the students described the visual appearance of the classroom. A colorful, cozy classroom filled with the students' artwork increased their joy. The students appreciated especially the posters with aphorisms hung on the walls and doors, and glued in the desks. Students reported them being inspiring and spurring. Contentment with the classroom decorations seemed to contribute to feelings of joy:

"If you have a sort of refreshing classroom that has drawings and bright colors, it brings you joy at school. Having just a chalkboard does not increase your willingness to learn but makes you want to busy yourself with something else."
(Student no. 3)

Pedagogical practices increasing joy at school

The most important goal of the whole research process was to produce a description of those pedagogical practices that would enhance positive attitudes to school. In the first intermediate measurement, all practices introduced during the first research cycle scored highly, which meant that student found them "pleasing" or "extremely pleasing". Class meetings, strengths gym, and mindfulness training were not started until in the second research cycle and therefore, they were not evaluated in the first intermediate measurement.

In this measurement, the most popular practices were morning meetings and big buddy activities with first-graders. In addition, the students reported that support provided by the teacher, parents, and friends, and collaborative work and teamwork were important to them.

The differences between results from the first and the second measurements were small. Again, all methods brought considerable joy to students. Class meetings were introduced during the second research cycle and they immediately became the most popular classroom practice. However, morning meetings and big buddy activities were considered very pleasing as well as the mindfulness training. Social relationships were emphasized too. Strengths gym and “What went well?” practices were reported to influence the joy at school the least—although they also got extremely high scores in student evaluations.

The third measurement somewhat mirrored the results of the first and second measurements by results. All pedagogical practices had considerably high scores and none of them got “not pleasing” or “not at all pleasing” responses. However, the rating changed: while morning meetings were still extremely pleasing, the students reported high levels of satisfaction with the support given by the teacher and their parents. Simultaneously, the (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) tasks were reported to have more positive influence. The strengths gym became more popular since the spring-long project called “the Strength of the Week” had begun.

The final measurement in the end of the spring semester did not bring any surprises. All pedagogical practices had had a positive influence on the perceived joy at school, and since many of them were in use throughout the school year, they had already become a regular part of school days.

Morning meetings became the hit. It provided them with a pleasant start for the day because it focused on communality and positive emotions. Collaborative teamwork and big buddy activities were evaluated as being very meaningful. Interestingly, while the students appreciated teamwork, they still considered the support provided by the teacher and parents more important than the support provided by classmates. The teacher’s support proved to be crucial for the perceived joy at school in every measurement during the study year.

The students could also describe in their own words which factors brought the most joy. Especially in the first measurement, the students emphasized that the new pedagogical practices increased joy. In addition to new approaches to school subjects, lessons included teaching about well-being skills and positive thinking. This change was emphasized by ten students. The students associated the new pedagogical practices with the teacher: they thanked the teacher’s “creativity” and “inventiveness” in her pursuit of “making learning fun”. The students often mentioned the usage of new technologies, and even though it was not a

part of new pedagogical practices per se, it is reasonable to acknowledge here as one of the motivating tools for learning. Furthermore, the students described that they enjoyed special occasions, parties, excursions, and events that the study year included because they strengthened the positive atmosphere in the class and home-school collaboration.

In the interviews students could explain their experiences of joy and tell the researcher more about their perceptions of each pedagogical practice. In the fall interviews, the students mentioned that due to the new practices the new school year had felt especially “nice” and their schooldays were happy:

“A nice day at school is one during which we have done something really fun, for example, spent time with our little buddies and had a class meeting.” (Student no. 2)

“Nice things in my own class are big buddy activities; almost everything actually. Morning meetings. Research things. Mindfulness.” (Student no 1)

In the spring interviews, the students looked back to the school year with wistful minds:

“I am sorry to have to go to middle school. What has brought me joy are the friends, the teacher, different ways of studying and not just going by the textbook and that we have something different. Well, when we have those all... strengths notebooks and such. When usually do not have such notebook or similar, and that has been inspiring.” (Student no 3)

Discussion

In sum, the data as a whole presented quite a conforming picture about the pedagogical practices and joy at school. The different sets of data complemented each other well. There was no doubt: the PERMA-based pedagogical practices brought joy at school to these sixth-graders. Various study methods and positive psychological themes that complemented regular school subjects increased positive attitudes to school and experiences of success. The role of social relationships at school was also emphasized in the students’ responses to the questionnaires and interview questions. The teacher had the key role in increasing students’ thriving and well-being at school. By including themes of positive education and related practices, the teacher could make learning interesting and meaningful, while simultaneously increasing students’ well-being skills.

There are certain limitations that should be acknowledged when evaluating the findings of this study. Firstly, PERMA theory is still young and there are not many empirical studies with which to compare this research. In addition, the roots of positive psychology and PERMA are

strongly connected to North-American culture and thus, the adaptability of the theory in a North-Finnish school can be viewed critically. Namely, Khaw and Kern (2014) noticed that the elements of well-being are complex because the culture plays an active role in impacting on how well-being is constructed at a local level. Their research among Malaysian adults showed that PERMA theory would have needed three additional categories—economic security, health, and spirituality—to fully describe flourishing in that culture. However, a smaller study among indigenous Sámi teachers in North-Finland (see Uusiautti, 2016) suggested that positive-psychological viewpoints gave tools to address many social-psychological problems students in these schools face.

Another important critical question focuses on the chosen methods. The intervention research approach was selected because without clear models and practices many pursuits of enhancing student well-being have remained rather descriptive and inefficient (see Proctor, 2014). However, differences between each pedagogical practice introduced remained minimal. Therefore, it was impossible to, for example, name the best or the most functional practice based on this study. The relation between the perceived joy and the methods could not be proven objectively with quantitative reliability measurements in this small group of research participants (see also Creswell, 2009). Still, this study was encouraged by examples of positive-psychological interventions that combined theories with practical applications and have achieved increased levels of well-being among various students (see e.g., Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011).

Conclusions: Enhancing Well-being in Northern Schools

When looking at problems introduced in the beginning, it seemed that the practices introduced in this research could bring joy and enhance student flourishing in schools in the North generally. This is the most important contribution of this research. It is noteworthy that the class in this study represented an ordinary group of students in a northern Finnish school with all the variations of social statuses of families, and strengths, weaknesses, and problems among students. It was comforting that during the study year, singular students could flourish and be happy, have good relationships with peers, achieve their goals, and do good things with others at school. At the classroom level, flourishing means the sense of togetherness, satisfaction and confidence, as well as engagement to school work (see also Norrish et al., 2013). When this kind of positive being at school is possible, the members of the school community can feel deep sense of commitment and belonging, and the school culture promotes positive emotions, efficient learning, and social responsibility.

According to findings, meaningful relationships was one of the main sources of joy at school when it comes to the perceived meaningfulness. Finding functional means of increasing students' sense of being heard and cared for by the teacher thus seemed to being one solution to the known problem of Finnish students' sense of distant relationships with

teachers (see Harinen & Halme, 2012). This research not only suggests that in order to guarantee students' thriving, participation, and efficient learning, it is necessary to spend time on daily basis building a safe and accepting atmosphere but also provide examples of practical means to do so. Simultaneously, the practices strengthen emotional and teamwork skills and attention, respect, and empathy toward others, which are especially important in northern region classrooms where students have heterogeneous backgrounds (e.g., indigenous and mainstreaming populations) (see Uusiautti, 2016). As mentioned, Finland also has the indigenous population of Sámi people whose official Sámi administrative area is located in North-Finland. The teacher-student relationship seemed to define students' attitudes toward school and were a central element in students' perceived joy at school.

It is important to remember that social support is an especially significant contextual factor when promoting subjective well-being at school (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008). Likewise, the support provided by the teacher is crucial for student well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2005), as are peer relationships (e.g., Mahanta & Aggarwal, 2013). In the North, it is also important to get a positive feeling about the region so that students would be able to build a strong connection with their home places, find them appealing, and in the future, stay in the north as active members of northern communities (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

The modern school cannot be considered as only a learning unit but it is a social community that directs students' holistic development. As malaise among children and youth increases and has been shown to be especially worrying in the northern Finland, school has to bear new kind of responsibility over teaching well-being skills. This research gives practical tools for educators to implement in their teaching practice. In addition to academic skills, children in the north need to develop well-being skills so that they could secure their optimal development later in life and be optimistic about their futures. In order to stay vibrant, northern regions need inhabitants who are able to nurture their well-being, pay attention to the different elements of it, and trust in their skills of coping and opportunities in these remote and sparsely-populated areas. By increasing well-being, we also support children's development into active, productive citizens who spread positive behaviors at school and other areas of life and can become the key agents of positive future in the north. In all, the elements of PERMA—positive emotions, absorption, satisfying and close relationships, experience of meaningful school work and purpose in life, and achievement of significant goals—are the exact things that teachers and parents hope for children, regardless of place and culture. But we here in the North have to pay particular attention to the chances and realities of being able to provide children with these positive elements in their lives.

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