

Research-based activities promoting flourishing at Sevenoaks School

Interview with Dr Christina Hinton and Ben Hill
(Research Schools International / Harvard Human Flourishing Program)

Introduction

During the past year we have worked with Research Schools International (RSI) on an exciting project to explore student flourishing. The following article summarises an interview with Dr Christina Hinton (RSI Founder and CEO, Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University Research Affiliate) and Ben Hill (RSI Researcher) by Helen Hampson (ITL Research & Development Manager). In this interview, Dr Hinton and Ben Hill describe the mission of RSI, explain how the flourishing project was set up, and share details of some of the research findings and next steps.

The gap between research and practice

There is a gap between research and practice in education. Often research isn't considered on the ground in schools and, at the same time, there is often great innovation happening in practice that isn't picked up with research. We established RSI because we wanted to fill that gap. We connect researchers and practitioners to ensure research is used to inform practice, the practical needs of schools influence research directions, and practical innovations in schools are evaluated and disseminated more broadly.

Our RSI model is based on John Dewey's laboratory school vision, which he set out over 100 years ago, calling for laboratory schools that are actively using research to solve problems that are happening on the ground. At RSI, we built on that original concept and created a network of schools around the world that are working in this way. Like teaching hospitals in medicine, we sought to create hubs of knowledge creation where researchers and practitioners are working hand in hand to generate knowledge that can be shared more broadly.

What is flourishing?

We're really interested in linking research and practice in the area of flourishing. The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and RSI have collated a list of activities that research has shown promote flourishing. We're passionate about supporting schools to integrate these research-based activities to enhance flourishing, and the domains that sit beneath it (e.g. feeling happy and satisfied with life, being mentally

and physically healthy, having meaning and purpose, developing character and virtue, and having close social relationships).

Flourishing at Sevenoaks

Over the last year, we have worked with Sevenoaks School to look at promoting student flourishing, the extent to which the school is already leading activities known from research to enhance it, and how the school might further support flourishing. An exciting part of the project has been to work alongside Student and Teacher Research Fellows at the school. For example, they helped to tailor the survey to ensure it was appropriate to the context of the school and for different year groups. The survey was administered across all years, with 886 students completing the whole survey in Spring 2021.

We've also been training the Research Fellows along the way through an apprentice type model to develop their research and thematic data analysis skills. The students and teachers have enjoyed working together, and for students it's been an interesting opportunity to see behind the scenes and witness teachers thinking about and reflecting along with them on these kinds of issues.

Research Findings

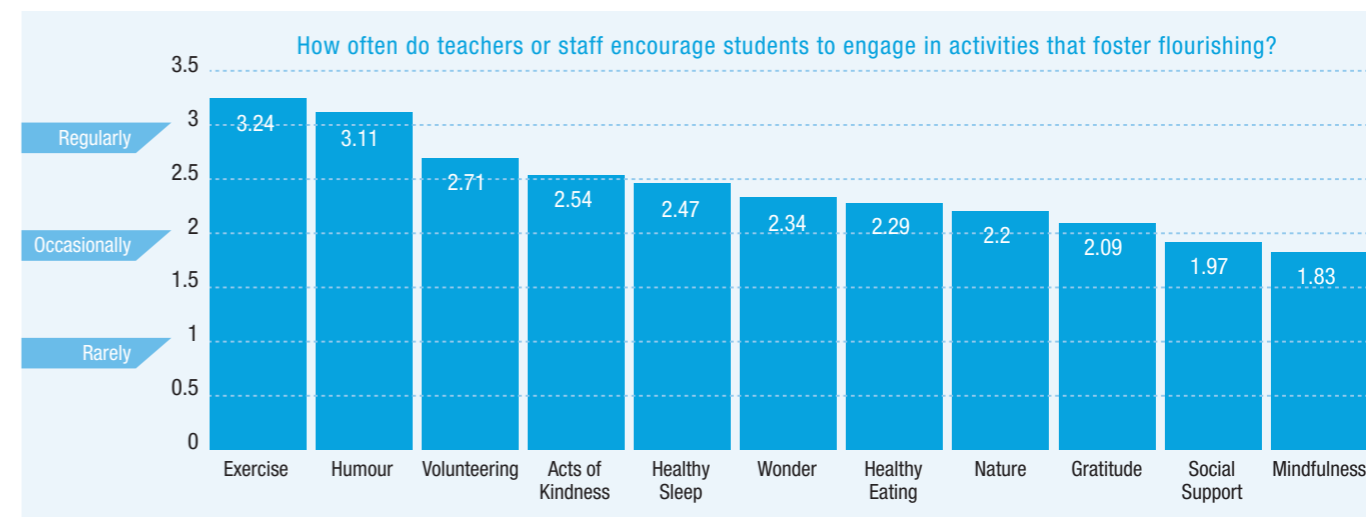
The graph on the right illustrates some of the findings from our survey, and the extent to which research-based activities known to enhance flourishing are used at Sevenoaks, and the relative strengths and areas for growth. Exercise, humour, and volunteering rank on the higher end in terms of how often they are being practiced. Every student participating responded on a scale to indicate how often students are encouraged to engage in these activities. This quantitative data was also supported by qualitative data, with students sharing many stories and experiences of these different activities.

Highest ranked: Exercise, volunteering, and humour

Approximately 1 in every 3 students wrote about exercise. Not only do students talk about physical activity in terms of how much fun it is, and as a means to de-stress, but also as a way to create deeper social bonds with peers, promote kindness through acts of sportsmanship and develop deeper links with their teachers who also serve as coaches and mentors.

Volunteering, another research-based source of flourishing, was also reported as an activity students engage in regularly through school. We found several stories in the data about students whose lives have been affected and changed by their service projects and the fulfilling activities they have undertaken within these projects.

Research-based activities that promote flourishing



Teachers also appear to use humour effectively. There were many examples of how students light up when a teacher presents information in a humorous way and makes the lessons very engaging, helping students focus on the task in hand. Humour appears to be used to enhance relationships with students and their learning experiences at school.

Lowest ranked: Nature, gratitude, social support, mindfulness

We found some opportunity for students to appreciate and connect with nature through their formal education. For example, there were some examples of teachers taking their classes outside and using the natural environment to support their teaching instruction. Students also wrote about eco-week and how planting trees on campus made them feel part of the efforts to take care of the school campus. Overall, students reported that these types of activities occurred occasionally, and as such it is a potential area for growth. Students appear to respond well to mixing things up and going outside on a nice day, as part of a classroom experience and through co-curriculum activities, to utilise and make use of the school grounds in their learning.

Some students have salient memories connected to gratitude. Examples included a teacher who has modelled gratitude, talking about the fulfilling life they lead, and providing inspiration to students. Tutors were also mentioned as helping students to reflect on gratitude, and some students had been encouraged to keep gratitude journals during the pandemic, though by and large it doesn't seem to be explicitly taught. Gratitude is understood by the students as a good thing, but it seems like an area where more activities and explicit instruction would help students to further flourish.

We looked also at social support, specifically how much students are feeling socially supported by teachers and staff at Sevenoaks. Students have positive relationships with their teachers and are keen for more interactions with them. Whilst acknowledging that it is not easy for overtasked teachers to find time during the school day for more one to one connections with students, those who do have meaningful interactions with teachers shared how important it was for getting them through a vulnerable time, and how much that worked as a subtle encouragement to persevere and do their best.

Finally, mindfulness, an umbrella for a lot of different activities, which try to encourage students to slow down and focus on the present is evident at Sevenoaks. Mindfulness seems to be promoted in some of the boarding houses, where there are opportunities for students to unwind at the end of the day through meditation, painting, yoga. It doesn't, however, appear to be something viewed as part of school culture and could be more widely promoted.

Next Steps

At the time of this discussion we are planning for a professional development session with all Sevenoaks teaching staff to share our research findings and support teachers to create research-based strategies they will implement to fill the areas where potential growth has been identified by the research (in activities currently occurring occasionally/rarely). We're excited to work with the teachers to develop their ideas and bring our knowledge from the research at Sevenoaks and elsewhere. We will also work through the next year with a smaller group of Teacher Research Fellows to evaluate the impact of some of the flourishing interventions they implement.