



What does it mean to flourish? Student research fellow reflections

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In the following article three of our students reflect on their role as research fellows in our flourishing project, giving their perspectives on what flourishing means to them, how their understanding of the research process developed through the project, and some of the research findings that began to emerge.

What does it mean to flourish?

Jen Thomas

What does it mean to flourish? How can I truly make myself happy? These are questions I have asked myself before, as many have, when I feel that times are tough. I have found myself asking these questions more over the last year, wondering what exactly it is that I feel that I am missing. However, I am very fortunate to have been able to take part in the Flourishing project with researchers from Harvard University. This incredible opportunity truly came at a time in my life when I felt that I was at a loss for how to improve my wellbeing. It was then that I was first introduced to the concept of flourishing. I learnt that flourishing is less of a tangible, physically attainable state of mind and more of an

approach to living life. To flourish is to feel contentment throughout the different aspects of your life, - happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, mental and physical health, character and virtue, and positive social relationships (VanderWeele, 2020).

To truly flourish is not about the temporary pleasure that we tend to label as happiness, but to feel fulfilled in all the different aspects of your life. Working with Harvard researchers on this project has invited me to reflect on what this means in practice, as well as how I can feel more fulfilled in my own life. I would suggest to anyone who wishes to be happier (which I think is everyone!)- take some time to reflect on what it might mean to do so. When you approach your own life with an outlook of flourishing, thinking beyond the momentary pleasure to the longer-term happiness and contentment, it might make a real difference.

The role of the student research fellow

Eloise Simpson

The flourishing project enabled students throughout different years to undertake research, an opportunity that we rarely get as students, especially in the social sciences. Since COVID-19, few projects have been undertaken throughout the years, but this project ran through lower school, middle school, and upper school, and for many of us was the first real research we participated in. The online sessions taught us valuable skills for designing surveys, filtering data, analyzing it, and drawing conclusions.

One of the hardest parts of dealing with research data is doing so from an unbiased viewpoint. It is important not to discount data because it does not seem correct or relevant to you. There is a step in the analysis process where data presenting similar ideas will be given "codes". Labelling recurring views like this allows the data to be cut down. However, it is easy to subconsciously rephrase data to fit what the person processing it believes or just to simplify it too much. Overcoming this challenge is key to keeping the data accurate.

It was also interesting seeing how much data directly contradicted itself, which showed us that making conclusions from research is never straightforward, but also how much the way people view the same things can differ. We would often find ourselves presenting information claiming the complete opposite to what the previous person had found, which makes it hard to understand which points are representative of a general feeling, and really emphasises the importance of looking across the whole data set. Data analysis in research is needed because simply looking at each piece of data and drawing conclusions is highly ineffective and inaccurate but analysing it as a whole brings out key points and important recurring themes.

How can we promote flourishing? Some research findings

Lilli Ganzer

One service at Sevenoaks School that students praised highly when asked about what Sevenoaks does to promote flourishing was the counselling programme. Counselling is defined as "the activity of a trained person listening to someone who has a problem and giving them advice on how to deal with it" (Cambridge Dictionary definition) but, in essence, the act of listening can be carried out by anybody. Part of the appeal of a counselling service to students is not just the fact that the counsellors help them solve their problems, but that they get the feeling there is somebody that listens to their worries and, more importantly, cares.

The responses to our survey question "How does Sevenoaks School promote flourishing" indicate how vital being able to talk to anybody, whether counsellor or teacher, is to student flourishing. Teachers are equally as important since they see students on a day to day basis and can, similar to a counsellor, listen, care and gently guide students towards activities that promote flourishing, or sources of further support. Feeling like somebody cares increases the self-confidence of students which, in turn, encourages them to step out of their comfort zone to participate in new activities such as sports and creative arts that help them thrive. Furthermore, having somebody to talk to helps students learn how to analyse and describe their emotions and thoughts, and to talk about them in a coherent manner. This increases their emotional intelligence and allows them to quickly identify and manage negative thought patterns. Below are some things students have said about their experiences:

"I like that I can talk to my tutor without feeling like I will get in trouble...She doesn't search for solutions but just lets me talk which is really freeing."

"Recently I felt very overwhelmed by exams (...) When I told my teacher they sat me down and we went through everything that I was stressed about one by one. Looking at everything in such close detail made me realise that it was in fact all very manageable (...) I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of my shoulders."

These testimonies emphasize the importance of teachers in supporting students to thrive. A good support system within a school can be a dealbreaker when it comes to the flourishing of the student body and we are very grateful for all the good listeners amongst the staff.



Involving students in research

Involving students in this project has provided a unique opportunity for the development of knowledge and skills through engagement with important research questions. Coming at a time of great uncertainty during the pandemic, for some students the project has sparked a real interest in flourishing, and led to further independent reading, thinking and reflection on ways in which their own wellbeing, as well as that of others, could find better support.

We are keen to involve students in research activities as co-researchers, and not just participants, and the apprentice model used through the project to support students to develop their research and enquiry skills has proved to be very rewarding for all involved. The insightful questions students have raised, their help in framing survey questions, the thoughtful feedback they have given through the data analysis process, and increased understanding of social science research, have added real value to the project. Working alongside teachers as research fellows has given students an interesting opportunity to see how the school is thinking about these kinds of issues, and be an important part of research-informed developments that, we hope, will have an impact at both the individual and institutional level.

The chance to work with Research Schools International/ Harvard Human Flourishing Program, has also enabled all our fellows to contribute more broadly to the significant and growing knowledge base regarding student and human flourishing.