

Positive Living Skills for Teenagers: A Youth Intervention

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Abstract

The Positive Living Skills (PLS) program for teens is a personal life enhancement intervention program centered on teaching focusing skills, positive perspectives, and relaxation skills. The purpose of this study was to introduce Orlick's PLS program to teenagers (in a classroom context) and to investigate whether the students enjoyed, applied, and found these skills effective in their daily lives. A secondary purpose of this study was to explore the best ways to deliver the program. Two grade 10 high school classes (15-16 year-old students) participated in a 10 session PLS intervention over a period of 16 weeks. These sessions included PLS audio CD activities, interactive and guided PLS activities, logbook exercises, discussions and practice using the PLS skills. The students who participated in the PLS program enjoyed the program skills, applied the skills effectively in daily life and planned to continue using the program skills. These findings support results from previous PLS research conducted with younger students between the ages of 4-12 years of age.

Introduction

Learning to focus on the positives, connect fully with what one is doing, and cope effectively with ongoing challenges is advantageous for people of all ages. People, especially adolescents, are living in a world that *can* be demanding, stressful and filled with distractions. One's focus directly impacts a person's ability to embrace life and fully experience the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dyer, 2004; Orlick, 2001, 2008; Zukav & Francis, 2003).

By developing the skills necessary to focus fully and constructively, you directly influence the quality of children's learning, performance, and living. Children and youth will learn

to focus effectively through guidance and practice at connecting fully with essential things that are going on in the present. (Orlick, 2001, p. 113)

Positive Living Skills (PLS) research with elementary school children has reinforced the importance of teaching focus, positive perspectives and relaxation skills in the school context, in the home, at day camps, and in hospital settings. (Cox & Orlick, 1996; Gilbert & Orlick, 1996; Gilbert & Orlick, 2002; Hester & Orlick, 2006; Julien, 2002; Klingenberg & Orlick, 2002; Koudys & Orlick, 2002; St. Denis & Orlick, 1996; Taylor & Orlick, 2004; Theberge, 2002). Orlick believes that teaching children and youth to find a sense of focus, harmony, and

balance in life should be at the forefront of parents, teachers and educators priorities (Orlick, 1995, 2002).

He recently adapted his children's PLS program for use with teens. Similar to the children's version, the teen program was designed to nurture "life enhancing activities that teach people to focus effectively, deal better with distractions, become more positive, control anger, relax more fully, and find more joy in life" (Orlick, 2005). Modifications integrated into the teen program included age-appropriate language, increased duration of recordings and more challenging activities.

Positive Living Skills Interventions

Past research on the PLS program has shown that positive living skills can be learned, enjoyed and applied effectively by children between the ages of 4-12 when taught within the public school setting, alternative school setting as well as with special populations (Hester & Orlick, 2006; Klingenberg & Orlick, 2002; Koudys & Orlick, 2002).

St. Denis and Orlick (1996) conducted a PLS intervention with fourth grade students that focused on developing positive perspectives, specifically by teaching children to increase highlights in their daily lives. Gilbert and Orlick (2002) introduced the PLS program with first, second, fifth, and sixth grade students and assessed how well the students were able to relax themselves, implement stress control strategies and increase the amount of positive experiences in their day. The findings of these two studies showed that the children enjoyed, learned from, and applied the program skills during the intervention and planned to continue to use the program in the future.

The PLS program was also implemented in an alternative school setting by Taylor and Orlick (2004). This study investigated whether the students improved their relaxation and stress control skills and how the teachers adapted the program for their students needs. Findings from this study demonstrated that the children learned to successfully implement the relaxation skills and positive coping strategies into their daily lives. The teachers shared some important considerations for the effective delivery of the program:

- 1) Concentrate on one element at a time,
- 2) let the children lead the discussions,
- 3) get to know the activities well,
- 4) repeat activities,
- 5) seize opportunities to show applicability of skills,
- 6) increase the duration and frequency of intervention if possible, and
- 7) remain flexible in the delivery of the program.

Koudys and Orlick (2002) conducted a case study with a five-year-old pediatric cancer patient and his primary care-giver. They examined the potential value of a five-year-old child learning and applying PLS skills while coping with cancer. During these sessions the child and primary caregiver learned basic PLS activities that focused on muscle relaxation, diaphragm breathing, focusing, refocusing, positive imagery, and finding highlights. The primary caregiver and her son both learned to successfully apply positive living skills in a stressful hospital experiences and outside the hospital setting. The primary caregiver found these skills were extremely helpful to her and her son.

Klingenberg and Orlick (2002) conducted a single case study examining the process of using PLS skills within a family with Spe-

cial needs. The family used a number of the positive PLS strategies to help them deal more effectively with stressful life situations.

Hester and Orlick's (2006) conducted a PLS intervention study with 3 children who had Attention Deficit and Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD). The findings of this study demonstrated that the PLS program helped these children to cope more effectively with stress by relaxing, focusing more fully and developing more positive perspectives about themselves and life. This study demonstrated that we can teach children to improve their focusing skills, even children who have difficulties with maintaining focus.

The Delivery of the Positive Living Skills Program for Teens

This article presents the findings of the first systematic assessment of the PLS program implemented with a group of adolescents. This PLS teen program for adolescents had previously been introduced in different contexts, but at the time this study was conducted, there had not yet been a systematic analysis conducted on the effectiveness of this program.

The following three simple PLS activities provide examples of the kind of focusing skills that are taught in the program. "Tree it", introduces the concept of leaving worries or distractions behind and connecting back to the present moment. "Changing channels" introduces a related concept of changing moods by shifting focus or changing thoughts to something more positive or constructive. "Making good Choices" introduces the notion that one's thoughts and focus are within one's own control. You can choose to focus on the positives and opportunities of a situation or the negatives. You can choose to connect or disconnect.

Helping students to understand the rationale behind the content of the different PLS activities is an important part of effective delivery. They need to know why something is important and how it can help them in their personal challenges and daily life.

Based on past research with the PLS program, Orlick (2001) provided several teaching tips for the delivery and facilitation of the program:

1. Use simple, concrete strategies.
2. Use an individualized approach by drawing upon multiple options.
3. Use respected positive role models.
4. Remain positive and hopeful.
5. Ask students to prepare themselves to relax, focus and listen.
6. Give students time to settle in to the activities.
7. Remain consistent with a set time for the program.
8. Encourage and challenge participants to live what they are learning by applying the skills in their daily lives.
9. Create a respectful environment that reinforces positive interaction and positive collaborative learning.

Davies and Osguthorpe (2003) point out that students' intent of learning is very important in an effective learning process:

Of all the factors that affect student learning, a student's desire to learn may be among the most significant. The quality of one's effort to learn and the persistence and striving a student exerts are determined by the student's aim and commitment to fully achieve the desired learning in a specific situation. This is learner intent. (p. 1)

The level of learner intent in the PLS program was encouraged by:

Giving the students good reasons to learn,

- 1) making the learning relevant and fun, and
 - 2) providing opportunities for reflection during and after interventions.
- In the present study the researcher/facilitator (first author) encouraged students to actively engage in on-going reflection on the program's relevance to their daily lives.

Methodology

Participants and Context

The participants in this study consisted of 31 students and two teachers in two existing grade ten health and physical education classes, in an Ottawa region private school. The students included 19 boys and 12 girls ranging in age from 15-16 years. Most of the students were from the Ottawa area however a number of students came from Europe or Asia to attend this school and lived in the residence at the school. The academic expectations are high at this school and students have to perform an entrance exam to be considered for this school. Most of the students participated in extracurricular activities such as sport, music or dance. The PLS program was viewed as complimentary to the aims of the school's health and well-being curriculum.

The Intervention

The participants took part in a number of group PLS sessions. The researcher and her thesis supervisor (second author and creator of the PLS program) played a role in determining the main skills and appropriate activities to be used throughout the intervention program.

The researcher/facilitator conducted the intervention in either the regular classroom, gymnasium or outside on school playing fields. The original plan for the PLS program for teens was to deliver the program in 30 minute sessions, two times per week, over a 8-12-week period of time. Due to the realities of emerging situations and various extraneous demands upon the students and teacher the final PLS program intervention included 10 sessions over a 16 week period with each session lasting between 15-30 minutes in length (with one session of 50 minutes).

The primary skills selected for this intervention included focusing and refocusing, positive perspectives, and relaxation skills. A number of the intervention activities combined more than one of these skills and all the skills require the skill of focus. For example, in order to maintain a positive perspective, one must focus on the positives or try to see things from a more positive perspective. After each intervention activity the researcher initiated a short class discussion about the activities, the mental skill used and how the skill(s) could be applied in their real world challenges and experiences. The students were made aware of the fact that elite athletes and other top performers use these skills to improve their performance and lives. The students were encouraged to practice and apply the skills they were learning in their daily lives.

Most intervention sessions focused on teaching participants how to focus or what to focus on to improve their performance or their life. This included:

- 1) Focusing in the present moment,
- 2) focusing on one thing at a time,
- 3) changing thoughts and feelings by changing focus, and

- 4) teaching participants how to maintain their best focus through distractions (e.g. focusing on the present moment or the next step, breathing, something positive, or a specific thing they wanted to do or accomplish).

The major elements of positive perspectives' addressed were:

- 1) Finding highlights,
- 2) embracing the simple joys in all parts of life, and
- 3) keeping life situations in perspective.

The relaxation component centered on helping participants enter a more relaxed state where they were better able to relax, focus, listen, and learn (Orlick, 2008). The main strategies used to teach relaxation during the sessions were relaxed breathing, tuning into relaxing music, and guided muscle relaxation.

In addition to the audio CD activities, other activities were sometimes used such as focusing on an object, focusing music, watching an inspiring Olympic video clip, or other activities and games found in the book *Feeling Great* (Orlick, 2001). Group discussions were an integral part of all sessions. The discussions addressed what focusing strategies were currently working well for them, what could be better, what their peers were doing, what challenges the students were facing, and how they felt they could apply the skills they were learning in their daily lives to overcome those challenges. Logbook activities were used during certain intervention sessions, for example after trying to relax to assess the students' response to the activity. The aim of the logbook was to generate meaningful participant reflection, discussion, and future application of the skill in their daily lives.

Data Collection and Analysis

The logbooks served as both a learning tool for the students and an assessment tool for the researchers. It was designed to create a clearer understanding of the process of participant enjoyment, application, and program effectiveness throughout the intervention.

Formal interviews were conducted with twenty-seven out of thirty-one students, at the end of the study, to gain further information about the program and whether or not they felt it had had an influence on their daily lives. Teachers were also interviewed at the conclusion of the study to gain their insights on the intervention.

The researcher kept personal notes on enjoyment, application, and effectiveness, as well as what went on in each of the sessions, for example, what went well and what did not go well in the sessions, any problems or concerns of the participants, participants' reaction to the activities, and any other defining information.

The four key research elements assessed during this study included:

- 1) enjoyment,
- 2) application,
- 3) effectiveness, and
- 4) delivery of the program.

The methods used to collect data on the four key research elements included participant interviews, researcher notes, logbook entries and informal conversations with participants. Activity rating scales were also used to assess the enjoyment and effectiveness of the program.

Enjoyment

The logbook sheets contained an assessment scale for enjoyment and an assessment scale for engagement in the activity (focused con-

nection). In the individual interviews, students were asked whether or not they enjoyed the program and the question of why or why not was further explored. Teachers were also interviewed to gain their perceptions of the students' enjoyment of the program.

Application

Some logbook sheets asked students about whether they were using the skills and how they could apply the skills in their daily lives. In participant interviews, students were asked whether or not they were currently using the skills and whether they planned to use specific skills in the future. Teachers were asked whether or not they observed the students applying the program skills in their daily lives or heard the students talking about applying the skills.

Effectiveness

The logbook sheets encouraged the students to reflect on the strategies they were using to overcome challenges, and how effective each of these strategies was. This data was collected through students written responses and the effectiveness rating scale for activities. Students were interviewed to find out whether or not they found the program skills helpful or effective in their daily lives. Teachers were also asked whether they perceived any effective change in the class dynamics or behaviour throughout the intervention and whether they perceived that the students found the program effective.

Results

Based on the post-intervention interviews, logbooks and researcher notes, it is clear that the teens participating in this PLS intervention enjoyed the program, applied the program activities, and found the program skills effective in the contexts in which they applied them.

How the Program Unfolded

Throughout the intervention process the first author recorded how she implemented the program, what worked well and what did not work so well, personal reflections, lessons learned about her interactions as researcher/facilitator and suggestions for future programs. Her perspective on the delivery of different part of the program is presented below.

CD Recordings

I personally found that listening to the audio CD activities before sessions helped my own preparation and my ability to present the different positive living skills. The audio activities concisely outline, explain and give the participant an opportunity to try out the different skills. During the sessions with the CD recordings I tried to first let the students listen to the recordings.

I communicated that the instructions on the CD were part of the activity and to take out of them what they could. This worked well. The students laughed a bit, but they were able to get into it after shortly after the CD started. (Researcher notes-girls, Jan 31st)

I also found that sharing the ideas in person was very well received by the students in this study.

Listening to the CD tracks is useful in more than just the content, as it also acts as a focusing exercise, but at times the students found the recordings less personal than talking in person. Although the group understood the ideas conveyed in the CD recordings, some students got too caught up on how the track sounded

and did not get as much out of the activity as they could. Talking about ideas and concepts can work very effectively with certain groups. For example, with the girls, explaining the concept of changing channels in person worked very well and allowed relevant links to occur in the dialogue. (Researcher notes-Girls, April 11th)

“Tree it”

At times during the intervention there were questions about PLS concepts that needed clarifying. For example questions surfaced in the discussion about when to apply the “tree it” concept. The following excerpt from my researcher notes demonstrates how I attempted to clarify how “tree it” could be used.

I started the session by having Lucie and Judy share how they felt ‘treeing it’ could be used. Lucie shared how for her “treeing it” was like turning over a new leaf. She explained that “treeing it” was like getting a fresh start at something and that it helps her to leave the past in the past. Judy shared how she would use “treeing it” because it allows her to continue doing what she is doing in the moment. Another student shared a powerful point about “treeing it” in her logbook. She said she would use “treeing it” to let go of things out of her control. This student was not comfortable sharing her idea with the group, so with her permission, I shared her idea with the class. This went really well. The group seemed to appreciate the follow-up on their questions and the examples of skill application from peers were helpful (for creating a clearer understanding

of relevant places to apply skills). (Researcher notes-girls, March 6th)

The students said that hearing about other people’s struggles and effective application of PLS skills was very helpful. Kristin shared the following example about how hearing about people’s challenges motivated her to keep trying.

Sometimes, I start to kind of lose faith in it (the effectiveness of the skill). Sometimes I say to myself “Well this (skill e.g. treeing it) does not work”. But once other people say “Yeah I feel that way too”, as a group we all collectively talk about how we can use it effectively (a skill like treeing it) and I hear other peoples’ opinions and it helps me to believe maybe it (‘treeing it’) does work if I keep trying.

Expectations, peer teaching and “mental training wheels”

In a similar vein the students’ expectations of their ability to use skills is another important area to address when conducting a PLS intervention:

I sensed that most people in the group have really big expectations of themselves and that they feel they should be able to learn these skills and apply them all the time, and if they can’t they don’t even want to try. Most of these skills take practice and in the end there is still a life force that is sometimes greater than ourselves (chance). The students and people in general need to be patient and know that all we can do is try our best and work from wherever we are in our process. (Researcher note-boys, Apr 6th)

Remaining patient when asking the group questions was another important lesson learned. In my researcher notes I explain how waiting for students to share and discuss with one another was beneficial:

Trying to word or phrase questions in a way that lets the group take their own lessons from the discussion can be difficult, but is very beneficial. Today the group was talking with each other, sharing ideas with each other. I found the group was very receptive to hearing what their peers had to say, and the group had some really great examples to share. I asked questions like, “do you have any examples in your own daily life where you have been able to stay in the present, or get back in the game after a set back?” When no one was sharing, I waited a bit and let someone fill the silence with their ideas, rather than me jumping in right away. (Researcher notes-boys, Feb 15th)

As a result of being patient in the sessions the students began teaching themselves:

A few students expressed that this idea of shifting or changing channels is not that easy, that it’s much easier for little kids because they have less responsibility. I let this part of the conversation go [...] other people expressed that they thought it would be easier as you get older because you would be more mature and less influenced by what other people think. As a facilitator I might have been able to contribute to this idea [...] but I felt it was more important for them to be heard, to understand that their ideas are good and to feel they are free to express their ideas.

It was evident that the students understood mental skills, like physical skills, take practice. One student came up with a clever way of looking at the process of applying mental training skills.

One person came up with the idea that learning mental skills is like learning how to ride a bike. It’s easy when someone is holding the back of your bike, you think you can do it, and you can even do it when they are not holding the back if you think they are they’re holding it (the bike). One person said, “Yeah it’s a confidence thing”. Another person said, you can start with training wheels and then bend up the training wheels to make it a bit less safe until you are ready to try without training wheels. (Researcher notes-boys, Feb 15th)

As a group we talked about ways to effectively change moods, help shift channels or use “mental training wheels”.

One person suggested that talking to other people who are going through similar challenges is helpful because they can share a different perspective with you [...] We talked about life’s challenge more and discussed that life is sometimes complicated and we may not always be able to change our channels but we might as well try. Just because we cannot do it all the time does not mean we suck. I think this idea of being patient and remaining positive with ourselves as we try to apply skills is a very important point to bring up with any group. (Researcher notes, April 6th-boys)

Experiential Learning

One day, the class had a rock climbing session booked the same time I was booked to conduct a PLS session. There were two choices; either reschedule the session for another time or work with the classes' planned activity. My advisor and I decided it was a great opportunity for the students to try out skills within a challenging sport context. Being flexible and taking advantage of the classes' schedule was of great benefit as the students then had more time to try out skills in "real" challenges. During regular sessions, it was challenging for me as a researcher to discuss concepts thoroughly, answer questions and still have adequate time for students to try out skills. Normally the sessions only lasted for 15-30 minutes, but the rock climbing session lasted for the whole period (50 minutes). Flowing with the change in plans and practicing some of the skills in an experiential way through rock climbing turned out to be one of the best sessions during the intervention

It only took 5 minutes at the beginning to discuss using the climbing session as an opportunity to try out some focusing and refocusing skills. After that, the students, teachers, and I climbed for most of the session, and then students filled out a logbook sheet before leaving. Although this format worked very well, in retrospect I would suggest a discussion in small groups about what they used and how it went at the end of the activity.

Out of the 31 students, twenty-six were present for this rock climbing session. All 26 students experienced a real challenge during the session and focused on doing something related to the PLS program to overcome their challenge. Below are some examples of students constructively practicing PLS skills during their climbing session.

When we were doing the rock climbing in gym class, Stefanie came and talked to us before and told us about taking our time [...] You can get pretty frustrated if you are not doing the thing right or you are not climbing as fast as you wanted. Definitely frustration was a huge part of it (climbing) and just remembering you have to slow down. At first I was focused on climbing to the top as fast as I could and if I did not get there as fast as I could, I got quite frustrated with myself. You have to keep telling yourself to calm down, because if you don't you are not helping yourself. You are taking the fun out of everything. And there is really no point in being there if you are not going to have fun. (Jane)

Steve overcame his fear of heights by thinking positively and thinking he could do it (Researcher notes, April 26th-boys).

Twenty studentseffectively overcame their challenges by taking a deep breath, concentrating, focusing on the task in front of them, relaxing, and shifting focus from a distraction (e.g. fear or a sore finger) to just climbing (Researcher notes, April 26th-boys and girls). Twenty students rated the PLS skills they had learned as being effective or very effective in this context.

Participation in Discussions

The size of the groups and the people within them made a noticeable difference in the extent to which students participated in discussions. Small discussion groups worked best. Girls also tended to be less vocal around the boys and afraid to share opinions with peers. Although students appreciated hearing about how other people worked through challenges, they often seemed reluctant to make helpful suggestions for peers

to try. It was not easy to get other students to make suggestions for their peers. These teenagers seemed somewhat afraid of this type of sharing. Yet learning from peers is such a valuable experience for participants. When reflecting on how to better facilitate this type of learning I wrote the following.

Remember to let the group and each person live their own learning process. Try not to tell them what is right and wrong. Instead use stories and examples to share how these type of activities or skills have worked for others. Stay tuned in to the group and make sure when you are going to say something to a student you are doing it for the good of that person, not because you want them to think the way you think. They need to figure things out for themselves. (Researcher notes-girls, March 6th)

Being aware of the fine balance between guiding students and letting students guide themselves is imperative.

Do not be afraid to recognize the positive parts of a person's process. Sharing this encouragement can be very helpful for opening a person up further to living in a more positive way. (Researcher notes-girls, March 6th)

By listening and observing I learned that my perception of participants was not always as clear as I originally thought. During the discussions, sharing personal examples or special moments with the students helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the impact the program. In one-on-one discussions with students I learned how they were more engaged in the sessions than I had originally thought:

This was an interesting part of this session. There is a girl named Andrea, who is a dancer. She had not been actively participating in the sessions nor had she shown interest or a desire to share with the group. During today's session I asked the group to write down a reminder to help them stay positive (or reconnect with being positive) that they could use during their March break from school. In an earlier session when Andrea was asked what she did to stay connected, she wrote "I just Dance" on her logbook sheet. As the students were writing their positive reminders during today's session, I shared with Andrea that what she had wrote was very powerful to me. I said, That's what I believe being connected is all about, just letting go of everything else and just dancing. After I shared how powerful her words were for me "I just dance", Andrea showed me her positive reminder for life-it was one word "DANCE". (Researcher notes-girls, March 6th)

At first I thought that Andrea was not interested in the sessions at all, but I learned as the program progressed that my perception was wrong. Through the interviews, I learned that some girls were afraid to share too much because they did not want to stand out. Andrea was one girl who had a great deal to offer but was afraid to say too much.

Yeah, I understand what Dance does for me and I can talk to some people about it, but when I voice it outwards towards people that wouldn't understand, it is difficult because it is almost at a different level of comprehension. So it's not that I get mocked for it, but people just don't under-

stand. And it kind of makes me feel a little bit like I am being on top and I don't like feeling that way. I try to keep quiet. (Andrea)

When I suggested that people could learn from her, Andrea expressed her concern of looking “stuck up”.

Yeah I know that some people would learn from me, but I also know that other people would see me as stuck up and more snobby, like having a higher level of knowledge. Just because I do know myself better and I have been dancing for 13 years now, it's not like a fear, it's like I try to limit myself so I can fit the whole group. I found that I can say something on a lower level, about when I dance and stuff like that but at a higher level it is just more difficult to say anything.

In a moment of reflection about sharing with others, after one session, I wrote:

I feel it would be good to motivate the students by expressing how sharing is helpful for the group as a whole. They can learn so much from each other, it does not matter what is said. They can change their mind about things as they go on. We are all in an evolution of learning, so there is no need to feel embarrassed about what we say or don't say. (Researcher notes-girls, Feb 21st)

I did not specifically discuss this beneficial aspect of sharing within the sessions as a group. For future PLS program delivery, I would suggest clearly defining the benefits of sharing perspectives, early on in the sessions and being patient with students as they begin to open up at their own pace.

Rational for Activities

The importance of taking the time to explain the reasoning or potential value of activities or skills for the students (as each activity is being introduced) was another program delivery lesson learned.

Going over how to relax and discussing the reason for doing it, before asking the group to relax might be more helpful for some members of the group. I had originally thought it would be better to just let them feel it out on their own, and then get into possible ways of trying to relax their bodies after. But after this intervention experience I think explaining the concepts up front in detail first, followed by giving participants an opportunity to explore their own individual ways to relax would work best. (Researcher notes-boys, Feb 8th)

Learning this lesson early during the intervention allowed me to apply it during a focusing exercises. In order to give the students a clearer understanding of the purpose of the activity, I explained that we were going to practice being in the present moment using a point of reference or dot. I then gave the students a chance to explore the concept through discussion by asking if anyone had heard of the idea of Zen. Lucie shared that it was about oneness, and Sydnie shared that being in the moment was about being so connected that everything else fades. Before the group practiced the focus on the dot exercise, I read this excerpt from the book *In pursuit of excellence* to ensure the purpose of the activity was clear.

Entering the Zen zone means becoming one with and inseparable from the essence of what you are doing during each moment you are

actually doing it. It is being all there, totally present, absorbing yourself in, connecting yourself to, and becoming one with your body, your task, nature, the tree you are looking at, the child you are playing with, the person you are talking with. When you are totally engaged in the process of doing, in a sense you become what you are doing and suspend all judgments about yourself, others, or your performance. (Orlick, 2008, pp. 155-56)

When I used the term Zen, students were very interested in the topic. It was evident that they found the concept of Zen to be ‘cool’ because their focus seemed to be intensified when we discussed this Zen idea. Overall, this passage was a good way to introduce and explain the focus on the dot activity.

Chantale, the girls’ teacher, was present again during the session. She participated in the activities and the discussions. She mentioned to me after the class that a few of the girls were lying in a different position (knees bent, eyes open). We discussed sharing how lying down with their palms up in anatomical position with eyes closed helps with relaxation, and that some people find focusing on their breathing helpful when trying to relax. I explained to Chantale that the most important thing was for each individual to feel comfortable, that some people find that they can focus better with their eyes open or feel more comfortable with their legs bent. (Researcher notes-girls, February 8th)

Experience what you are Doing

Really living what you are presenting or talking about with the group was appreciated by most of the students.

Take advantage of fully experiencing what you are teaching or discussing. I feel that being outside while we were discussing simple joys allowed the group to feel the sun on their face and any other simple joys simply by being outside. (Researcher notes-combined, April 19th)

If we had more time it would have been great to let the group go on a nature walk paying attention to simple joys or highlights along the way or focusing on a stream or tree instead of a dot when practicing focused-connection.

Take Time to Listen

Even with the changes in plans throughout the intervention sessions, taking time to listen to what the students were sharing or questioning remained a priority. Even if the discussion was not necessarily on topic there were meaningful lessons learned as a group that came out of these “off topic” moments.

The session today was reduced from 30 minutes to 20 minutes. At first I was bit concerned about getting everything done and then just set some priorities. The relationship questions and discussion became the first priority and Umbalakiki was the second. Above both these priorities was staying in tune with the class and not getting caught up in just getting things done. I find the sessions are most meaningful and helpful when we are taking our time and really listening to one another. (Researcher notes-boys, Feb 28th)

Students’ Perspective: Enjoyment, Application and Effectiveness

The following section presents the students’ perceptions on the four elements of

- 1) enjoyment,
- 2) application,
- 3) effectiveness, and
- 4) delivery of the program.

Emergent themes are presented for each of these four elements. *Figure 1* outlines the first three elements and their concurrent emergent themes.

Enjoyment

Every participant interviewed in this study (27 students) said that they enjoyed some part of the PLS program. When a student said they liked the program, they were asked, “what did you like about it?” The themes that emerged for the element of enjoyment included: a) learning to focus, b) learning to be more positive and appreciate life more, c) relaxing and learning to take

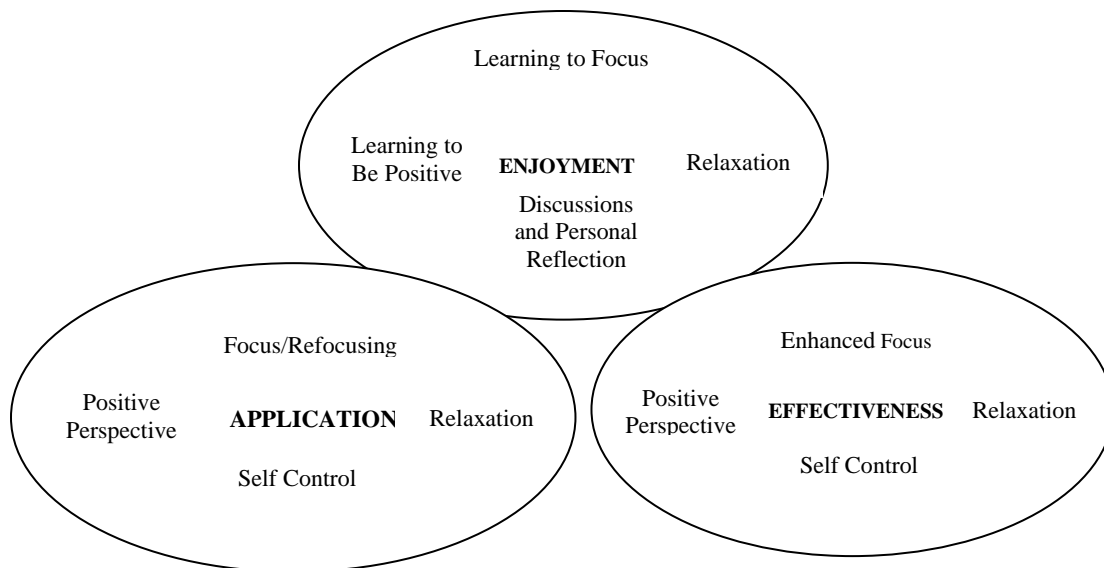
time to relax and d) participating in discussions and personal reflection.

Enjoyment-Relaxation

Relaxation was the most often mentioned theme to emerge from the students comments on enjoyment. The elements of relaxation that students enjoyed most included having a break in their day (e.g. during the PLS sessions), letting go of everything else that was going on, and learning that implementing relaxation into their daily lives was important and beneficial not only to their health but also for their ability to work and perform well. Students’ comments below reflect how they felt relaxation made the program enjoyable.

At the beginning we did relaxation and that was a break in our day, that helped a lot, yeah and also, it was a fun experience, because she (the researcher) showed us a different point of view (a more positive mental aspect). (Kevin)

Figure 1: Elements of Enjoyment, Application and Effectiveness



When Kevin was asked what he specifically liked about the relaxing he said:

You cleared your mind, it is more like your day is so full of things, it is very busy with school and stuff, and then [after the relaxation] it was just very clear [...]

The relaxing exercises were really good. Like listening to music and it came at a pretty good time because a couple of periods after that I had all these crazy presentations to do and so it was nice to just sit there and relax and not have to think about it for even ten minutes. (Kristin)

I liked it when we were relaxing and listening to music and concentrating on things. I liked the ones when we were listening to music the most. That is just because that relaxes me a lot more. It helped me cope with the rest of the day. (Lucie)

When she (the researcher) turned on the music and she made us lie down and relax, so you can forget about all you had to do, yeah it was nice. (Julie)

It was really really, good to have a break [...] because it was really relaxing and it was just really good to have a break. (Anthony)

I enjoyed the program. It was a really good experience. Like we play sports and we get into a mental stage of playing [...] Saying [we] need to relax at some point or to understand to take breaks afterwards you know stretching and relaxing and learning to control yourself, yeah it was good. I liked it, and it really increased your

understanding of what you are going through. (Steve)

It was great. I liked it a lot. It just helped me to relax. (Jason)

Enjoyment-Positive Perspective

Positive perspective was the second most often mentioned theme by the students under the element of enjoyment. The students enjoyed learning to carry a more positive perspective, becoming more aware of positive parts of their daily life, learning to appreciate the simple things in life, and seeing how paying attention to these highlights and simple joys made them feel better.

I think the simple joys section was a good part of the program. It is something that you should try, so you get a greater appreciation for the smaller things in life. (Lisa)

I enjoyed it. It was good to just learn new ways to appreciate life. The part about the simple joys, that was good to learn, to look at what you do and what you enjoy. (Janice)

I liked the idea that if something is bothering you, like once it's done, just put it aside and not carry it over for the rest of the day. And sometimes when everything seems like its going really bad, like at the end of the day, think about all the good things that happened, so that the day is not like a complete waste. The simple joys were just like the little things that can make it better. (Kristin)

I really did enjoy the program, it was a lot of fun and it was good. I learned a lot of things which I don't think I would have ever come across

otherwise. For example that Umbalakiki thing, hearing it and seeing other people do it. It's like a novel type of thing. It's kind of actually cool and I also liked the part about the highlights because it's a really bad time of year and so being able to think about highlights and being able to really look back on the day and think even one thing that went well, that's really nice. (Veronica)

I liked the program and I also liked the highlight thing we talked about, it just makes you more aware of certain highlights you have or that other people don't have the chance to get, just to keep you happy. (Ray)

The relaxing was really good, also just learning to think of highlights, yeah highlights, remember the good things. That was really really cool. We don't do that enough, we always think of the negative, like after a game. Yeah remembering the highlights. It is good. (Steve)

Yeah the sessions were good, pretty constructive. I had a rugby game right after one of the sessions and I used some of the techniques [clearing the mind, deep breathing to relax and staying positive] right after. (Brian)

I enjoyed the program, listening to music and relaxing and the activities about positivity helps. The most important thing I learned I would say is thinking positively especially when you are playing sports, and you tend to get frustrated if you are losing badly. When things aren't going well, just think positively, it is just a

game. Yeah I tried that and it helps. (Peter)

Enjoyment-Discussion and Reflection

The elements of discussion and reflection that the students enjoyed most were voicing their concerns or struggles, learning from other students, becoming more aware of what was going on within themselves, and learning better ways to deal with or resolve problems.

Just being able to talk about stuff and realize what was going on, actually taking time to analyze your feelings and analyze emotions helped you deal with it. (Candice)

I really liked talking about your problems. It was almost like therapy in a way; it was really helpful. You wouldn't direct your frustration or anger out on a certain person or anything like that, but you would be able to talk about it and get it out in the open and that helped. It did not matter that you were around a bunch of people, and when we listened to relaxing music, that really helped you feel more comfortable (Jane)

The program was fun, just sitting down, first of all it was a little break, and talking about stuff that was going on and ways to fix it. (Kristin)

I enjoyed the discussions and everyone exchanging ideas, just interacting with other people and participating. (Lisa)

I liked the open discussion thing, you had to think about stuff, and reflect on it. (James)

Enjoyment-Focus

Focus was the fourth emergent theme under the element of enjoyment. Students mentioned that they enjoyed the program because it helped them learn to focus, refocus or improve their focus. Students specifically enjoyed learning to intentionally choose their focus, and enjoyed learning to “zone in” to the present moment.

Yeah I did. It was fun. It was good. It was great. We just talked a lot about things that we don't normally talk about. Specifically I enjoyed thinking back on how to deal with certain situations, like game situations in sport, for example for me when I am playing soccer and the other team scores a goal, and the whole mentality after that. Coming back and focusing on the game and not focusing on the fact that you are losing. We were actually talking about things that I could actually apply to my everyday life, while playing sports, so that was the best part of the program. (Jeremy)

I enjoyed the program. I liked when we were talking about what makes us focus better, zone in, like when you think about it there is a lot of stuff that I actually do unintentionally, but now I do it intentionally to make me focus. Like using music, or something or sometimes just silence, makes me focus in on something. (Ray)

I like how it the program got me to focus on certain things and how it allowed me to just focus on just one thing and forget about everything else. Like if stuff was going well in my day or something was good and I wanted to focus on that. (Jennifer)

I enjoyed it when we had to focus on one thing, as you get into it you would not think of anything else, you would just focus on that one thing. (Julie)

Application

Every student interviewed said they planned to apply some of the skills they learned in the future. Twenty-one of the 27 students said they were presently applying program skills and would continue to apply them in the future in these four areas:

- 1) focusing,
- 2) relaxation,
- 3) positive perspectives and
- 4) self-control.

Application-Focus

Students were applying PLS skills to improve their focus, to be more in the moment, to refocus and to clear the mind. The ‘tree it’ concept was used in a variety of ways to let go of distractions (like thoughts that were not helpful at that moment). Students said they used these skills inside and outside the intervention/school setting, for example, to relax, to clear their mind, to focus on homework, to focus on one thing and to get “in the zone”, for example, during sport.

I refocus by focusing on my simple joys. For instance, if I have a fight or something doesn't go well, I just focus on something I want to do, like improve my times in swimming. When I go to practice, I just focus hard on what I want to do and it helps me to forget about other things. When I come back to the situation I am more relaxed. I refocus, like I have a different view of the situation because I have been away from it. (Laura)

Laura commented on the application of the program skills to focus in sport:

I used the program skills to get focused before a swimming competition. The program taught us to focus, to look at something, and just focus on it, so I tried doing that one and it worked. I was just looking at the big board where they have the times and just focusing on the little red lights, for about 10 minutes and when I got up to the blocks I was really calm.

To refocus I just take a break, do something to get my mind off it (the stressor). I listen to music, go somewhere else, go for a walk- just get my mind off it. I use refocusing when I go to the gym. I go to the gym a lot, get a workout in, and if I cannot do a certain weight or something I won't let it get to me. I just keep pushing until I can achieve that weight. I set goals for myself, in a certain amount of time I want to be able to do a certain number of repetitions. I just think that to myself, and set my mind to just go for it. If I want to refocus, I just get everything off my mind and set a goal for myself. And it is ok if I don't meet it. If I can't do this now, it's ok. I can push for it later. (Ian)

The program emphasized the fact that most people have all this information or potential in the back of their mind, they know it, but they don't use it. But now that it has been talked about they can fine tune it. (Kevin)

Lisa said that she applied the skill of 'treeing it' to refocus when she was playing the piano. She explained that continuing to think about a mistake in the past, prevented her

from focusing on what she was currently trying to play. She explained it as follows.

At a piano recital, if you make a mistake you just want to go back and do it over and make it better, but you do not want to think about the mistake for the rest of the piece because then you can't focus on what you are playing. (Lisa)

Yeah sometimes when I am playing hockey or something and I make a mistake, for the next few shifts I am thinking about it. And so I just try and tap my stick on the boards or something like that and I try and forget it. (Anthony)

Well if I am playing anything, a sport with my friends or anything, and I miss something or make a mistake, or I accidentally passed the wrong guy the ball. I just try to fix it, ignore it and refocus on the game. (Dean)

Application-Relaxation

Specific to relaxation, students applied various skills to relax such as listening to relaxing music, breathing to clear their mind, taking a break, going for a walk, playing sports or reading a book. Several students said they used music to help calm themselves during their day.

We basically learned techniques to manage stress and she (the researcher) helped us appreciate simple joys and highlights in life and how to relax. When we were relaxing or listening to and relaxed, it was helpful, especially if it was a stressful day. The exercises helped me realize that it actually does work, so I do it sometimes. I swim a lot, so I do it after a meet or after a hard prac-

tice to relax. I just put music on and listen until I fall asleep. (Laura)

The focusing was good, we did the breathing and clearing everything out of your head. I use it when I am doing work, I put, music on. I start listening to it and let go of everything else distracting that is going on around me. (Candice)

I was using deep breathing and also listening to calming music, like the softer tone type of music. And then also I was thinking about nice days and that kind of stuff. (Brian)

When I am stressed and I have a lot of work, I just sit down for a second, relax or listen to music and I just clear my head. (Anthony)

One student said that it was helpful to go outside and do something physical when she was having trouble concentrating.

In one of our discussions, I heard someone say, when you feel really stressed go for a run or do something physical. I usually like to get everything done and then do what I want, but there comes a time when you are just too stressed to concentrate on things. I found when you go outside, like for 40 minutes or play soccer or basketball, then you are tired, then you can focus a bit more. (Lucie)

Yeah, yeah, yeah I have been using the relaxing and the visualizing because I have been in trials for the Eastern Ontario team. I have been doing the relaxing and visualizing, and I actually made the team, so it has been pretty good. So before the

game, I would take time and that relaxes me, and gets myself centered. I keep my eyes closed and then I visualize. I go through the different play combos, for example, we have about 40 running plays and we give numbers to each of them because they go to different holes in the line. So I visualize every single one, and then I visualize the tactic plays, just to be fully into it. When I go on the field I really get myself centered and then I peak. It is like a slow process. I am applying it perfectly. (Steve)

Application-Positive Perspective

Many students who applied the PLS activities, focused on thinking more positively, embracing simple joys, sharing highlights and thinking about positive memories to feel better.

I used the positive thinking, when playing basketball. Our basketball team didn't do too well this year and it helped me to think positively. Like having fun with your team member. Even if you are losing you can still learn and have fun. It helped. (Peter)

I have trouble relaxing sometimes before a presentation because I tend to get so nervous when I speak. Trying to do relax, think positively does help. It calms you down. I would just sit down and think to myself 'everything is going to be fine'. I just have to remember what I am supposed to say, and it is just a presentation, I mean it is important but it is not too important.

Andrea made a comment that she feels she is the 'boss' of herself when she says that a bad mark is not her.

I ask myself what are the things that are happy, then your day can be happy. Let's say you get a bad mark on a test, it (the bad mark) is not me, it is not the end of the world, you still have another chance to recover and feel good about the day. (Andrea)

Andrea (a dancer) explained that when life is more stressful she knows her simple joys are always present for her to enjoy.

I find simple joys every time I listen to music, any type of music where I can see movement. So it is kind of nice and the joy stays there, it is always there for me. I find that the simple joys like the highlights are continually bringing me into the moment. So I get joys constantly. My simple joys and highlights are ever present and sometimes when I do forget, like when I am experiencing stress, then I know myself well enough to go away from the problem and to go listen to music and to relax. I know my simple joys are everywhere.

When I was at the dinner table with my family, I mentioned simple joys to my Mom and Dad, and we just started talking about what really makes us happy. It was interesting to see what everyone came up with. My sister was like, "oh I like ice cream" or "I like summer time," and for me it was "I love rugby and I love being with my friends". It just puts you in a happier mood and makes you think in a positive way and it really helped. (Jane)

When I am feeling down I do stuff like think of highlights. Yeah when I need to (think of highlights I do, like

when I am having a bad day I think about something I did positive like a good play or something positive, and then I get back to that positive mentality.

My coach recognized that I had played for team Ontario and she said you can do this - be confident in yourself. So I just said that over and over to myself. (Candice)

I remember one time we talked about how we learn. You have to learn how to trust yourself if you are learning something new, like in rugby, when you learn something new, sometimes even if you don't feel comfortable or if you think it won't work, just go with the flow and try to trust that you have done everything to prepare for it. And it works.

Sometimes, you have to get your mind off things. Between school and summative exams you have to. You get home and you are overwhelmed with work. And then you have to get your mind off it. You know it is just not all about school, you have other stuff in life. (Ray)

Application-Self control

Students said they planned to apply PLS program skills to control negative emotions within themselves and/or in their interactions with others. The idea of choosing to improve self-control was mentioned with respect to controlling emotions with friends and family and being more able to focus on listening to and understanding others.

I find with friends, of course girls get very frustrated with each other, get very catty and annoying. It is almost like a game with girls. It's like if you

play the game right then it is good, but if you don't know how to play the game, it is not good. And so you have to be very careful not to get stressed out and worked up about little things. Being a girl if you get in a fight with a friend, you have to remember, don't let it get to you. Even though you are extremely frustrated with that friend right now the more you get frustrated, the more she is going to get frustrated, so you have to calm down and just remember that it will work itself out, so you can really apply those (PLS skills) to friends as well. (Jane)

If you get mad, basically, just control your emotions. We talked about that a lot; how to release your anger and not get mad at other people who, you shouldn't be mad at. There is no reason to be mad at them. I learned how to release that anger, how to come home and calm yourself down, like with your family or if you get mad at your brother or sister how to stop that from escalating. For example, I have a brother that I get in fights with all the time. Not like real fights, just we argue all the time, sometimes even when I know I am wrong, even though I know I have lost the argument I will argue anyway. So I just have to learn to accept that I am wrong or at least try to not make it escalate into a huge argument, because it is not worth it. (Mark)

I think of other people more now, I try to understand others more. (Jacob)

Future Application

The areas most often mentioned for future application by the 27 students in this study

included focusing on the moment-staying connected to whatever they are doing, breathing, shifting focus through 'treeing it', relaxing with music, visualization, and simple joys. The vast majority of the students planned to use focusing skills such as "tree it" (Umbalakiki) to let go of distractions in the future. Students said they would apply focusing skills in:

- 1) School – to help themselves and others with school, because they could learn more,
- 2) Sport – to apply focusing skills to perform better e.g. focusing on the ball or being in the present moment),
- 3) Tests – to prepare for a test and perform well in the test,
- 4) People - to connect more fully and try to really take in what someone is telling them.

Students' comments on their future application of program skills resulted in four emergent themes that included:

- 1) focus,
- 2) positive perspective,
- 3) relaxation, and
- 4) self-control.

Future Application-Focus

Students planned to use focus or refocusing to be more in the moment, to be more in the zone, to refocus during distractions, and to clear their mind.

The program skill I used in everyday life was being able to focus myself, and not just freaking out, being distressed and frustrated. Keep my mind on what I need to do and not getting side tracked, just don't let your mind wander. If you are focused into whatever you are doing, stay into it. It is hard to do anything if you are

thinking about so many different things at once. If you are doing one certain task, don't start thinking about "what do I have to do after", keep your mind where you are, stay mentally with it.

I will definitely use the leave it behind (tree it concept). If you screw up, leave it behind. Especially in sport, if I missed a basket in basketball, before it used to really get to me. If I was playing sport, and I would be like "oh why did I do this, it could have been so close". Now I will just leave it behind, keep playing and try it again. Try to fix it. There is no use in worrying about it. Just get my head back into the game and keep playing. (Ian)

I would use, the 'pole it' (or tree it). I think that forgetting about stuff that has happened or the mistakes you have made is probably the most useful skill. Before when I would play sports my mind wouldn't be focused 'right now on the game'. Instead my mind would be other places. (Anthony)

We have exams coming up in a couple of weeks, so I will use the skills for sure. Sit down, focus on the studying, organize things, and just calm down and have some background music playing so you can focus on what you are doing. That would be a good way to study for exams. (Jeremy)

Focusing on what you are about to do, like school, focusing on work, when you need to focus, just before exams and stuff. I mean just eliminate the other things from my mind,

so if I need to think about something I am totally thinking about that. (Derek).

Future Application-Relaxation

Students mentioned using the relaxation skills in the future by scheduling breaks into the day, using music or breathing to relax and calm down, dealing with stress as it arises (rather than letting it linger on), and not being in such a hurry. The following students' comments reflect plans to use the program skills to relax.

I am going to carry on using the program skills in university football, and also just university is going to be a tough time. You need time to relax and you need to set yourself a schedule, so I am going to put aside a time, to go over these program skills because they are essential. You need them. Or else you will just get stressed and ahhhh, you know get stressed and you won't be able to continue. The skills that we learned that I plan to use in the future include finding some time in the day to take care of yourself, before you go to bed-really relax and then you will fall asleep better. It helps out the next day you feel refreshed and you feel good. (Steve)

I definitely think I will use the program skills, because I know that as I go through high school and as I go through university, things are going to get more stressful. But I am going to have to stay active and I know things like listening to music to relax, and taking time to relax really do calm me down and help me relax. So I am definitely going to use this (PLS program) in the future because

it is going to get more stressful as life goes on. (Andrea)

I loved it when we talked about stress, I really liked that. I get stressed out so easily, so when we talk about it, it really helps so much. Yeah so I can apply a lot [of the PLS skills I learned here] in real life situations. Everybody gets stressed out. It is just how you deal with it so that really helped. (Jane)

Future Application- Positive Perspectives

Students shared how they planned to use concepts such as positive thinking, finding simple joys and looking for highlights in the future.

I will definitely use the (relaxation and positive thinking). Like I had never done anything on relaxation or, I have never heard of positive thinking so, so I will use that stuff in the future and I think that will help. (Peter)

I will use all the relaxing and focusing and trying to focus on simple joys and highlights. (Laura)

You should not think about [...] “oh this is going to be so bad”, like, you think you are going to fail. If you think positively and visualize yourself positively and say, “ok I have studied, I know what do and I can see myself doing well and passing” that helps. Because if you have a negative attitude then obviously you are not going to do very well, even if you know a lot. If you think, “I am going to fail”, you are not necessary going to fail, but you are not going to do as well as you should. If you just visualize things going well and

really believe that they are going to work and you really believe, the confidence is like a force that shields you. (Kristin)

Well basically, positive thinking I think I will use, yeah be positive about things and think positive and if you get mad just calm yourself down. Yeah I think the positive thinking will help me. (Mark)

Future Application-Self-control

Self control or choosing emotions was another skill students planned to apply in the future. Some students mentioned planning to control emotions in situations with friends, family and in daily life transitions.

I think I will actually use a lot of them (program skills), because I think it is more about self-control. And I think self-control is a really important part of life, so I think I will use a lot of relationship kind of things. I think it will help me to have better relationships with people. (Jacob)

The program skills are more of a relationship with yourself than anything else. I think if you were in an argument with someone the skills would help because you can evaluate your anger better and see if you are really mad at the person or what you are really mad at. Instead of just being angry you can try and work it out. The program gave me a better chance to get to know myself. In all the little sheets (logbook) we wrote about ourselves and how we react to pressure. I never really thought of that (how to deal with pressure) before. I learned about myself. (Veronica)

Effectiveness

Effectiveness was determined by whether or not students said the program skills helped them in their daily lives. Applying the PLS program skills was felt to be effective in some area of lives for 25 of the 27 of the students. Four emergent themes of effectiveness include: a) Focus, b) relaxation, c) self-control, and d) positive perspectives.

Enhanced-Focus

The program effectively enhanced focus for most students. They commented on experiencing improved focus for: 1) Focusing on the present moment or being in the zone, 2) refocusing, and 3) clearing the mind. Some specific examples of enhanced focus follow:

Everyday (during PLS sessions), we talked about how to really focus on something. When things get a bit hectic, if you have something to do, concentrate on it. I felt that was a brilliant idea. Before you work, play a song that clears your mind, and go to work and be in the zone in a way, be your work, just rip through it that is actually the best type of work you can do. In sports it is a bit easier because it is fun doing an activity. Yesterday I had a paper due. I started the essay. I ripped through it and finished it in time, so actually that focusing on one thing helped because when you concentrate on something you just do it the right way. (Kevin)

To get focused before an event, (the researcher) taught us to focus, to look at something for a while and just focus on it. So I tried doing that one and it worked. (Laura).

Actually I have done some of the focusing before, but I feel I have ex-

panded it through the program. (Derek)

I am really focused intentionally and now after the program it is even better. There can always be improvements. I learned how to focus even more. (Steve)

We learned about concentration and relaxing and how to keep ourselves mentally focused doing sport or other things. That helped me learn some things about concentration; to take your mind off something if you are too confused about it. I thought it was helpful. (Ian)

I learned about staying focused, making sure you give it your 100 %, give it your full everything, you've got to focus on what you are doing to do your best at it. (Jeremy)

Some students found the program skills particularly effective to let go of negative thoughts more easily, to not carry negative experiences into other experiences.

Sometimes people do get mad for the dumbest things. You have to tree some issues, get over it and move on. You don't want to be spending your whole day frustrated about something, when in the end it is just something that does not matter in the long run. I found that was useful. (Lucie)

When we heard the story (about Umbalakiki), about those kids playing a game, where they were thinking about all the bad things, and then when the game was over they just left it (the negatives) there and they didn't carry it over. It seems kinda

stupid at first, but when you try and apply it in real life, it actually does something, and it's not as stupid as it sounds. (Kristin)

The whole ignoring your mistakes thing was probably the most important part (of the program) that I would apply. Focus on the more positive side of that (what you are doing), so you don't make it (the mistake) again. (Dean)

At times I found it helpful, when you are playing sports, and you screw up, not to keep thinking about it. Move on and leave it behind. Just stay in the game and stay focused. (Ian)

When I am losing like in a sport I try to do tree it. When I am thinking of the mistake too much, I just let it go and start again, focus on the next play. (Liam).

Effectiveness-Relaxation

Most of the students commented that the relaxation skills were effective in their daily lives. The students learned the importance of relaxation and in particular learned to:

- 1) take time to relax and reflect on the good and the lessons of the day,
- 2) take relaxation breaks during school work to refresh the mind,
- 3) take time out to relax, and
- 4) make time to relax throughout the day.

If anybody I know wanted a way to relax and calm down, this (PLS program) would definitely help them. It is good, to be able to sit down and be calm, take your time and calm down. And reflect on what you have done,

good things, bad things. Even if you are in a bad mood, taking a moment can cheer you up and the bad mood can be gone. (Jeremy)

I find when you study sometimes, you push yourself, you keep pushing yourself, you can't find the answer and you get frustrated. I find when you have that break period and take time for yourself, you go back and you just feel better. You refresh your mind. You are not just ramming all these things into it. I just find that is a good technique. (Lucie)

I found that this program brought me back to the acknowledgement of having to understand what I am doing and take time to just relax. Yeah and it really worked for me. (Andrea)

I have had a huge problem with stress, I just go go go go go and I don't stop and I don't take my time. So when we would do the program activities for stress or anything like that ,it definitely made me think about slowing down and just relaxing especially when you get into a situation that you need to calm down. (Jane)

What I got (from the program) was that I need to relax more. I was always too stressed, so stressed about organizing my day. I had sports after school, and a lot of homework. I just figured out how to relax for a few minutes in between everything that I did, and it just worked out. I learned to relax more. When I have lots of homework and I wasn't concentrating I would just sit down for a few minutes and listen to music, close my

eyes. Yeah, that is actually what I got out of it. (Scott)

Effectiveness-Self-control

Students said they learned to be more effective with self-control and as a result were less likely to overreact to situations. Hearing classmates discuss how they were dealing with real life challenges helped students to refine their own perspective. Most of the students mentioned how the PLS program positively influenced their self-control.

Learning how to stay relaxed and stay focused and not over react, can work with anything. Like at work or school or with your friends and your family, just not over reacting. Just take a second and think about things and how to stay calm. If I was mad at something that happened in the class, I just remember to leave it in the class, to not get mad at my friends because I am already in a bad mood. Learn that things should not carry over, even if you are having a really bad day. Like I was doing really bad on a test, but I didn't let it ruin my entire day. Good things still happen, the test is not going to change my whole life. I am not going to fail everything just because of that one thing, so it's good just relaxing remembering that not everything is terrible even when it seems like it is. (Kristin)

For sure the program was helpful with relationships, because usually when you are in a fight with somebody, like my Dad, you get angry really quickly, but it is better if you just let it go for a couple days, and calm down before you start making any rash decisions or say anything you will regret. If you calm down first and think about what you are going to say and

then actually talk to the person about it later, it is a lot better than getting mad right away and then regretting what you did. (Jeremy)

I have actually been noticing a difference, I have been a lot calmer with my friends and people that I know. And so it is easier to deal with the problems that come up with friends and stuff like that. And when I do have problems with my friends when I am stressed, more recently I have been noticing that I am much more calm and relaxed. Especially as a teenager, yeah teenage drama, it definitely helps. I can help my friends and my friends can help me because I am not bringing stress from other situations into situations with my friends because. I just let stuff go better, because I am more relaxed and not so stressed. (Andrea)

Effectiveness-Positive perspective

Some students commented on how they found the program skills effective in helping them create a more positive perspective by:

- 1) focusing on what they can do or control,
- 2) paying attention to simple joys and highlights which make them feel better and
- 3) enjoying life more by focusing on the good things:

The play had stopped because we had a penalty so we were getting set for that and I was just thinking to myself what I had done right and that worked for me. It was like a restart, it was better than a restart. I was not looking at all the negative things that had happened. That is when it kind of clicked in for me, the whole fact that you should constantly try to stay positive and focus. (Brian)

We just recently had our drama play, and I was really nervous. We were the first group to go, but we weren't really ready. We had our script done, but physically and mentally we just weren't there. So I felt we wouldn't do a very good job, but after talking to people we kind of realized - just be positive. It is a drama summative. But it is not the end of the world. And I think that putting the play in perspective helped a lot because the day of (the presentation), you are frantic because you are like "oh I want to get through this." What I learned in the PLS program, you have to think positively about things. You are either going to do it or you won't. Just let go and get ready. When you are in the moment, you just forget everything else. You just have to be positive, because if you are positive you are ready. Even when you are not ready you will do a whole lot better [being positive] than when you are all tense and you are like "Oh I am going to fail". (Lucie)

I did not really have a way to find more joy in my life. I did not know how to do it. I did not really think about simple joys before. I did not even really know about simple joys. (Laura)

The different highlights help you. You look back on the highlights that you have, and that could happen in the future. It makes you look forward to up coming things. You are not just watching life go past you. You are looking forward to them, like yeah, "I am doing this with my cousin today, we have a family event today, or a show is on today or we have a team event today" so you look for-

ward to it. It makes life more interesting. You are not just watching everything go by. (Ray)

Right now I am playing rugby with the school and sometimes when you are out on the field you get so worked up, you are like "oh you gotta go, we gotta go". But really when you think about it, it is a slow moving sport. Any kind of sport is a slow moving sport as long as you just take your time. So that really helped. Also with tests, calm down, just read what is in front of you, take a deep breath and try to relax. I think it just sort of cued in my head when I walked in to the classroom for a test. I just realized "ok I need to calm down and I need to focus" and it actually did get me focused. It definitely helped me focus. (Jane)

Student Program Delivery Suggestions

The students shared some key suggestions for improving the delivery and effectiveness of the program:

- 1) more active activities,
- 2) real life examples,
- 3) consistent location and
- 4) longer and more consecutive sessions. Some of their specific comments are presented below.

More active-activities

Do more active things, like obviously you need to talk, but you have to actually do these things to understand them. (Derek)

Maybe a little more movement. (Jennifer)

I personally learned a lot more from doing the activities than the discussions, yeah just lying on the ground relaxing worked the best for me. It just felt good, it was great. (Scott)

I definitely learned a lot from the program. If anything (to improve) maybe more hands on things, maybe stretches or something, or a video. (Ray)

Real life examples

Maybe try to provide more examples that we could actually use. (Anthony)

I think it would be better if the program could be related to real life even more. I think there could be more examples that would make students think it could actually work. (Jacob)

When the researcher was talking about the stories, she was giving examples of where it has worked for other people. If you know it actually works, you are more inclined to do something, to actually pay attention and try it and, so that was good. (Kristin)

Location

Most students felt that a time and location that is consistent would work best and perhaps changing the location for certain events – like going to gym or outside for certain activities where the focusing skills can be applied in different contexts.

Longer-consecutive session

Continuity in the timing of delivering the program is a definite advantage for learning, remembering, and applying program activities. Students also felt that the sessions

should be longer so there would be more time to do the activity and discuss it. More time would also allow for repetition of audio CD activities and other key components of the program.

If we would have had more time with it [the PLS program] I think it would have helped even more. (Kevin)

Discussion

Overall, the teenage students who participated in the PLS program enjoyed the program, applied the program skills, found the program skills to be effective, and planned to apply the program skills in the future. This supports the findings of earlier research by Cox and Orlick (1996), Gilbert and Orlick, (2002), and Taylor and Orlick (2004) with children 4-12 years of age.

When teaching positive living skills, Orlick (2001) suggests using simple, concrete strategies, an individualized approach, positive role models, multiple approaches, creating a respectful environment that reinforces positive interaction and positive learning, and encouraging or challenging participants to live what they are learning by applying the skills in their daily lives. This study strongly reinforces the importance of acting on these suggestions. Equally important for teenagers is ensuring that students understand why a skill is important and how it can help them through their personal challenges and daily lives.

Excellent contexts for future delivery of PLS programs with teenagers include a classroom or small group setting, a sport, performing arts, physical activity or outdoor setting. Teachers/leaders/coaches should aim to provide a good mix of activity, focusing practice and relaxation.

Creating a positive environment for this program and presenting the activities at regular times will help to reinforce the positive concepts being taught (Orlick, 2002). Ideally sessions should take place several times per week over a period of at least 12 consecutive weeks (Taylor & Orlick, 2002).

The students in this study enjoyed learning to focus more fully, to live with a more positive perspective, to relax better, the personal reflection stimulated by the program, and the group discussions which helped students to learn from one another and refine their own ways of dealing with stressful situations. Once the students had learned the basic PLS skills, the rock climbing session gave them an opportunity to try out the program skills in a physically and mentally challenging medium.

In future programs it is recommended that teenagers be exposed to all the PLS audio CD activities for teens and discuss the potential application for each skill. Students become more engaged in the audio CD activities when they listen to them more. (Orlick, 2002; Taylor & Orlick, 2004). Challenge teenagers to see if they can focus fully on listening to each CD activity so they capture everything they can from each.

The opportunity to listen, talk and share was appreciated by these students. The program worked best when the information portion of the session was short and precise, and adequate time was left for the students to try out the skills and discuss their ideas for application. Finding active ways to practice and apply PLS skills such as relaxing, focusing, refocusing and positive thinking should be a priority. The single most important goal is for teens to apply those skills to current challenges in their lives.

As emphasized by Koudys and Orlick (2002) and Taylor and Orlick (2004) it is important to be flexible and make the best of whatever situation you are faced with. Remember what is most important and find a way to pass on the most essential messages in a relevant and meaningful way to this individual or group. When students are not fully engaged in a session or are not holding an 'intent to learn', the potential benefit of the experience will be reduced (Davies & Osguthorpe, 2003; Orlick, 2001). Encouraging students to consistently reflect on what they are learning to act on what they are learning. The goal is always to keep the students engaged in meaningful ways and give them good reasons to continue to learn and act (Orlick, 2001).

One of the most hopeful findings in this study was that all the students interviewed stated that they were applying the program skills presently and/or planned to apply program skills in the future. For most of the students, the program stimulated personal reflection on what is important in their lives, and strengthened their will to take a more decisive role in how they focus, how they feel, and how they live their daily lives.

The students voiced the spirit of the PLS program by stating that it is about taking time for your life and seeing that simple joys are all around us. We all have the choice to connect or disconnect with these moments of joy. Learning positive ways to see ourselves and deal with the world around us can be cultivated early in life and nurtured throughout life. It is hoped that this study has contributed, in some small way, to moving in this direction.

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Positive youth development (PYD) programs are designed to optimize youth developmental progress. PYD differs from other approaches to youth in that it rejects an emphasis on trying to correct what is considered wrong with children's behavior or development. Instead, youth development professionals live by the motto originally coined by Karen Pittman, "problem free is not fully prepared" as they work to grow youth into productive members of society. Programs and practitioners seek to empathize with