Beyond Me-ism: Teamwork, team building and cooperation in Flexible Learning Environments

Introduction

Teachers who work in alternative education environments in Australia are often motivated by a desire to make a difference and to change the educational trajectory and work opportunities for young people who have been disenfranchised in mainstream schooling. A growing body of research on Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) is furthering our understanding of young people's experiences and the conditions and processes of re-engagement (Lewthwaite et al., 2017; MacDonald, Bottrell & Johnson, 2018; McGregor & Mills, 2012; McGinty, Bursey & Babacan, 2018; Te Riele, Plows & Bottrell, 2016). Much of this research focuses on the individual experiences of young people and the holistic approach in FLPs. Relationships, between staff and with young people, are considered vital in this process (Te Riele, 2014). However, there has been less exploration of young people's understandings of the role of staff and the significance of their relationships with staff to their wellbeing and re-engagement in learning (MacDonald, Bottrell & Johnson, 2018). Moreover, as Vadeboncoeur and Vellos (2016) argue, in the literature demonstrating the significance of student-teacher relationships in both mainstream and alternative learning environments, there has been little investigation of the qualities of the relationship between students and teachers in helping young people to overcome negative experiences of education and re-engage in their learning. This chapter aims to contribute to our understanding of these relationships, from both staff and student perspectives.

The chapter builds on our previous analysis of findings from a project designed to establish a common understanding of staff and student wellbeing across Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres (Flexis) located in six Australian states and territories. A key finding of the project was that young people define their wellbeing mainly in terms of learning and staff supporting their learning (MacDonald, Bottrell & Johnson, 2018). In this project, staff reported that relationships with students were the most important aspect of wellbeing for them but were less sure about how students perceive the value of these relationships to their learning. Staff reported a high level of individual focus amongst students where young people think that learning is all about them and their successful re-engagement in education is determined by their own motivation and actions. In the following analysis, young people's responses provide valuable insights into how they perceive relationships with staff, and other students, at Flexis and the role they play in their re-engagement with education. Following a brief overview of FLPs and a discussion of staff-student relationships in the context of young people's re-engagement with education, we introduce the Wellbeing Project. Findings from this project show that young people recognise the significance of relationships with staff and acknowledge the joint or team project that surrounds their re-engagement with education. The team project, in this context, is described as the combination of student and Flexi staff, working together to ensure young people achieve their learning plans and prepare themselves for their post-school lives.

Literature Review

Flexible Learning Programs

Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) in Australia are designed to re-engage young people who, for various reasons, are at risk of not completing secondary education, have been excluded from or are early leavers of 'mainstream' schools. Te Riele's (2014) comprehensive Australian study identified a diverse range of flexible provision nationally, with over 900 programs serving 70,000+ students. Thirty-eight percent of FLPs are stand-alone learning environments or separate campuses connected with a school; the remainder are evenly located in-school (31.2%) and in-TAFE or community colleges (30.8%). Flexibility is a condition of creating inclusive and meaningful education for young people who come into FLP's educationally disenfranchised and socioeconomically marginalised (Te Riele, 2014; McGregor et al., 2015).

There is a general consensus in Australia that the success of flexible learning environments and programs lies in the holistic approach to educating the whole person and the 'creation of a safe and supportive learning environment that focuses on young people's social, emotional and physical, as well as intellectual needs' (Lewthwaite et al., 2017, 390). Common features of FLPs include student-centred practices, personalised curricula, student choices and active participation, and engagement with parents, local organisations and social projects (Te Riele, 2014). They are *flexible* learning environments in their commitment to responding holistically to the needs and interests of their students, with individualised learning plans and one-to-one support for individual needs related to students' status or circumstances. For example, some programs work with specific student groups such as young parents or homeless youth; and all FLPs provide practical support to students' wellbeing, with assistance in navigating services (eg., health, mental health, accommodation, financial, legal) provided by FLP staff or community agency partners.

Many young people describe their positive learning experience in FLPs as being very different from previous mainstream schooling that did not work for them (McGinty, Bursey & Babacan, 2018; Mills, & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014). For these young people, 'interest, learning and belonging form a powerful trifecta' (Te Riele, Plows & Bottrell, 2016, 48) that disrupts what students have felt to be irrelevant or inaccessible curriculum, lack of care about them as individuals and a sense of repeated failure (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The small, responsive flexible environment enables young people to see themselves as capable, to feel confident, achieve valued credentials and access to further study or employment (Te Riele, 2014).

Staff-student relationships in the context of re-engagement

In traditional teaching environments, the unequal relationship between students and teachers often results in a 'disparity of power' (McGregor et al. 2017, 53) that many young people re-engaged in FLPS depict as authoritarian. The approaches of teachers in mainstream schools have left them feeling disrespected or misunderstood and it is not uncommon for young people to report being treated differently from other students or viewed by teachers 'as lesser' or 'not as capable' as their peers (Lewthwaite et al. 2017, 395). While many of these young people acknowledge that their own behaviours may have contributed to the teacher's response, the cumulative effect of negative teacher-student relations has contributed to their disengagement from mainstream schools (McGregor et al. 2017).

Teaching in alternative learning environments challenges the 'conventional teacher-student relations' with a focus of 'learning on the student and agreed aims rather than on subjects' (Ball 2016, 195-96). While students in mainstream schools develop their own individual learning plans, aims are largely related to subject outcomes rather than student's holistic development. Research in flexible learning environments argues that teaching practices have a common purpose of 'supporting students … to gain positive experiences of learning and valuable educational credentials' (Te Riele, Plows & Bottrell 2016, 45). In recent research with young people in FLPs there is evidence that young people recognise the bidirectional nature of interest in their learning that is shared with staff (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). This purpose orients practice as a team project, drawn from cooperative learning methods, where students work together in groups, undertaking projects that enhance their learning, building on their capacity to work together with their peers (Slavin, 1980). Members of the group take responsibility for each other's learning as well as their own. In this study, we include teachers in the team project in acknowledgment of the 'central quality of the relationships between students and teachers' in young people's re-engagement with education (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016, 308). Young people have described this as a 'we-ness' that they more commonly associate with the concept of family rather than education (Lewthwaite et al. 2017, 398). While many of these young people experience complex family circumstances, aligning their new learning experience with the concept of family acknowledges the significance of relationships in this space.

Vadeboncoeur & Vellos (2016, 320) argue that the key to re-engagement for young people lies in accepting 'what teachers have to offer'. In doing so, they argue, young people become open to new possibilities in their learning and future opportunities. The impact of past negative educational experiences for young people in FLPs is not surprising but the capacity to imagine that a 'teacher can be trusted' and can empathise with their 'previous educational experiences' may be the key for young people's re-engagement with learning. To enable the Wellbeing Project to make a contribution to this emerging scholarship we offer the following analysis of our research with staff and young people in Flexis. We introduce our analysis of the significance of relationships for staff and young people from our research separately and consider how, if at all, these align as a team project around these young people.

Method: The Wellbeing Project

The research findings discussed in this chapter are drawn from a recent study, The Wellbeing Project, investigating staff and student wellbeing in Flexis. Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth+ operates 19 Flexis across Australia, based in all states and the North Territory. Flexis are small, special assistance secondary schools that work with students who have become disenfranchised from mainstream education settings. Flexis place significant emphasis on wellbeing, which has inextricable links to student engagement and quality learning outcomes. The aim of The Wellbeing Project was to investigate how staff and student wellbeing is understood in Flexis, how Flexi practices impact on staff and student wellbeing, and importantly, how these practices can be strengthened.

The project adopted a participatory action research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008) to investigate staff and student experiences of wellbeing. A parallel design allowed staff and students' responses to be analysed independently and comparatively. Staff and students at eight Flexis in Adelaide, Alice Springs, Geelong, Geraldton, Hobart, Melbourne, St Marys and Wollongong were initially invited to complete an anonymous survey that was informed by an

ACU and Erebus International scoping study (2008). Two hundred and ninety three young people (one third of enrolments) responded to the student survey, and one hundred and one teachers, youth and social workers, school support and members of the leadership team (half of the staff group), responded to the staff survey. Survey participants were asked a series of rating and ranking questions on a Likert scale to test the relative importance of aspects of wellbeing. Open-ended questions enabled staff and students to define professional and student wellbeing respectively. Following analysis of the survey responses, participants were invited to participate in a staff or student focus group undertaken in their own Flexi environment. A total of 32 staff across five of the Flexi sites participated in focus groups. 53 young people, aged between 14 and 20 years across all 8 sites, participated in student focus groups.

Staff perspectives

Our research revealed that staff members in Flexis had a clear appreciation of the joint project they enter into with their students. We have deliberately chosen the word 'staff' to describe the adults who work in Flexis. While there are obviously teachers working with the young people, the youth worker in each class is equally important, as are the support and leadership staff in Flexis. While the staff often refer to the 'team', the young people do not distinguish between the different professionals and typically refer to 'workers' or 'staff'. It is this joint approach to re-engaging disenfranchised young people that has motivated us to identify the team project that surrounds their re-engagement with education. The team project is primarily relational, has a basis in staff teamwork, but is centred on young people.

Survey findings

Figure 1. Findings, staff survey, responses to question: At this Flexi, professional wellbeing means …(101 respondents)

Insert Figure 1 here.

In this project staff reported that professional wellbeing for them meant having good relationships with young people. One respondent described professional wellbeing as being able to, 'care and looking after the students in all aspects related to their life in and out of school.' Another respondent described professional wellbeing as 'teaching the young people about…things that will help them not only throughout their youth but also their lives.' (North Melbourne survey). Staff also recognised the importance of bringing their own identity and values to their work. Staff emphasised teamwork and the challenge of making time for 'team problem-solving' and 'team development' as a significant factor in professional wellbeing. Staff survey responses demonstrated that 'to work well and [be] healthy as individuals, we must work well and be healthy as a team'.

Focus group findings

The focus groups enabled a deeper exploration of wellbeing in Flexis and it was evident that for staff the quality of their relationship with students was a key motivator for their engagement with the young people. One participant explained:

> If you don't have a relationship with the kids they're probably not going to do much for you, in terms of work output, or respect, or anything like that (Adelaide focus group).

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Staff reported that the quality of relationships at Flexi could directly impact a young person's classroom engagement. A staff member reported that 'they [students] can't function in the classroom with a new person in there' (Adelaide focus group). Staff expressed the hope that students would engage in the development of relationships, but this was not always the case:

> I think we've got to both meet each other halfway, and sometimes that's hard because someone's carrying a bit more than someone else (Alice Springs focus group).

Staff members were uncertain about how young people perceived the team project that supports them at Flexis. Some staff reported that students had little awareness or regard for the needs of their peers or the competing demands staff members face:

> I think there's a thing, I'm just inventing it, called me-ism, because [for the young people] it's 'all about me' and [they] don't understand that it's not 'about me' all the time. [At Flexi] it's about we [staff and student] and our idea of teamwork and team building and cooperation... (Geraldton staff focus group)

Staff attributed students' lack of awareness of others in the Flexi environment to a number of factors, including age, the extent of their own learning needs, or poor school attendance. Other staff members disagreed, believing that students used both verbal and non-verbal, and sometime conflictual, cues to indicate that others were impacting their learning:

> Young people can see and do show us that they can see when someone's taking away from their learning or from their time. They might show us in explicit ways by yelling at the young person or more subtle ways by kind of disengaging from the task (Geraldton focus group).

There was broad agreement that such disruptions impacted relationships. This everyday frustration was described by staff: "It's tricky, there are some very high needs young people and you're trying to operate as a group". Managing 'all needs' is complex work, "a struggle" and "a responsibility" and requires staff mutual support, "patience", "flexibility", accepting "it's the nature of the game, [working] with a mix of traumatised young people, all in the same space at the same time" and maintaining the "sense of contribution to social justice"' (Geraldton focus group).

Student Perspectives

Focus group and survey findings

There was a significant focus on 'me-ism' in the young people's responses as they reflected on the wellbeing practices in their Flexi environment. In this context, me-ism can be described as the juncture of meritocracy and agency for these young people as they acknowledge their own motivation and actions in successful re-engagement with education, alongside the freedom to make their own choices. The young people identified their own effort in creating a space of potential and new possibilities for themselves. The young people reported that wellbeing in the Flexi environment meant being able to be, that they could:

> Do things here than I can't do at [previous school], that's my wellbeing, I feel more free here and I get a say in things (Alice Springs focus group).

The young people valued the 'freedom to learn my way' and reported that 'the freedom that I have at this school' enabled them the opportunity to be able 'to express myself', 'not caring what anyone thinks of me' as important (student focus groups). While the young people acknowledged the importance of close friends they were not always tolerant of their peers, suggesting that:

> They keep talking whenever like I'm trying to learn they keep talking and like it is really disruptive and I ask if I can go to another room and like them to write down on a paper or something but they won't do that (St Marys focus group).

> Despite their disengagement with mainstream education and suggestions that flexible learning offers an unconventional education, learning was very important to these young people. They identified the importance of their own 'personal learning plan' and talked about having opportunities to engage in 'educating their mind'. The desire to pass 'my classes and getting good grades' was evident and they could now perceive an opportunity to finish school and get 'the life that you want' (student focus groups).

Insert Figure 2 here

There was evidence, however, that young people recognised the role of Flexi staff in their re-engagement with education. Having staff who respect you was the most important wellbeing support Flexis provided for these young people. They valued the team approach of a teacher and youth worker supporting them and having extra support (from staff) when they started at Flexi. The young people acknowledged the different role that staff at Flexis played compared to their previous educational experiences:

> Actually, like I suppose, sit down and have a chat with you like they don't, they're more acquaintances than they are teachers (Geelong focus group).

Discussion

Teamwork and cooperation versus me-ism

We conducted an independent thematic analysis of the staff and young people's responses in surveys and focus groups, identifying key aspects of wellbeing for each group. The independent analysis enabled a unique comparison of findings for each group. Relationships emerged as a key theme of wellbeing at Flexi for both staff and young people. In this section we consider the alignment between the two perspectives and, in doing so we highlight key qualities of student-staff relationships.

> There is evidence of alignment of perspectives on the importance of relationships, with young people identifying staff support as an important aspect of wellbeing, particularly to their learning (MacDonald, Bottrell & Johnson, 2018; Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Staff reported that relationships with the young people were the most important aspect of wellbeing in their Flexi, even more important than their relationship with each other. Qualities of relationships valued by both staff and students included respect and cooperation (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). The concept of being respected and valued entails a relationship with another and, in contrast to their previous educational experiences (Lewthwaite et al., 2017), many young people reported that getting along with staff was the most significant aspect of wellbeing at their Flexi. The young people acknowledged that Flexi staff would go above and beyond for them, often supporting them to develop everyday life skills or assisting with complex social and

family issues (Te Riele, 2014). The significance of having staff who recognised their social, emotional and physical needs alongside their learning (Lewthwaite et al., 2017; Te Riele, 2014) was not lost on these young people, who reported this as an important aspect of wellbeing at their Flexi.

Respect is an important quality of Flexi relationships. Young people identified feeling respected as the most important Flexi support to their wellbeing, linking this directly to their capacity to learn (Te Riele, 2014). Flexi staff expressed a strong desire to make a difference in the lives of the young people but reported that without a high level of respect they would find it difficult to engage the young people and support them to produce the level of work output required. Considerable effort was required to achieve a high level of respect with the young people. One respondent suggested that this could take up to six months, perhaps reflecting the interrelationship of respect and trust, young people's past fraught relationships with teachers (McGregor & Mills, 2012) and the time required to accept what staff have to offer in the Flexi context (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016).

However, staff also expressed a concern that young people did not appreciate the significance of a commitment to developing relationships and hoped they would 'meet them halfway'. Getting the wellbeing and educational balance right for these you people was important for staff (Ball, 2016). Staff valued and relied on the support of their team but were uncertain about whether young people had an appreciation of the joint project of Flexi education. They were concerned about the apparent 'me-ism' and the impact of 'difficult' students who demonstrated unsafe or disrespectful behaviours, with staff or other students, in the classroom. Staff also raised concerns that many young people required extensive one on one attention and this impacted on their effectiveness with the learning experiences of the whole class.

Young people reported a strong sense of 'me-ism' in both our survey and focus groups, yet their perspective suggests there are nuances that align with the commitment of staff. Young people demonstrated a combination of meritocracy in their own actions and behaviours in re-engagement with learning and a level of agency as they reported that they could look after themselves at Flexi and accept responsibility for their learning. The acknowledgement of freedom was evident in young people's appreciation of the ability to learn their own way and express themselves without having to care what others, staff or students, thought about them (Tw Riele, Plows & Bottrell, 2016). To some extent, this aligns with staff authenticity, and their freedom to be themselves. These aspects of 'me-ism' as self-focus articulate the young people's commitment to learning in the Flexi context, in contrast to their previous school experience. Their focus on learning and association of wellbeing with learning is indicative of their shifting frame of reference for understanding themselves as capable learners (MacDonald, Bottrell & Johnson, 2018).

For many young people, the presence of their peers was important although they reported that their learning was largely an individual experience, with other young people often distracting rather than contributing to their experience (McGregor et al., 2017). Ironically, their intolerance of peer disruption appears to be a corollary that aligns with staff concerns for student learning and work output, even while that intolerance may be expressed in ways that add to disruption and staff's competing demands in effective work with the whole class.

Conclusion

Underpinning young people's self-focused 'me-ism' in our findings, is an intrinsic recognition of the significance of the student-staff relationships at Flexis. While staff were concerned that young people's 'me-ism' impacted relationships, wellbeing and learning, it may also be an important process in young people re-creating their identities as learners (Plows, Bottrell & Te Riele, 2016). These findings of the first phase of this action research project offer insights for staff consideration in planning for phase two's strengthening of Flexi wellbeing practices.

One clear insight is the value of staff understanding of the joint project as process and means of transformative Flexi education and working with students in undertaking phase two is integral to harnessing that transformative power. The relational locus of change is a complex of qualities, especially respect, cooperation and freedom, harnessing young people's meritocratic and agentic motivations and actions as they come to understand that learning is all about them. The tensions noted by staff (eg., me-ism v. team project), and students (peer disruptions to 'my learning'), are arguably indicative of the relational locus of transformative education. As each student's process of coming into the joint project and, as staff recognise, collective cycles of changing wellbeing, learning and achievement may not neatly match up, the relational context of Flexi is itself in the process of transformation. The findings may be particularly useful for Flexi staff in re-contextualising frustration with student me-ism that appears to disregard the team project. In practice, jointly moving beyond me-ism may require continual shifts in emphasis between individual student and team needs. As the alignment of staff and student perspectives here indicates, both are necessary to fulfil the wellbeing and learning needs of young people.

Figure 1. Findings, staff survey, responses to question: At this Flexi, professional wellbeing means … (101 respondents)
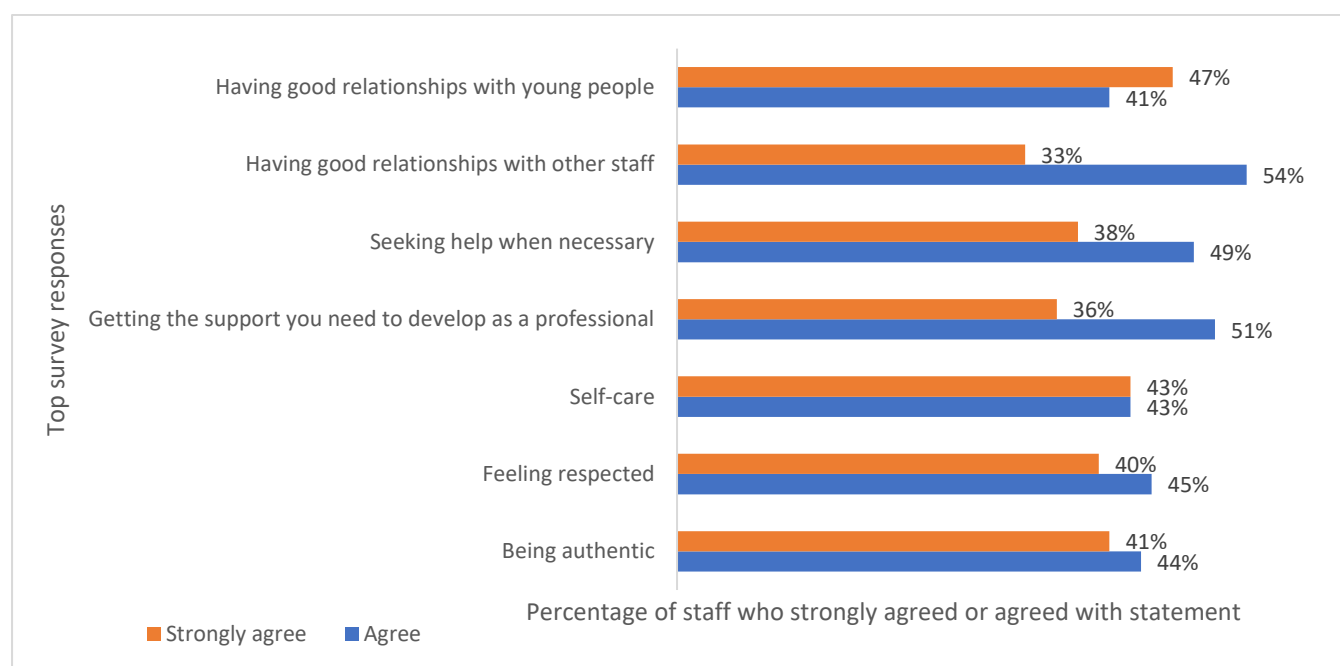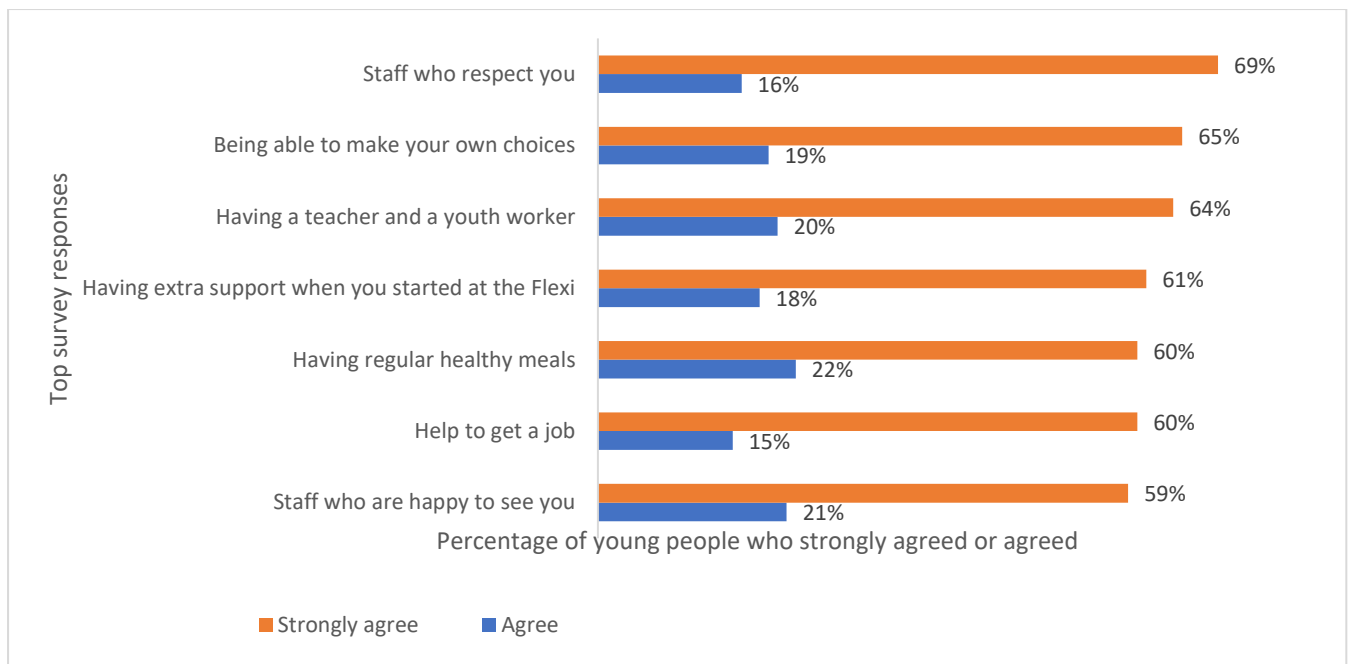

Figure 2. Findings, student survey, responses to question: Flexis do lot of things to support your wellbeing. How important are the following things to you? … (293 respondents).

Top survey responses:

Response	Strongly agree	Agree
Staff who respect you	69%	16%
Being able to make your own choices	65%	19%
Having a teacher and a youth worker	64%	20%
Having extra support when you started at the Flexi	61%	18%
Having regular healthy meals	60%	22%
Help to get a job	60%	15%
Staff who are happy to see you	59%	21%

Percentage of young people who strongly agreed or agreed

■ Strongly agree   ■ Agree

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