Socially transformative wellbeing practices in flexible learning environments: Invoking an education of hope

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Abstract

Objectives: Student wellbeing is closely linked to young people's satisfaction with life at school. Wellbeing practices in an alternative learning environment take on a particularly significant role as they aim to re-engage young people who are disenfranchised from Australia's education system. The Wellbeing Project, which is described and reported on here, aimed to capture young people's perceptions to strengthen and create a Youth+ model of wellbeing in participating centres.

Design: A mixed methods approach was employed to explore student experiences of wellbeing. A quantitative methodology informed the development of surveys, and focus groups adopted a semi-structured qualitative approach.

Setting: Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres (Flexis) in various parts of Australia.

Method: Students in the flexible learning centres were invited to complete a survey during class time. Young people from each centre were then invited to participate in focus group discussions. Four groups were held in Melbourne, two in Geelong and Adelaide and one each in Hobart, St Mary's, Alice Springs, Wollongong and Geraldton.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed that being supported by staff to learn and working towards long-term goals in an individual way were central to the development of wellbeing among young people involved in the centres. Relationships with staff were highly valued.

Conclusion: Findings demonstrate that wellbeing for young people in flexible learning centres is associated with staff support and respect. There is value in giving young people the opportunity to engage in a socially transformative education, enabling them to envision new learning and work opportunities.

Keywords

Alternative education, learning, relationships, respect, social justice, wellbeing

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Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on young people's experiences in alternative educational environments. Research into alternative education has tended to focus on the 'extent, nature and reach' of such environments (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Increasingly, however, research is responding to the call to develop understandings of how the alternative education sector is different from mainstream schools and how 'this practice is experienced and interpreted by students' (Lewthwaite et al., 2017: 390). Reporting on the findings from the Youth+ Wellbeing Project, we consider how wellbeing practices in flexible learning centres (Flexis) enable young people to challenge public understandings and assumptions about educational experience and attainment in Australia (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). We argue that young people who feel genuinely acknowledged and supported by wellbeing practices are able to transform their educational frames of reference to address the social inequality many have experienced in mainstream education environments.

Background and context

It is widely understood that resilience and wellbeing are essential for the academic and social development of young people, with significant longer term benefits including the ability to develop healthy relationships and strong social bonds. Student wellbeing is closely linked to young people's satisfaction with life at school. Schools play a significant role in creating safe, supportive and respectful learning environments (Australian Government, 2017) to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of all young people. Research suggests that wellbeing initiatives are most effective when developed as whole school approaches, where schools put their own programmes in place informed by the particular needs of their students, families and community (Australian Government, 2017; Wyn et al., 2000). Student wellbeing is a priority for all schools in Australia but has particular significance in alternative educational environments that seek to re-engage young people who are disenfranchised from education and have often experienced significant social, developmental, psychological, health, legal and family challenges.[1]

Education plays a vital role in the future opportunities of young people, yet the role of wellbeing is often conceptualised instrumentally in terms of how students' wellbeing supports academic achievement. For the most part, it is obtaining a university entry score at the end of Year 12 (i.e. senior secondary level for young people aged 16–18 years) that defines educational success in Australia. This narrow definition focuses mainstream education in Australia on academic prowess and individual accountability (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Rejection and the social inequality perpetuated by narrow frames of educational attainment have a significant and damaging impact on young people (Best, 2015). Up to one quarter of young Australians do not complete Year 12 or its equivalent by the time they reach the age of 19 years (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

Alternative learning environments and second or last chance educational programmes offer young people a degree of choice outside Australia's mainstream schools (Te Riele, 2007). While Australian education systems include targets for happy, healthy and resilient children,[2] success in Australian schools is largely measured through achievement, especially via National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) results. Yet many young people struggle with the testing and assessment that has become a focus of everyday school life. They are marginalised by a 'neoliberal focus on individual accountability' that reveres academic success but often labels young people as deficient if they 'fail' to achieve (McGregor et al., 2015: 609). As Lewthwaite et al. (2017: 389) argue, this deficit model has worked to limit consideration of the everyday experience of young people learning within a performance-focused climate. Many

young people labelled as being in deficit are actively encouraged by schools concerned about their annual 'school ranking'[3] to consider alternative pathways to employment through apprenticeships and applied learning courses. The decision to follow a different educational and employment pathway should not be disparaged. In many instances, however, young people opt out of Australia's mainstream education because they feel undervalued and disenfranchised (Lewthwaite et al., 2017: 402).

Many young people re-engaging in alternative learning environments have experienced these processes of disenfranchisement as 'educational rejection' (Best, 2015). Many are also caught up in deficit discourses of 'youth at risk' (Te Riele, 2007) with claims they do not understand the value of education. A focus on individual accountability problematises young people, blaming them for their disengagement rather than critiquing 'the relative resources and deficits' of educational systems and policies (Bottrell, 2007: 598). As Best (2015: 81) argues, these are not young people who 'are resistant to education' but are students who have opted out of mainstream education because it just did not work for them.

There currently exists a diverse range of alternative educational environments for disenfranchised young people around Australia, with over 900 facilities offering 70,000 young people the chance to re-engage with education (Te Riele, 2014). While Lewthwaite et al. (2017) suggest that the sector is a 'heterogenous kaleidoscope of programmes', most institutions take a holistic orientation to education, focusing on young people's social, emotional and physical, as well as intellectual needs (pp. 389–390). Alternative programmes largely work within this 'counter-space' or place of difference from mainstream education, which Plows et al. (2016) describe as a 'hybrid place' that works to 'create a valued and valuable education for marginalised young people' (p. 30). Alternative schools do not just shift educational practices but aim to develop their own distinctive identity by providing environments in which young people are welcomed and nurtured as they re-engage with learning (Fielding and Moss, 2010: 88).

Alternative schools have historically been associated with the 'progressive' critiques of Dewey (see Middleton, 1982), Illich and Freire (see Semel et al., 2016) that oppose the standardising and domesticating tendencies of mass schooling and argue for person-centred education broadly grounded in democratic principles. There are varied approaches to alternative education internationally. For example, in the UK, contemporary alternatives range from experimental democratic types of provision to those that are more 'military inspired' or therapeutic (Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). In Denmark, there exist 'production schools' (Grytnes et al., 2018), and in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there are Maori community schools. In many countries, there are schools with distinctive philosophies (e.g. Steiner and Montessori schools) and 'second chance' schools such as Flexis (Te Riele, 2014). One key axis of differentiation is the locus of change, with some alternatives focused on changing young people and others being more intent to change the curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of students (Te Riele, 2007: 57–58). Some contemporary alternative schools are built on the legacy of the 'free schools' and 'community schools' established in the 1970s that rejected competitive meritocracy in favour of students' freedom to choose and explore learning, especially within their local communities (Head, 1974). As a result, flexible learning options in Australia are often place-based and focus on community participation. For example, in schools that see themselves *as* community, Aboriginal and working-class families are not positioned as 'others' to be included, but actively collaborate to shape the culture and curriculum of the school (Bottrell et al., 2014). Learning experiences in Flexible Learning Centres (Flexis) are holistic and address the social and emotional needs of young people while promoting a sense of wellbeing and developing their cognitive and academic skills. Class sizes are small and two staff members, a teacher and youth or social worker, are present in every class. The interests of young people are incorporated into a flexible curriculum which is linked to national curriculum frameworks and nationally accredited vocational education and training courses. A sense of community is fostered in Flexis with all students and staff meeting together daily to 'check in' with each other.

In the valuable scholarship that is taking place within alternative education environments (Best, 2015; McGregor et al., 2015; Mills and McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2009, 2014), there are calls for young people's voices to be heard. It is this call we respond to in this paper as we analyse young people's perceptions of wellbeing and consider how Flexi practices enable them to transform their learning experience. The research we present here is drawn from a study of the Wellbeing Project conducted in Edmund Rice Education Australian (EREA) Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres. Youth+ Flexis are guided by Rice's vision of the empowering potential of education and the challenges of transformation through development of the person. Their aim is to provide educational opportunities and programmes that are relevant and responsive to individual needs (Te Riele, 2014). When the focus of change is on educational provision, there is evidence that students do change too – they improve their wellbeing, and this affects their experience of school in a positive cycle of wellbeing, learning and achievement of goals and relationships that matter to the young people and transformational education.

Transformative learning: evoking an education of hope

> Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. (Mezirow, 2003: 58)

Transformative learning is most commonly associated with adult learning, but young people who engage in alternative learning environments are making 'adult' choices about their education. A transformative learning framework highlights the significance of these choices and enables us to consider how practices in institutions such as Flexis enable young people to challenge narrower educational frames of reference.

According to Mezirow (2003), transformative learning is based on 'constructivist assumptions' whereby individuals interpret their past experiences in their own way and make sense of the world as a result of these perceptions (Taylor and Cranton, 2012: 5). Alongside young people's experiences in Australia's mainstream education are discourses and 'educational ideologies and policies' that are deeply embedded in wider societal expectations (Mills and McGregor, 2014: 79). Arguably, the current over-emphasis on measurement and university entrance scores undermines well-intentioned policies for wellbeing in mainstream education, chipping away at young people's sense of hope. Wellbeing approaches that fail to recognise the 'very unequal positions' of students lack credibility in the eyes of young people (Lewthwaite et al., 2017: 401). Applying a transformative learning framework as part of the Wellbeing Project enabled us to consider an educational environment in which young people believed they were indisputably the focus and not the standardised measurement and schools' ranking of a system that seemingly fails to acknowledge individual needs and aspirations.

Mezirow et al. (2009) also argue that

> transformative reasoning involves figuring out how taken-for-granted facts are warranted. This may involve critically examining the epistemic assumptions supporting one's values, beliefs, convictions, and preferences and reassessing reasons that support a problematic frame of reference. (p. 23)

In other words, transformative learning is only possible when young people recognise their frame of reference as problematic. Yet the capacity to make an informed decision assumes that the individual has the knowledge about alternative possibilities. The challenge of making informed educational decisions in Australia's current one-size-fits-all orientation is confronting for any

young person and their parents (Lewthwaite et al., 2017: 401). While we are reluctant to label the young people in Flexis, the challenges that learners with social, emotional, educational or behavioural needs face makes making an 'informed decision' almost unattainable (Best, 2015: 72). For many Australians, Year 12 completion is an evidence of success, and non-completion considered a form of failure. As a result, alternative education is widely considered to be a counter-space for those who have already been 'educationally rejected' by choice or by exclusion (Best, 2015).

As Ball (2016) and Te Riele (2009) have previously argued, the possibility of hope can be the impetus for young people to re-engage in their education through alternative learning environments. A pedagogy of hope in schools, according to Te Riele (2009), is more than an individual's wish to succeed and requires the involvement of 'both teachers and students, clarifying what is hoped for and the ownership of those hopes' (p. 67). Te Riele (2009: 67) argues that hope can only be beneficial in educational environments when it meets three criteria: 'it must be complex, it must be attainable and it must be sound'. At a more macro level, Ball (2016) contends that hope should enable us to rethink 'the purpose of education' and consider 'what it means to be educated' and to question 'what schools are for' (p. 190). Hope brings these questions back to the individual rather than the system or organisation. However, unlike deficit labelling, it places young people at the centre to enable us 'to focus learning on the student and agreed aims rather than on subjects' (Ball, 2016: 196). As Fielding and Moss (2010) argue,

> The process of learning as co-construction, in relationship with others and without the necessity of known outcomes, involves all concerned creating and re-creating theories. (p. 5)

The basic premise of hope in education, as Te Riele (2009) highlights, is about teachers and young people working together. The development of trustful relationships with others that support individuals to question and challenge their previous experiences is a key aspect of transformative learning (Taylor and Cranton, 2012). Flexis rely on both teaching and wellbeing staff who are dedicated to working with the multiple challenges facing these young people. They rely on the development of authentic relationships between staff and young people to provide an engaging programme that promotes academic and social development.

The Wellbeing Project

The Youth+ initiative has a strong commitment to both young people's and staff wellbeing, with a clear focus on relationships and a philosophy that young people and adults will work together to meet the needs and aspirations of every young person.

The overall aim of the Wellbeing Project which we describe here was to consider how student and staff wellbeing is understood in Flexis, the characteristic practices of wellbeing in Flexis, how Youth+ practices affect wellbeing for young people and staff and how these practices can be built upon to improve wellbeing.

The research design employed aligned with the Youth+ culture of reflective practice whereby young people regularly participate in facilitated reflective exercises. The Wellbeing Project was informed by a participatory action research methodology as used by Kemmis and McTaggat, (2005) and the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Erebus International Scoping Study (2008), which identified seven pathways to student wellbeing in schools by the following:

1. Building a supportive, respectful and inclusive school community;
2. Developing pro-social values;
3. Providing a safe learning environment;

4. Enhancing social–emotional learning;
5. Using strengths-based approaches;
6. Fostering a sense of meaning and purpose;
7. Encouraging a healthy lifestyle.

In this article, we report on the results from surveys and focus groups conducted with young people. The research we describe was overseen by a steering group of key stakeholders in EREA Youth+ Flexis as well as a reference group of senior wellbeing workers and other interested staff.

The research design was designed so as to adhere to the following ethical frameworks: National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (Updated May 2015) (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007) and Values and Ethics – Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003) and Understanding Consent in Research Involving Children: The Ethical Issues (Spriggs, 2010).

Data collection and analysis

Youth+ has a culture of reflective practice and young people regularly participate in facilitated reflective exercises. Young people were informed about the study during community meetings, class meetings and direct invitations as well as a letter sent to their home address. They were provided with a plain language explanatory statement informing of the research aims and process. In centres where many students identify as Aboriginal, our cultural protocol included letters hand delivered to families by familiar staff members. These young people were given the option of participating in all female or all male focus groups.

Young people were first invited to participate in the survey component of the research and informed that their participation was voluntary. They were given the option of having a staff member present while they completed the survey to assist with understanding the research questions. A total of 293 survey responses were received from young people. Participants were aged 14–20 years; 57% of participants identified as being male, 39% identified as female and 4% did not declare, or identify, themselves as either gender.

Leadership staff then invited young people to participate in focus group discussions to further investigate their understandings of wellbeing practices. Participation in the focus groups was also voluntary, and they were conducted in the Flexi environment. Focus groups were facilitated by two Youth+ senior wellbeing workers and discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. A familiar senior wellbeing worker known to the participants in each site was also present at the focus group discussions in order to support the young people.

Staff were briefed on how to avoid influencing young persons' responses. Both surveys and focus group questions were predominantly strengths based and focused on constructive solutions, being designed to be non-invasive and non-compulsory.

A total of 53 young people aged between 14 and 20 years participated in the focus groups; 60% identified themselves as male and 40% identified themselves as female. Numbers ranged in size from 3 to 6 young people in each setting. Four focus groups were conducted at the largest Flexi in Melbourne, two each in Geelong and Adelaide and a single focus group in each of Hobart, St Mary's, Alice Springs, Geraldton and Wollongong.

Findings

Survey and focus group responses were analysed thematically in relation to each of the research questions.

How is young people's wellbeing defined in learning centres?

In their survey responses, young people identified 'getting the help you need to learn' (83%),[4] 'being yourself' (83%), 'feeling safe' (83%) and 'getting along with the workers' (83%) as the most significant aspects of wellbeing at their Flexi. Being happy was linked to wellbeing by many young people who reported in survey comments and focus groups that wellbeing meant they felt 'good' or 'positive'. Young people also described wellbeing as being able to 'be yourself' and being true to their feelings. Respondents were less concerned about the perceptions of others and reported that 'being myself and not caring what anyone thinks of me', as another important aspect of wellbeing.

Health was very important to young people's perception of wellbeing, with many identifying the significance of wellbeing to emotional, physical and mental health (76%). Many young people described have a healthy balance in their lives as being important, a finding in line with those reported in the ACU and Erebus International Scoping Study (2008):

> A person's emotional, physical and mental health, being a healthy balance. (Young person, Geelong Flexi focus group)

Relationships were identified as an important aspect of wellbeing for these young people. The importance of building positive teacher–student relationships (81%) and positive peer relationships was evident. Friends were also very significant to many young people (78%):

> I feel weird sometimes when I have to tell teachers something. But with your friends–there's no filter, it don't matter what you say to them, they're always there. (Young person, Geraldton Flexi focus group)

The young people also recognised the value of being able to talk about their lives, and the problems they faced, with the workers at Flexi. The daily meeting between Flexi students and staff may enable this interaction to occur more organically than in mainstream schools:

> I think our youth worker and our teachers are supportive when we talk about our problems in home or society they help us. (Young Person, Melbourne Flexi focus group)

How do learning centre practices affect young people's wellbeing?

Analysis of the young people's responses revealed that the teaching and learning practices (79%) at Flexis have a significant impact on their sense of wellbeing in this space. The desire to learn, to pass and get good grades was important to young people. They identified 'getting the help you need to learn' (83%) as most important. Learning for these young people was not just about having something to do. The locus of change was evident as they expressed a desire to learn and recognised the value of gaining an education to their goals:

> School helps us to reach it [goal]. Give us help with what we need and help us do it. That's the main goal for a lot of people. (Young Person, Geraldton Flexi focus group)

Other young people reflected on how wellbeing practices at Flexi enable them to 'complete certificate qualifications' to 'get a job' and 'improve English skills'. There is evidence here of the benefits of a strengths-based approach and person-centred education. Young people demonstrated how the learning practices at Flexis supported them in different ways from their previous mainstream education environments:

> They [workers] encourage me to do good work, not yell at me for doing poor work but instead help me improve on it. (Young Person, St Mary's Flexi focus group)

Respondents also recognised that Flexi practices such as small class sizes, having two workers in every class and a commitment to a democratic pedagogical approach encourage learner empowerment and autonomy, which in turn contribute to feelings of wellbeing in this space:

> My most important thing for wellbeing is I get to do things here that I can't do at [previous school]. I feel more free here and I get a say in things. (Young Person, Alice Springs Flexi focus group)

Many young people described wellbeing as feeling respected (85%), being cared for and being treated fairly. They identified the pro-social values of compassion and an acceptance of difference that Flexi staff adopt. Overwhelmingly, the responses of the young people demonstrated their appreciation of the commitment of Flexi workers to helping them to understand and learn:

> They sit here and run through it like they'll sit there and read the question to you until you [get it]. They'll help you try and solve it. (Young Person, Geraldton Flexi focus group)

Young people also valued the holistic approach of Flexis, particularly whereby workers help them with significant life events. Feeling valued as a person beyond the classroom was especially important for young people:

> For me in the past having teachers and youth workers visit me in [youth justice centre] and attend my courts, made me feel really good about myself I know that there actually are people out there [who] care and see good in me when I was at my lowest point. (Young Person, Melbourne Flexi focus group)

How can learning centre practices be adapted to improve young people's wellbeing?

The two key changes that young people wanted in Flexis was to limit disruptions to their learning from other students and to enhance their learning opportunities at Flexi. While young people at Flexis appreciate the role that close friends play in their wellbeing, there was a strong theme of frustration with disruptive peers, demonstrating the links that young people make between their learning and wellbeing:

> There is someone in this class that disrupts a lot, doesn't say stuff but says stuff to me that disrupts my learning cause I get annoyed at … (Young Person Wollongong Flexi focus group)

The unexpected vehemence of young peoples' intolerance when their learning was disrupted may demonstrate the link that young people make between their education and wellbeing.

Discussion

Two clear themes emerged from the Wellbeing Project – the desire to learn and relationships with staff. Despite their previous largely negative disengagements with education and no longer constrained by their inability to 'fit' into an education system which did not work for them, young people valued the possibilities a Flexi education offered them. Many recognised the person-centred education that would help them achieve long-term goals and obtain qualifications or a job. This was not the language of young people who do not value education.

The commitment of staff in alternative learning environments is widely recognised (Lewthwaite et al., 2017; McGregor et al., 2015; Te Riele, 2009, 2014). Less well understood are young people's understandings of the role of teachers and wellbeing staff in their learning. Overwhelmingly young people in this study told us that they associated wellbeing at Flexis with the support of staff. The key benefit of this was to shift the focus of learning back to the young person. Through support and encouragement, and focusing on each individual, young people believed that staff interactions and intentions were genuine. They recognised the confidence they gained from workers who showed a genuine interest in them and did not judge them for failing to achieve standardised measurements of attainment. For many young people, their previous experiences in mainstream education had been damaging but in an alternative setting, where wellbeing practices are person-centred, they recognised the significance of staff, teachers and youth workers to achieving their goals. Learning for these young people had become an interactive process though which they recognised the value of and accepted the support of adults in enhancing their learning. The benefits of being in an inclusive school community with its own distinctive identity was not lost on these young people.

Our findings suggest that the wellbeing practices of Flexis enable young people to transform their engagement with education (Mezirow, 2003). The holistic orientation promoted by Flexi wellbeing practices enabled young people to begin to question their assumptions and societal expectations about education in Australia. By contrasting their experience in Flexis with their previous mainstream education, young people were able to consider new possibilities for learning and work. By experiencing person-centred wellbeing practices, young people were able to move beyond their previous 'failure' and alleged poor fit. Wellbeing for these young people, of feeling safe, happy, being themselves, being looked after, being able to talk to people, enabled them to reflect on their assumptions about educational attainment and to acknowledge that they were not deficient in their capacity to learn (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). For many young people, their Flexi experience proved to be a transformative learning experience which enabled them to envisage a new future in which learning and education contribute to their goals and work opportunities (Te Riele, 2009).

For young people who had previously been 'educationally rejected' or labelled as 'failures', the holistic orientation to wellbeing in Flexis enabled hope for work and for the future. Flexis provided a transformative and holistic learning space where opportunities for education and employment goals became attainable, meeting Te Riele's (2009) criteria for there being a pedagogy of hope. Through the work of the project, we found that enabling young people to understand themselves and their learning world in new ways, opened up the opportunity to discover a more autonomous sense of self through choice and reflection:

> When I came here I didn't have any confidence at all to do anything but of course they [staff] actually listen to you, they care, they don't pretend like they said, they actually want to help you. They don't actually do the thing like teachers, like have it their way and force you to do things and put stress on to you, it's more of them listening. (Young Person Melbourne Flexi focus group)

Conclusion – towards an education of hope

While the number of participants in this study – 293 survey participants and 53 focus group participants – may be considered small, it is important to remember that this is a study of just eight schools. Findings from this phase of work will be used to inform the development and further evaluation of wellbeing practices in other Flexis and alternative educational environments.

Success in mainstream education leaves little room for young people to identify alternative educational opportunities until they are 'forced' to consider these. Learning environments such as those studied here provide young people the opportunity to challenge deeply embedded frames of reference concerning educational attainment and thereby transform their learning

The Wellbeing Project enabled us to 'think about what education might be, rather than what it has become' from the perspective of the young people who attend (Ball, 2016: 193). Young people confidently shared with us the ways in which the inclusive approach to their wellbeing enabled them to 're-create their own identities as learners in positive ways, and to develop social relations with others' that provide hope and opportunity for their future (Plows et al., 2016: 8). There is something important therefore to be learned from educational practices, mainstream or alternative, that acknowledge,

> Successful learning requires human relations between educators and learners that are freely chosen, based on trust and mutual respect, in which learners feel safe, supported and then challenged, so they become better at learning. (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013: 304)

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. EREA Youth+ website, http://new.erea.edu.au/our-schools/youthplus
2. Department of Education and Training Victoria, Target Happy, healthy and resilient kids, http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/targethappyhealthy.aspx
3. My School website, https://myschool.edu.au/
4. The percentages included in brackets throughout this section are a percentage of the 293 survey respondents.

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