



Exploring The Pit

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*“Not till we are completely lost or turned around
...do we begin to find ourselves.”*

Henry David Thoreau

We have all experienced moments of confusion or indecision at some point in our lives. For students, facing adversity can be particularly unnerving, but children of “helicopter” or “lawnmower” parents who work assiduously to ensure their offspring are spared from life’s difficulties may be especially vulnerable. In recognition of this, Yarrambat Primary School in Melbourne’s outer northeast is applying the concept of “The Pit” to build emotional intelligence and resilience in students at all levels.

Principal Kelvin Bennetts learned about The Pit on a recent study tour of New Zealand to investigate student curiosity and engagement. On the recommendation of Dr Jenny Wilson, with whom the school has been collaborating to develop their inquiry learning practice, Bennetts visited Stonefields School in Auckland. While there were many impressive programs at the school, he found the concept of The Pit especially intriguing. “The Pit is not knowing what to do next; a state of indecision; butterflies in the stomach; feeling lost. There is not one single

definition. It depends on what aspect of life you are using it in,” Bennetts explains. In particular, the underlying idea of recognising when you are in The Pit and accepting that there are times when you feel stuck or confused resonated with him. “It’s a response to today’s overprotection ...children are not often allowed to be in a position where they don’t know what to do next,” he says.

Bennetts’s observations are supported by recent research by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). A survey of 128 psychology or counselling professionals working with children and families found that only eight per cent have not encountered overparenting (Locke, *et al.*, 2012). The study identified combinations of high responsiveness to children’s needs and low demands being made on children as key characteristics of overparenting. For example, parents who are highly responsive but make low demands on their child might, as one respondent put it, “Question everything on the child’s behalf as though they are always right – try to prevent the child from being able to problem solve through racing to their rescue –

not allowing for failure or a struggle.”

A parent with high demands in terms of achievement but low demands in terms of independence might also be guilty of overparenting. “As a teacher, I have seen parents getting far too involved in their eight-year-old’s play and friend issues. I try to encourage the students to work it out themselves, not involving their parents. Some parents have been known to come into the school, find the ‘other’ child and have a word with them, some parents have written to the ‘other’ child and had their child give it to them,” another survey participant recalled.

The unwillingness of adults to allow children to confront difficulties or failure clearly does students a disservice in the long term. Bennetts recounts hearing of a student who was devastated because their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank was 91, but they wanted 93, and therefore viewed themselves as a failure. The end of Year 12 may signify the first time that young people cannot be shielded from disappointment, and it is therefore little wonder that many are ill-equipped to deal with it. Finding life difficult

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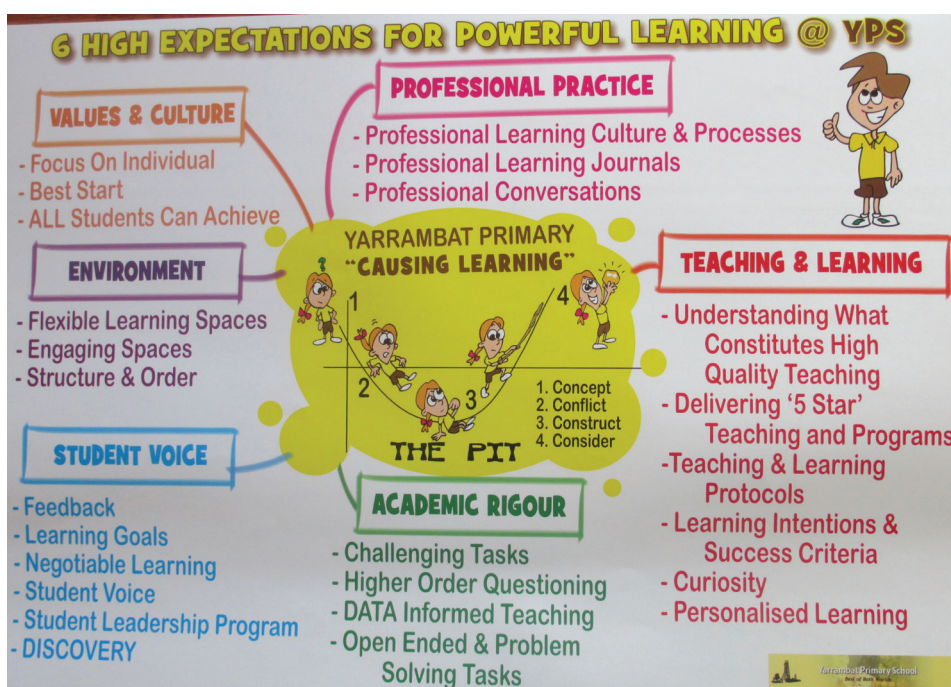
as a young adult is certainly not unique to Australia; New Zealand has the second highest youth suicide rate for 15- to 24-year-old males in the world after Finland, and the third highest for females in the same age range (New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development). According to Bennetts, The Pit represents one of several long term solutions that it is hoped will have an impact on these figures.

Participants in the QUT study identified a number of outcomes they believe are a result of overparenting (Locke *et al.*, 2012). These include a lack of resilience, increased anxiety and a poor sense of responsibility. Application of The Pit concept offers a way to mitigate these effects, but crucially, it is not useful just for those cosseted by mum or dad; it is a strategy that will stand all students in good stead by developing life skills that extend well beyond the classroom.

On his return from New Zealand towards the end of 2012, Bennetts shared his experiences with staff and from day one of 2013 The Pit was implemented throughout the school. One of many wellbeing initiatives at Yarrambat Primary, The Pit now offers students a framework to acknowledge that they are stuck and to find a way forward. At this early stage, the school has taken the approach that the teachers are learning beside the students. They model working through issues, supporting children with prompts such as, "It looks like you're in The Pit. Here's what you can do to get out."

The way out of The Pit will vary according to the catalyst for being there in the first place. In an academic sense for example, if a student is struggling with an aspect of writing, he or she might refer to displayed goals for the genre, and self-nominate some different actions that could be tried to move on. The ultimate objective is for students to develop knowledge of how to manage adversity to the point where teachers are unaware that a class member has moved in and out of The Pit.

Bennetts believes that it is becoming, "accepted daily practice for staff and students that we talk about these things," but he suggests that like with any change, you have to keep using it and giving continual reminders to make sure that it becomes embedded. Although it has only been recently introduced, he is pleased with the impact that understanding The Pit has had on students already. He offers as evidence the response of a prep student during a recent whole school reflection session. The child recounted how on the weekend, he was told that he had to go shopping and he really didn't want to. He recognised that he was in The Pit, and decided that he should just go, so he got out of The Pit and things were fine. The strength of this very simple anecdote is twofold. First, it demonstrates that the concept is being used and understood within the school. Second, and perhaps even more important, it shows this child has internalised the idea and is able to apply it beyond school.



The establishment of The Pit concept at Yarrambat Primary supports other school initiatives to promote independence and resilience with the aim of facilitating an easy transition to high school. Examples of activities that complement the philosophy underpinning The Pit include a successful Year 6 leadership program and the development of avenues to incorporate student voice within the school. Staff also made a conscious decision to mix students up for some classes; even prep children move classrooms for maths sessions a few times a week. This fosters independence and adaptability as students become accustomed to travelling around the school and working with different teachers. The school's approach to self-management is consistent with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which aspires for all young Australians to become, "successful learners", "confident and creative individuals", and "active and informed citizens" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008).

While the youth suicide rate in Australia is, thankfully, lower than New Zealand's, the mental health of our young people is still a cause for concern. A report card analysing the wellbeing of young Australians released by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2013) reveals that 12 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds have high to very high levels of psychological distress, while 18 per cent of 14- to 19-year-olds are engaged in substance abuse with illicit drugs. This underscores the importance of equipping children to deal with difficulties to make sure that they can get out of The Pit.

The idea of encouraging students to make their thinking explicit is not a new one; many teachers do this routinely in subjects such as maths to build students' critical thinking and problem solving skills. The Pit takes this practice a step

further, offering a universal cue to move students' thinking from an unproductive track to one that is more likely to result in success. It is perhaps a perfect metaphor for the journey that Yarrambat Primary School is in an old gold mining area, its emblem still a historic poppet head. Just as the locals no longer work in the pit, so are the school's students learning to climb out and pursue life's opportunities with a positive attitude. **ET**

Further Reading

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Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008) *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. Available from: http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf. Accessed 19 April 2013

New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development. Youth Statistics: A statistical profile of young people in New Zealand Available from <http://www.youthstats.myd.govt.nz/indicator/healthy/suicide/international.html>. Access 19 April 2013

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