

Positive psychology goes to primary school

Wendy Ewen and Suzy Green

Mental health problems are increasing among young people, possibly reflecting greater awareness of disorders and also resulting from the increased number and intensity of stressors. Nearly 20 per cent of youth experience an episode of clinical depression by the end of high school (Lewinsohn, *et al.* 1993). Among adolescents, there are also high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenges. Efforts to reduce these problems may need to begin in childhood, with special attention to a window of escalating risk in the transition to adolescence.

Schools are a major provider of mental health services. However, the predominant approach is reactive rather than proactive, in that educational psychology services are available only after students demonstrate difficulties. There is growing recognition that effective interventions need to be more proactive and focus on promoting competence and strengths in addition to the prevention and treatment of problems. Schools should be adopting more holistic approaches with missions that address the needs of the whole child.



Positive psychology

Positive psychology is a strengths-based psychology, focusing on programs that promote optimal functioning and wellbeing. It is intended to supplement more traditional psychology research by expanding the topics of study and generating a full delineation of human thriving and flourishing. As an applied positive psychology, evidence-based coaching involves a collaborative, solution-focused, systematic process to foster self-directed learning and personal development. There is growing evidence from well controlled studies that indicate evidence-based coaching programs may

have the potential to build resilience and wellbeing in young people within an educational setting. For example, a randomised controlled study conducted by the Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007) showed that evidence-based coaching with senior high school students attending a Sydney private girls school led to significant increases in their self-reported goal striving, hope and resilience. In 2008, one of Australia's prominent private schools, Geelong Grammar, also sought to infuse positive psychology throughout the entire school, and with encouraging outcomes.

Mosman Preparatory School

This article presents a pilot study from Mosman Preparatory School that demonstrates how a strengths coaching program, integrated within the traditional school curriculum, was associated with increased levels of engagement and hope. The program was designed so it could be easily integrated within the school curriculum, addressing several outcomes from the NSW Board of Studies Syllabus Document. All students attending Year 5 at the school were required to take part in the program as part of their Personal Development and Health Curriculum.

Prior to commencing the program, the students were screened for any mental health

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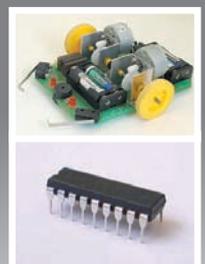
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concerns by the school psychologist, using the Beck Youth Inventory. Seven were identified with needs and they completed sessions with the school psychologist while simultaneously taking part in the strengths coaching program.

The coaching program consisted of eight face-to-face group-coaching sessions with the teacher-coach. Each coaching session was of 45 minutes duration and was conducted on a fortnightly basis over two school terms. The students shared the same coach, a qualified primary teacher with a Masters in Applied Science (Coaching Psychology) from Sydney University.

There were three key parts to the program.

Part 1

Part 1 focused on raising the students' self-awareness, including the identification of personal strengths. A 'strength' can be defined as a natural capacity for behaving, thinking and feeling in a way that promotes successful goal achievement. 'Signature strengths' refer to the top five character strengths and virtues of a particular individual. They convey a sense of ownership and authenticity, and inevitably there is powerful intrinsic motivation to put them into practice.

To identify their signature strengths, students completed the Values in Action Strengths Inventory for Youth Survey. This survey is designed for youths aged 10 to 17 and is available online at www.authentic happiness.org. Using the survey results, the students were provided with a useful vocabulary to both identify and talk about their own character strengths. They created 'strength shields' representing how they were already using their top strengths. These shields were displayed in the classroom and referred to on a regular basis. The students were also provided with a copy of their results to share with their family.

Part 2

In Part 2, the students were coached to identify personal resources and utilise these in working towards individual goals. They were taught how to identify meaningful goals, plan, prioritise, manage time, and be persistent in their goal-striving. They applied these skills in an ongoing assignment focused on finding novel ways to use one of their signature strengths.

Pursuing meaning and engagement are more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure (Peterson, 2006). A recent study conducted by Monash University (Norrish & Vella-Brodick, 2009) showed that adolescents generally have high levels of pleasure, yet are lower on engagement and meaning. Students have a sense of meaning in their lives when they are engaging their strengths and using them to do something that has impact on others. Playing to people's strengths enhances wellbeing because the

student is able to do what they naturally do best, and thus generate feelings of autonomy, confidence, and self-esteem. Finding original ways to use strengths also reflects the importance of ongoing personal effort in producing a flourishing life.

Part 3

Part 3 was focused on the students working through a cycle of self-regulation. This involves a process of reflection and evaluation while moving forward toward individual goals. They were given the opportunity to share their assignment results with the group and reflect on what they learned. Finally, the students completed a 'letter from the future' that involved writing about themselves at their very best, focusing on how their needs and values were being met, and finding solutions to allow for all the things they would like to have happen.

Student feedback was also overwhelmingly positive

A key to successful goal attainment is the construct of hope, and this can be engendered in young people by engaging them in such solution-focused conversations and activities. Participating in the self-regulatory cycle also allows an individual to see oneself as able to generate alternative routes to goals, and as having the perceived capacity to utilise these routes to reach desired goals. These are key features of the construct hope. Hope has been shown to correlate positively with self-esteem, perceived problem-solving capabilities, perceptions of control, and positive outcome expectation. In educational settings, higher levels of hope have also correlated positively with perceived scholastic competence, greater academic satisfaction and even better academic performance.

Outcomes

To measure the results of the program, students completed a self-report questionnaire modified from Snyder's Hope Scale and the California Healthy Kids Survey. The results showed significant increases in the students' levels of engagement, hope and wellbeing as a result of their participation. While the program was part of the school curriculum, student feedback was also overwhelmingly positive.

Such positively framed programs, without the stigma often associated with remedial counselling, may provide an effective means of promoting student wellbeing. It would appear there are many potential benefits of evidence-based coaching programs in schools. For example, when students work with their strengths, they tend to be more motivated.

Similarly, increases in wellbeing are likely to produce increases in learning, with positive mood producing broader attention and more creative, holistic thinking. In addition, students who have positive attitudes toward their teachers and school are more likely to display appropriate behaviour.

There is much more to positive education than a simple stand-alone course. For best outcomes, the coaching program trialled at Mosman Preparatory School would need to form part of a school-wide initiative with a strong practical focus on infusing positive psychology in to the whole curriculum. There is a need for further research and the need for expert external consultants to work collaboratively with schools to create individualised programs. Similarly, there is a need for further research in developing measurement tools to assess the overall climate of individual schools. The focus needs to be on establishing an authentic curriculum for pupils that has relevance, meaning and connectedness to their lives.

If you are currently utilising positive psychology at your school, or have any questions, we would love to hear from you. Email wendyewen@live.com.au

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