

First Australian Positive Psychology in Education University of Sydney Symposium - 9 May 2009

Riverside Girls High School Positive Psychology 2008-2009

Introduction

1. A school is like any organisation it will thrive in the right conditions and if quality relationships are evident
 - teachers with teachers
 - teachers with students
 - office staff with parents, teachers, students
2. It is crucial teachers model positive behaviours which build hope and self belief as well as create ideal conditions where teaching and learning can thrive
3. Keith Tronc is a high profile Australian barrister and author who has written several texts and articles on bullying in schools and the related legal issues. He cites research which indicates that schools anti-bullying programs are generally ineffective. Does this mean we should rather concentrate on educating students how to respond to bullying behaviours? How to survive such attacks and demonstrate resilience?

Background to Implementation of positive psychology

- 1. Michael Durrant**

School counsellor, was DET, we heard about his work at Doonside HS
Solutions focused, in his approach outcomes not causes were stressed
Not big on why
More focus on what next? Where to?
Interview post suspension as eg

Suspend disbelief
Assume competence
Build positive
Recognise what not working
Explore outcomes not causes
- 2. Durant's work led to Dr Suzy Green's work in positive psychology at Sydney University**

DP invited Dr. Suzy Green to work with executive 2008, continued 2009
- 3. Misery circles**, among adolescent girls, despair, anger, lots of discussion mental health issues, depression, girls at risk, low self esteem, anti depressant, girls without resilience, problems coping with medication adversity, without hope, no real understanding of conflict, or how to deal with it, no empathy, usual relentless bullying victims and bullies (also victims) too much learned helplessness (some parents too)
- 4. Need for common language across school**

Earlier Glasser approach
"how is it helping?"
"is there a better way?"
Were common questions in 1980s and 1990s re student welfare and discipline
Teachers not using stages for classroom management even though stages provided common language
- 5. More socially out of control students**

Teachers need to believe, need hope if they are to respond to vast array of students we have to teach including the very troubled ones
- 6. Welfare and Discipline**

"Mean, Too mean, Very mean,
RGHS had already changed language to describe behaviour
A-B project (from Anarchy to Belonging)
- 7. Toxic impact of other reality TV shows rely on**

eg. Big Brother and also degrading sleaze on judgement, criticism, expulsions from groups, appalling bullying on Australia's Next Top Model on pay TV now a source of so called entertainment
- 8. Beyond Generation Y**

Students born 1995-1996 – now in Yr 9 or 10
How have they challenged teachers?
Differences from earlier generations

 - surface, no depth
 - glued to mobile phone
 - multi tasking
 - no privacy
 - exacerbated, all girl intensity and politics of exclusion in an all girls school
 - feral toxic parenting
 - more technology than TV each week for most students
 - no empathy
 - denigration, humiliation common
 - no resilience in too many students
- 9. Frenetic world young people have to navigate**

Global wars, economic mess, physical appearance is everything, unrealistic expectations about wealth, spin doctors who will do and say anything to get politicians elected, vacuous TV entertainment, sports gods, alcohol everywhere, technology, internet, violence commonplace, racism, poor nutrition, eating disorders,

Strategies at RGHS so far: (a work in progress)

All teachers

- 1 • Character strengths on positive psychology website/survey took 45 min or longer
individual teachers
then in faculties
then in school as a whole
2DP + Principal, (senior executive)

Interesting some faculties had not a single reference to

“social intelligence”

“forgiveness and mercy”

“fairness, equity and justice” had most hits by far across all faculties in survey

Made teachers very familiar with the website with positive psych, with strengths – with work values, with core life values, with team building – collective strengths of faculties and whole school strengths

2 **Dr. Suzy Green has been to RGHS 2008-2009**

1. I.W. Day Assembly in 2009 as guest speaker
2. 2 x Exec. Meetings, 11 HTs, 2 DP, 1 Pr
3. Year 7 assembly, gratitude journal launch
4. 2 x SRCs Junior and Senior
5. PL Day July 08, presentation, all teachers present

3 **Gratitude Journal Year 7**

Pages in school diary see some eg

(weekly commitment in Year 7 classes 2009, via different teachers) from Term 2

4 **Weekly bulletin messages from D.P.**

Reminders, consciousness raising across all faculties

5 **Beliefs and goals**

declare what we want for our high school graduates
what do we value?

resilience/cope with adversity

manage crises effectively

no victims

understand mountains and molehills

celebrate diversity/value others

believe in themselves

find answers within self

high self esteem development

accept responsibility

all much more important than UAI of 99.00

6 **School Initiatives involving students**

SRC 2008 Blue Day fund raising

Awareness of psychological depression and mental health issues via this initiative

7 **School messages**

TV screens in school corridors

2 street signs changed regularly

Newsletters emailed to parents

Mailout to all parents

School diary

Info in new enrolment packages

Speakers @ assemblies

Articles in local press

Response of teachers so far

Responses vary, not surprising, 87 teachers including 17 part timers

1. **Too labour intensive**
 - Takes too long to have sustained conversations to implement positive psych. approach (Same criticism of Glasser approach)
 - Who has the time to do all the interaction?
Teachers on full load of 30pds for fortnight do not have time to implement the approach
2. **Some teachers as parents of teenagers found some of the approaches**

They could apply much of it as parents
3. **Teachers often wedded to punishment and blame(even if it doesn't work)**
 - Changing language and approach in general is very challenging for some experienced teachers
4. **Engagement of reluctant learners a problem**
 - Willing to give everything a go because they recognise students behaviour is challenging and we need to respond
5. **Usual negatives**
 - Cant teach anyone to be "happy", cant teach students to be optimistic
 - Do you have to be thriving to be happy or happy to be thriving?
 - How much of this really can be learned?
6. **How much is all this costing?**
 - Can we have more text books instead (a very teacher response)
7. **Some language or jargon difficult for some teachers**

"thriving" OK	"flourishing" problematic
"resilience" OK	"authentic" problematic
"optimistic" OK	"ANTS" problematic
"belonging" OK	"PETS" problematic
8. **Relevance**
 - Is it my job to develop 'psychological well being of students?
 - Is it really a family responsibility?

Questions regarding implementation

1. Start with teachers?
2. Start with teachers well before students?
3. Do both @ same time?
4. Where do parents fit in?
5. Allocate PL funds to implantation?
6. Who is main driver in the school?
7. Can schools implement a positive psychology approach without an academic friend of mentor?
8. What resources would be needed?
9. Which aspects of school life should be targeted?
10. What is the emphasis of schools approach?
 - (i) how to deal with bullying
 - or
 - (ii) try to eliminate bullying behaviour, or reduce itAre the 2 approaches mutually esclusive?