Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Investigating creative approaches to nurture resilience, optimism, collaboration and real engagement for primary students

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A significant challenge for our schools today is to reinvigorate our educational practices to better reflect the world in which we live. Schools have a responsibility, beyond academic competence, to prepare the whole child. Educators need to develop creative ways to provoke and engage learners in our classrooms. We need to explore approaches to ensure that our students are skilled, informed, engaged and challenged to overcome obstacles. It is essential that the emotional and social needs of our students be given the attention they deserve through nurturing positive wellbeing. The need has become even greater to ensure that learning experiences are geared towards enabling our students to flourish, lead purposeful lives and contribute to society as compassionate and responsible citizens.

The focus of this study is to explore strategies to help prevent depression in young people. Schools need to embed creative approaches that build engagement and connection, as these are significant protective factors for developing positive mental health. We need to embed quality programs and practices that inspire, motivate and empower students, and strengthen their social and emotional capabilities by building their resilience. We need to foster skills of creativity, resilience, optimism and empathy through celebrating strengths in ourselves, our students, our teachers and our communities.

Significant Learning

The Anika Scholarship has been an incredibly inspirational and rewarding professional and personal experience, providing me with the time, space and opportunity to investigate, collaborate and reflect on educational issues. It enabled me to experience firsthand a number of successful approaches to developing and nurturing resilience, optimism and engagement in learning.

I observed some fantastic programs in action and discussed ideas and practices with a range of inspirational experts in this field. I visited schools where the focus on the students’ wellbeing, happiness and strengths was exemplary. I was inspired by seeing students authentically engaged in their learning through connecting with their passions, collaborating with others and celebrating their potential. It also guided my discovery of the countless minuscule moments that contribute to engagement and resilience. Many of these factors are seemingly quite ordinary, but the accumulation of these can contribute to positive education in a very powerful way.

The experience reinforced the message that the emotional wellbeing of children lies at the very heart of education. An integrated whole school approach to positive education is a key factor, as is shifting the educational paradigm from teaching content to developing a culture of inquiry for lifelong learning. The practices that promote engagement, collaboration, resilience and optimism need to be embedded in every facet of school life and not be treated as an additional program to fit into an already crowded curriculum.

The hospitality, generosity and friendship extended to me prior to, during and after my tour have been amazing and very much appreciated. Thank you to all.

Middle School Research Project: Delmar, New York, USA

Mary Judd is an inspiring and knowledgeable advocate of positive psychology and strengths-based education. Her personal approach is supportive and motivating, and I saw in action her work in encapsulating strengths. Mary worked with identifying staff and student strengths and implementing ideas to build upon positive culture and engagement in schools.

She studied with many of the leading researchers in the field of Positive Psychology and wrote the curriculum for both the Mentor Coach Training and ‘The Happy Movie’. In teaching a Positive Psychology/Strengths-based course for middle school she found that the tools developed to increase positive emotions and life satisfaction, particularly those focussing on character strengths, were accessible and effective to use with all ages.

Along with encouraging students to take the VIA survey of signature strengths, a variety of approaches was offered to further discussions of ‘what’s right with us?’ Workshops were held with staff and parents describing different ways to use the strengths work with themselves and with their children/students. Positive response to the program resulted in its planned expansion for the full school year in 2015, plus an optional research study to track a variety of outcomes in overall school progress in aspects such as performance, attendance and attitudes of students and staff.

Bethlehem Central Middle School principal Michael Klugman is enthusiastic about strengths-based teaching, which he believes acknowledges and proactively addresses an inherent weakness in education, namely, that educators often fail to create a balance between messages of affirmation and messages of critique and correction. Educators feel pressed to reach out to parents when behavioural or academic issues arise but not when a student displays an exceptional act of strength.

Mike believes that building a culture within schools that incorporates a proactive approach to spotting, recognising, and proactive building of character strengths is the best way to facilitate students’ realisation of their potential. We discussed the idea of collaborating on a strengths-based project and the possibility of creating a ‘sister school’ network.

Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

My discussions with researchers and educators at Harvard University were based on the GoodWork Project and its elements of technical excellence, personal engagement and ethical practices. Its focus is on how we help our students to become ethical decision makers who use firmly embedded personal values while being committed to doing high-quality work that is meaningful to them.

I was particularly interested in its connections with the positive psychology movement and its similarities to the ‘Action for Happiness’ initiative in the United Kingdom.

I learnt a great deal about many aspects of Project Zero through discussions with project manager, Lynn Barendsen. I met with Paromita De, who discussed her work with the Toolkit in investigating what good work is and analysing actual narratives and dilemmas faced. Paromita discussed the positive findings of her interviews with teachers and students, particularly with the marked increase in more multi-dimensional responses from students as the program progressed. The insights I gained helped to reinforce the belief that educational change must be purposeful and substantial.

A number of exceptional educators are working with primary school students using the Goodwork Toolkit philosophies and are keen to create a middle school toolkit. We shared ideas for online student collaboration on interest-based projects, developing questionnaires, formulating parameters for projects and developing partnerships based on common themes and ethical concerns. I am keen to implement some of the classroom ideas and lesson plans with my Year 5/6 students.

Youth at Risk, Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire, England

Meeting with Kevin Lakey I learnt about mental health recovery programs which focus on self-esteem, confidence building, goal-directed strategies and optimism. Kevin shared his experiences and perspectives on supporting positive mental health, providing valuable contacts and resources. We discussed the need to challenge the stigma that, even today, is still evident in mental health and the importance of thinking about mental health in the same way we regard physical health. We shared ideas about positive mental health strategies that can be used with young people to strengthen their friendships, help to break down stereotypes and support recovery.

There is a need for a plan for individuals, and for schools, that would identify activities for everyday wellbeing and encourage individuals to recognise the strategies and activities that work most effectively for them.

The Grange School, Long Eaton, Derbyshire, England

This school provided another excellent model of a dynamic approach to engage and nurture students. Head teacher Mike Hannon spoke fervently about the need to develop the whole child, finding the passions and potential of individuals to make learning real. He spoke about leading a community that empowers all members to think for themselves, to make choices and take risks, and where celebration is not an event but a way of life. I spent time with Mike and a number of exceptional teachers, who shared their enthusiasm about engagement and linking learning to interests and saw this work firsthand in their classrooms.

The student voice at the school is strong and is nurtured right from the nursery level at the school. The mayor of Grangeton, who is a senior student at the school, and his delegate took me on a tour of the school and spoke enthusiastically about the school, the university workshops and the lunch time clubs which operate. The students show enormous pride in their school and seem to particularly respond to the buddy system for reading and for other aspects of work.

English Martyrs’ Catholic Primary School, Derbyshire, England

This school has an inquiry-based curriculum that is underpinned by a very clear focus on acquiring strong literacy and numeracy skills. The Learning Challenge curriculum has been adopted by the school and the teachers I spoke with about this approach were passionate and enthusiastic.

Learning is personalised, and pre-learning tasks and planning conferences play an important role. The quest for balancing the teaching of crucial skills and ensuring that the learning is personal and engaging for students has brought the school an excellent reputation for its outstanding results, particularly in literacy, and the students respond well to the curriculum. In every classroom that I visited, it was promising to see engaged learners working with teachers, collaborating with others or working independently. When I asked students to tell me what they were doing, they were able to explain what they were doing and why.

Students showed me how they evaluate their own learning and I also saw samples of peer assessments. The self-reflective learning was impressive and teachers spoke to me about how seriously the students viewed these reflections.

Towards a More Creative Curriculum, Richard Gerver

I met with author, leader, creative thinker and inspirational speaker Richard Gerver for a one-on-one discussion about revolutionising education. He is best known for his leadership in transforming a struggling school into a highly innovative success. Richard spoke about adapting to change and managing it. He also spoke about nurturing a vision by taking the time to communicate with people on a personal level. He considers developing cultures of empowerment and utilising the collective power of all people involved to be critically important.

Richard stressed that creativity and innovation are collaborative processes that need to be stimulated, supported and challenged. Growth, whether personal or professional, doesn’t take place in isolation.

The changes that need to take place in our schools are not unique to education. Richard reminded me of the importance of spending time in the company of apparently unconnected people to help you to realise how connected we all are and to generate more divergent thinking.

I learnt about an approach which originated in Japan which looks at change as sustainable, incremental and continuous. *Kaizen* (change for the good, or continuous improvement) follows the principle of continuous efforts to improve which result in small changes that can accumulate to make a significant difference over time over time. In this strengths-based approach, things that are working well and are valued remain at the forefront, while smaller changes in other aspects occur on a regular basis. On an emotional level, as well as an administrative one, this means of transforming thinking, behaviours and patterns can occur in a timely, positive and collaborative manner.

Celebrating Strengths, Jenny Fox Eades

Jenny Fox Eades, author, teacher and speaker, embodies the principles of positive education and has developed truly remarkable work focussing on character strengths, mindful teaching, self-reflection and wellbeing. We discussed the value of using a strengths approach in education on an individual, class-basis and school-wide basis. Jenny spoke about embedding this framework at school in small steps until it seeps through everything you do. She spoke of the importance of modelling and of ensuring that the process was enjoyable for everyone: ‘If it’s not supporting the teachers’ wellbeing, it will impact on the children’s learning.’

Jenny has many practical suggestions for turning the theory of a strengths-based program into practice and of making sure that the principles connect with your own school’s ethos. Jenny’s focus on storytelling is exceptional and she exemplifies the values of silence and stillness that tend to be forgotten in a frantic world.

Bollington Cross Primary School, Bollington, Cheshire, England

I had the great pleasure of working with Jenny during a visit to this school, which had much to offer in terms of student engagement and optimism. A welcoming feel and an atmosphere of trust and respect were immediately apparent. A number of teachers and students shared their thoughts with me about their teaching and learning and how strengths had been gradually embedded in their school and integrated into the curriculum.

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| Six Core Elements of Mental Health Improvement Framework | | |
| One Good Adult  The importance of a dependable adult to support and protect mental health  Attachment (parenting),  Mentoring (mentoring, guidance, befriending) | Resilience in Schools  Whole school approaches to mental health and well-being  A nurturing environment that builds emotional literacy  School ethos, curriculum, behaviours, pastoral care | Resilience in Communities  Strong network of youth services, voluntary and community organisations, building achievement, confident and skilled to support and intervene |
| Guiding through the Service Maze  Children, families and young people have a range of support options for early intervention and can be helped to find their way to appropriate help quickly | Distress, Self-Harm and Suicide Prevention  Frontline staff are confident and supported to intervene and help youngsters in situations of distress | Peer Help & Social Media  Build opportunities for young people to provide peer support and positive use of social media  Those who share their problems enjoy better mental health  Young people often turn to peers and the internet for help |

Jenny led a whole school assembly with a prayer, song, dance and a story. The story, which highlighted strengths of courage and kindness, enthralled the students. Following this, I was part of the ‘scrum meeting’, a brief discussion that Jenny held with two Year 5 students to discuss future plans and ideas. The contributions and conduct of these students showed how genuinely this program is regarded.

I was involved in lessons and listened as Jenny captured each child’s attention through her gift of storytelling. I saw the strengths circle at work and listened as students spotted strengths in story characters. In a Year 2 class, I was astounded to see children in groups of three re-telling a complex tale after one hearing.

Head teacher, Mrs Julie Downing, spoke glowingly about the strengths program and the resulting increases at the school in emotional intelligence, deep thinking and in the quality of the students’ language, particularly their speaking and listening skills. She said they incorporate strengths in everything they do and believes that it has given the school community a common language and has become sustainable as the students guide the program by selecting the strengths on which to focus.

Project 99, Youth Mental Health and Internet Project, Glasgow, Scotland

Dr Trevor Lakey, Health Improvement & Inequities Manager, focusses on mental health improvement and early intervention for children and young people. He discussed the collaborative work involved in creating the innovative Project 99 scheme, which explores the potential of digital approaches to promote positive mental wellbeing.

I also learnt a great deal about the Scottish approach to positive mental health from Barry Syme, Principal Psychologist for Glasgow City Council Education Services, who is playing a leading role in driving a ‘nurture’ approach across Glasgow schools.

Barry spoke about the benefit of employing nurturing principles at a whole school level and empowering schools to take this concept to a deeper level. The initial step involves schools carrying out a self-evaluation using several indicators of wellbeing— successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens—to help schools to implement changes or improve practice to enhance the life of a child or young person. The ‘How nurturing is our school?’ document that guides the process would be an excellent resource to adapt to the Australian school setting.

Sleat Primary School, Sleat, Highlands, Scotland

This small primary school has established some innovative and exciting art projects which promote student engagement across the curriculum. Staff, parents, students and a team of artists have collaborated on Gaelic/English visual arts projects that incorporate many aspects of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. One of the projects, *An Dealbh Mor*, which was a high calibre, year-long project celebrating the landscape and culture of South Skye that received great acclaim throughout Scotland. The school has also arranged exchange programs in the arts field, enabling their students to visit cities such as Edinburgh to incorporate cityscapes into their artworks.

International School: Breda, The Netherlands

This school was a perfect illustration of outstanding leadership, personalised learning, passionate teaching and the embedding of resilience in practice. The Head of School, Ger Rombouts, and the head of the Primary School Department, Louise Everson, discussed how their school, which is grounded in the PYP curriculum, focusses on developing the whole child as an inquirer, both in the classroom and in the world outside.

Teachers spoke about having the freedom to adapt the curriculum to suit student needs and interests. A high degree of respect and rapport was evident in teacher–student interactions. Character values such as resilience were explicitly taught and incorporated in the curriculum. Visual displays and artworks focussing on values served as explicit reminders. When I asked a 5 year old child about resilience, he told me that his friend had shown resilience that week when he was trying to cross the monkey bars.

Ger, Louise and I discussed the idea, suggested by Richard Gerver, of setting up a worldwide network of like-minded schools that are keen to implement creative approaches that promote vibrant engagement and positive wellbeing.

Rock and Water, Freerk Ykema

I spent time with the inspirational founder of the Rock and Water program, Freerk Ykema, who developed this ground-breaking program to nurture young people’s self-control, confidence and ability to reflect. Freerk’s sense of vocation was obvious as he spoke about the program’s beginnings, its growth in recent years, and its expansion to over 30 countries worldwide.

Freerk outlined the program’s philosophy, research analysis and recent developments.   
When I discussed our school’s positive experience with the class program and my desire to adapt the program to use school-wide, Freerk showed me samples of primary school programs and talked about the different formats that schools use in its operation. A critical element is allowing enough time for discussion and reflection.

My discussions with the program’s founder reminded me of the very reasons I was drawn to it initially. It resonates because it is a positive approach to concepts that can be challenging, particularly social identity, teasing, bullying and aggression. It embodies the belief that, primarily, people are good. The physical activities closely link with mental and social skills, so the program has a holistic attitude to self-development, communication and respect.

Conclusion

In investigating how we can best prepare our students for success as learners, individuals and citizens in the 21st century, it has been inspirational to examine so many creative and successful approaches. This opportunity has reminded me of why I became a teacher, reinvigorated my passions and reinforced my beliefs. My thinking was shaped and inspired by the following key messages that repeatedly emerged:

* + **The Importance of Seeking Strengths:** We need to remember that children cannot become real learners until they have a sense of wholeness. We need to help students find and celebrate strengths in themselves and in others. We need a positive and holistic approach to wellbeing that identifies the assets and potentials of children, rather than pinpointing deficits.
  + **The Strength of the Ordinary:** The most effective strategies and programs will often be the simplest or most ordinary. The everyday magic of ordinary humans teaching, connecting and building relationships has the capacity to create major life changes.
  + **The Need to Embed:** Teachers everywhere face complex and competing demands and expectations. Educators must be creative in addressing multiple outcomes, to create experiences where learning occurs more naturally and to ensure that wellbeing practices are instilled in every facet of school life.
  + **The Power of a Group:** It is easy to feel isolated and inundated. Many conversations centred on investigating ways to collaborate, using teamwork to build classroom and school communities of inquirers. Teachers spoke about the impact of developing coordinated problem-solving groups, locally and globally, and of empowering students to own and drive initiatives.
  + **The Impact of Language:** Our thoughts play such a pivotal role in influencing our feelings and behaviour. An essential element in nurturing confidence, security and positive attitudes lies in the way we speak. The simple act of storytelling, for example, can have profound effects in building and making connections.
  + **The Value of Reflecting:** Finding moments and space for reflection is vital for teachers and their students—being open to opportunities for contemplation; short walks, outdoor learning areas, reading or writing in notebooks of poetry or reflection can be powerful tools.
  + **The Role of Creativity:** Creativity is a vital skill and a practice that needs to be taught and nurtured in all staff and students. Creative thinking, problem solving and expression need to be explicitly and implicitly taught inside and outside the classroom.