Premier’s **Anika Foundation** Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Resiliency HQ

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*I believe that explicit and systematic teaching of Positive Psychology (or skills for psychological wellbeing) can enhance student resiliency and academic performance, and that the two areas are not mutually exclusive.*

My study question focused on exploring how elements of positive psychology can be meaningfully integrated within traditional teaching and learning in order to provide students with adaptive coping and resiliency skills. Specifically, I wanted to understand: What are the psychological and educational benefits of teaching middle school (years 6–7 transition) students positive psychology interventions; what effect might it have on preventing depression and increasing psychological wellbeing?

With the scholarship my overarching goal was to develop an evidenced-backed, school-based positive psychology program that incorporates quality teaching and draws explicit links to the Stage 4 NSW English, and Personal and Social curriculums. Below are a series of research areas relevant to my broader research question, program goals and study outcome(s).

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively new field of study, having emerged within the academic literature at the turn of the century (circa 1999). However, in this relatively short length of time it has rapidly become a leading wave in psychological research and currently stands as a NSW Department of Education research priority. The goal of positive psychology is to understand and promote the human strengths that enable individuals and communities (that is, schools) to thrive and flourish (Seligman, 2011). Regarding adolescence, evidence-based positive psychology research highlights its efficacy in buffering against the onset of emerging such mental health problems as depression (Diener & Dean, 2007; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2006).

Positive psychology is based on the PERMA model, PERMA being an acronym derived from:

* + positive emotion
  + engagement
  + relationships
  + meaning and purpose
  + accomplishment

PERMA is otherwise known as Wellbeing Theory. Seligman argues that no one of the PERMA elements defines wellbeing, but each contributes to it. And each element have the following properties:

* 1. It must contribute to wellbeing.
  2. Many people pursue it for its own sake, not merely to get any of the other elements.
  3. It is defined and measured independently of the other elements (exclusively).

Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals (2008)

Goal two from the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals (2008 p. 9) highlights the importance of teaching students psychological wellbeing skills. For instance, the document posits that students should be able to ‘manage their emotions, have a sense of optimism, develop the personal values of resilience and empathy, and have the knowledge to maintain a satisfying life’

(ACARA, 2013, p.9). Throughout the completion of pre-tour research as well as post-tour consultancy it became evident that many teachers and schools lack the basic knowledge to fully address goal two. Specifically, teachers are experts in subject content and pedagogy, whereas many of the desired outcomes related to goal two are directed more broadly at the development of the whole child in ways previously untaught by educators.

Personal and Social Capability

Social and Personal Capability is a new and previously untaught curriculum. Ideally this curriculum area should be integrated within traditional learning areas (such as English and Math). However, the curriculum permits teachers to apply this learning area as a standalone subject, which would be particularly relevant for those working in educational settings with high levels of student mental health. The Personal and Social Capability argues that, ‘Students with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, develop resilience and a sense of self-worth, resolve conflict, engage in teamwork and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.’ (ACARA, 2013 p.3)*.*

There is now extensive research that supports the much needed inclusion for a Personal and Social Capability Curriculum within the Australian education system. Specifically, there are clear benefits to teaching students psychological wellbeing skills in terms of significant improvements to both their mental health and their academic performance. For instance, findings from a recent meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students; showed that compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement [i.e. NAPLAN]. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011).

Study Tour Learning Activities

*Beck Institute*

Thought - What we think affects how we act and feel.
Behaviour - What we do affects how wer think and feel.
Emotion - What we feel affects how we think and do. The Beck Institute is the world’s foremost psychological research and training centre explicitly dedicated to cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). Moreover, cognitive behavioural therapy is the most evidence-based treatment for depression that does not include medication, such as anti-depressants. It was a fantastic opportunity to attend the Beck Institute and I completed core module one, Treating Depression and Suicide.

The core tenants of cognitive behavioural therapy stipulate that our thoughts influence our feelings, which in turn have sway over our behaviour (see diagram at right). This process can result in a downward spiral that is typically associated with depression which usually takes place over many months or even years. For example, a person might have a series of negative life experiences, for example, loss of a job, relationship break-up, failed exam, friendship complications. Those negative experiences can create a mental schema or way of viewing the world that is maladaptive and can trigger negative feelings that significantly restrict a person’s thought–action repertoire, thus making life unbearable and seem hopeless.

School-based programs that include cognitive behaviour therapy within their framework are among the most effective in treating youth depression. Such programs work by having students identify the triggers that lead to a downward spiral as well as dysfunctional thinking patterns in general. The goal of such programs is to teach students more adaptive ways to view their current life circumstance as well as helping them to develop small action steps towards a preferred future or value.

*University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center*

The University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center is the world’s first and most reputable in the field. It is chaired by the creator of positive psychology, Professor Martin Seligman, and is dedicated to the scientific study of positive psychology in various forms, for instance, education, neuroscience, social media, the workplace and mental wellbeing. During my time at the Positive Psychology Center I was able to meet Program Director Mark Pawalski, World Wellbeing Project Director Andy Schwartz, and Character Strengths in Schools Academic Leader Angela Duckworth.

The Positive Psychology Centre has been extensively researching Virtues In Action (VIA, Peterson & Seligman, 2004), otherwise known as an antithesis to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders. VIA is a hierarchical classification of positive characteristics. It consists of six virtues that form 24 character strengths.

Research findings based on VIA Signature Strengths include:

* + Strengths can be used to buffer against mental health problems and traumatic events.
  + The five key strengths associated with wellbeing are hope, love, zest, gratitude and curiosity (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2004).
  + The most common strengths among youth are gratitude, humour and love, and academic achievement among school children is predicted by perseverance (Peterson and Park, 2009).

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge**: Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

* + **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
  + **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
  + **Judgment** [critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
  + **Love of Learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one’s own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
  + **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

2. **Courage**: Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

* + **Bravery** [valour]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
  + **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
  + **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions
  + **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigour, energy] Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. **Humanity**: Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

* + **Love**: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
  + **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, ‘niceness’]: Doing favours and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
  + **Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

4. **Justice**: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

* + **Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one’s share
  + **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
  + **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

5. **Temperance**: Strengths that protect against excess

* + **Forgiveness**: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
  + **Humility**: Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
  + **Prudence**: Being careful about one’s choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
  + **Self-Regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions

6. **Transcendence**: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

* + **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
  + **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
  + **Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  + **Humour** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
  + **Spirituality** [faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

*Yale’s Center for Emotional Intelligence*

I had the great pleasure to attend Yale University and meet with Dr Mark Brackett, founder of the RULER program (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating Emotions). RULER is a comprehensive whole-school, skills-based program that is designed to teach students emotional literacy skills. The RULER program is research-backed and grounded in the belief that academic success is enhanced and improved when students can understand and

channel their thoughts and feelings appropriately. Research based on the program show that within one year students who received emotional literacy training (i.e. RULER) received higher end-of-year grades in writing, reading, social studies and science. This finding is complementary to the benefits of teaching students psychological wellbeing skills in general.

*Toronto University*

My visit to Toronto University focused on ground breaking research linking positive psychology to the treatment of depression. This new modality of therapy is referred to as positive psychotherapy (PPT) and was developed by Dr Tayyab Rashid in conjunction with the grandfather of positive psychology, Professor Martin Seligman. During our time together, Dr Rashid explained that in order for PPT to hold up against other interventions for treating depression it had to be completely strengths-based and could not include any of the elements found within the already well-established and validated cognitive therapy model. PPT is a 14-session treatment intervention that aims to build a positive upwards spiral in depressed clients. During treatment clients learn about their strengths, such as optimistic thinking patterns, forgiveness, savoring positive experience and gratitude, etc., and how these factors and others can be used to reduce depressive symptoms and ultimately lead to a more satisfying and fulfilling life.

Recent findings based on the efficacy of PPT to treat depression show that it is more effective than treatments as usual and antidepressants over a 12-month period (see Figure 1).

Dr Rashid and I discussed how PPT builds on Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotion. That is, how positive emotions increase an individual’s thought–action repertoire and problem-solving ability. Moreover, recent research into brain plasticity demonstrates that talking therapies can significantly change functions and structures of the brain, for instance, telling and retelling can facilitate the development of new neural pathways, whereas antidepressant medication can only treat existing neural pathways (Rossouw, 2010). Thus, PPT aims to induce positive emotions through exploring a preferred future, one in which the individual is using their strengths. This in turn increases the individual’s thought–action repertoire, which over time may generate new and more adaptive neural pathways (that is, coping and resilience strategies).

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| PPT=positive psychotherapy vs. Control=standard treatment. |

This discussion and understanding of the broader implications of positive psychology has informed both my counselling practice and desire to create a positive psychological wellbeing program for NSW school students. Specifically, there are clear advantages in terms of increasing childhood resiliency with regards to providing students with strategies that induce positive emotions that increase their thought-action repertoire and adaptive coping skills.

School Visits

Throughout my study tour I was able to visit a number of schools that are implementing positive psychological (or strengths-based) social-emotional learning programs. The following is a brief overview of some of the key ingredients that I discovered.

*The Shipley School*

*A quality education is about becoming the best possible learner  
and our best possible selves; both are important.*

The Shipley School is an amazing private school located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the United States. What I particularly appreciated about my time at Shipley was that, despite its affluence, the Shipley School demonstrated a commitment to social justice, character development and social–emotional learning. Discussions with the Director of Student Wellbeing, Dr Usha Baltmore, left me feeling more committed to the need to include psychological wellbeing skills alongside traditional teaching and learning. The Shipley School taught this lesson throughout all of its key learning areas through the simple motto of ‘best possible work’ (that is, academic skills) and ‘best possible self’ (ethical wellbeing skills).

*Purnell School*

Purnell School is an inspirational private ladies school located on a converted farm and homestead in New Jersey. Purnell is a second-chance school for female students with learning difficulties who have not succeeded in a traditional education setting. Students newly attending Purnell transition through what is referred as a ‘demystification’ process. That involves being matched one-to-one with a teacher mentor and being informally assessed for strengths and weaknesses. Upon completing their first month at Purnell, the findings from the observation period are shared with the student and her family. This involves the demystification of previously held negative self-perceptions about learning and personal abilities. Following that process, an individually tailored learning plan is developed to remediate academic weakness while building upon under-utilized personal strengths.

A key focus during a student’s time at Purnell involves participation in the Affinities Program. That is essentially a self-directed strengths-based program that has been integrated with the formal curriculum. The Affinities Program involves students building and developing a personally selected strength through a semester- long (extra credit) project- based learning task, which typically has a series of hurdles and culminates in a capstone project. During discussions with Purnell students, it became evident that their sense of self-worth had increased substantially as a result of the Affinities Program: they held fewer negative self-beliefs.

*The difference at Purnell then with my other school is that the teachers here never give up on you,  
there are always new options to help you succeed*.

—a student

*R.H. King Academy*

R.H. King Academy is a public charter school located in a low socio-economic and high multicultural district of Toronto, Ontario, in Canada. The school had implemented a series of initiatives and programs to support student mental health, including a designated block of learning time used specifically to teach a purpose- made High School Mental Health curriculum. The curriculum includes basic psychological literacy skills and psycho-education about common mental health disorders, including prevention strategies.

In addition, R.H. King Academy teaches senior students mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques via a high school curriculum. Preliminary results show that participants in the program are demonstrating lower scores for youth depression and anxiety on standardized tests.

*KIPP Infinity*

KIPP Infinity is a low-socioeconomic and high multicultural charter school located in West Harlem, in New York City. I was particularly keen to attend a KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) school as they are rapidly expanding across the United States and have a strong reputation for their academic success and strengths-based culture.

It was certainly evident that KIPP Infinity students and staff embraced the Virtues in Action Character Strengths developed by Seligman and Peterson (2004). Moreover, KIPP implemented a designated character development and leadership curriculum for one learning period each week, which involves identifying and using one’s character strengths. This program initiative and the broader school culture clearly made a difference to student learning and wellbeing.

Conclusion

My study tour was an amazingly life changing experience and as a result I have made lasting friendships, and learnt more about positive psychology than I could have possibility imagined. From this unique opportunity I have decided to return to university and evaluate the efficacy of a mindfulness-based resiliency program for school children. However, in closing, I would like to sum up some key findings from my study tour that may be useful to those interested in developing their own strengths-based curriculum.

* + **Strong school leadership**: In all the schools I visited there was a commitment to student wellbeing as being equally important as academic achievement. School leaders inspire and drive a positive workplace change that supports and enriches student development.
  + **Whole-school approach**: Robust and sustainable wellbeing programs involve the whole school. It is important that teachers understand, value and take ownership of the wellbeing initiative within their school for their long-term success and sustainability.
  + **Family involvement**: Students’ most influential role models are their parents and family. Including students’ families in a whole-school wellbeing program not only adds meaning and build relationships, but it also provides students with opportunities to rehearse their wellbeing skills in different contexts, such as at home.
  + **Local schools**: Local schools know their students best and no two demographic areas are alike. Schools need to have an understanding of the challenges experienced by their school community and develop a wellbeing policy that best meets their unique circumstances.
  + **Evidenced-based**: Successful psychological wellbeing programs are backed by evidence and are more than mere pop psychology. The challenge for educators is to creatively and meaningful align the benefits of psychological literacy with traditional learning outcomes.
  + **Resilience is relevant**: Skills for psychological wellbeing are just as important and relevant for today’s 21st century learner as skills for academic achievement. The need for students to have resiliency skills is a necessity in our fast-paced, knowledge-based global economy.
  + **Never give up**: Students value teachers that demonstrate resilience themselves and hold the fundamental belief that all problems have solutions.

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