Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

An investigation of best-practice models of resilience and positive psychology across a range of contexts and cultures

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A study conducted by Resilient Youth Australia in 2013 that examined 4500 students in years 7 to 12 found that one in three girls and one in four boys are depressed. Further, 34 per cent of girls and 30 per cent of boys felt constantly under strain and unable to overcome difficulties associated with resilience. More than half of the students surveyed identified with low levels of resilience.

The 2015 *Healthy Schools, Healthy Futures* report found that more than 60 per cent of the students surveyed who were bullied did not seek help. In addition, the 2015 *Tell Them From Me* survey reported that 30 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls reported moderate to high levels of depression. Low levels of resilience have been linked to increased susceptibility to depression and emotional learning difficulties (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Depression is predicted to be the largest health problem in the world by 2020 (WHO, 2012).

Recent research indicates that, rather than waiting for depression to occur, interventions can be put in place that focus on human strengths, happiness and flourishing (Gable and Haidt, 2005). Teaching students and staff how to improve levels of wellbeing and resilience leads to cultivating positive emotions, fostering greater engagement, improving relationships and increasing levels of achievement (Seligman, 2011). Increasing resilience has been shown to improve students’ attendance rates, wellbeing and ability to achieve (Challen, 2010).

There is an identifiable need not only to educate students through wellbeing, resilience and emotional intelligence training to improve their ability to handle adverse situations, but also to provide for better support channels for teachers, parents and the wider community who facilitate in implementing these programs. In a society that is more informed but less empowered,my research will provide the platform required to bring existing practices into line with the latest ‘best practice’ models in positive psychology, resilience and wellbeing.

Focus of the study

In my study tour I set out to investigate the impacts that best-practice models of resilience and positive psychology have across a range of contexts and cultures. My main focus was to identify effective strategies that can be used to empower students across a range of cognitive, behaviourial, social and emotional learning domains.

**Resilience: ‘**the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversity of life’ (Grotberg, 1995).

Significant learning

*Newcastle and Sydney, Australia, 24–27 May, 2016*

My study tour began when I met with Professor Gordon Parker, founding director of the Black Dog Institute, NSW. The aim of the meeting was to gain a deeper understanding of the paradigms that I would be exploring on my study tour overseas.

Professor Parker identified the need for an investigation into targeted strategies such as immersion projects, support check-ins and individual wellbeing that could be used to empower adolescents in the area of resilience. Professor Parker identified three core tenets that must underpin best-practice models for anyone dealing with depressive illnesses and mood disorders:

* + displaying an element of frankness which in turn leads to trust
  + providing opportunities for the person to ‘operationalise hope’
  + letting them know that you are with them for the long haul.

Professor John Fischetti, Head of the School of Education at the University of Newcastle, identified teacher buy-in as a crucial factor that underpins the success of any resilience and positive psychology program.

*New York City and New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 27 May–June 3, 2016*

* + **Harlem, May 31 – Linda Lantieri and Public School 112**

In New York I met with Linda Lantieri, Director of the Inner Resilience Program. At PS 112 daily teaching practice incorporates mandala colouring, mindfulness practice, self-regulation and self-awareness. The process of repetitive calming exercises through practicing mindfulness puts ‘an emotional strengthening deposit’ into the brain that in turn strengthens resilience. Three key findings from the Inner Resilience Program are:

* 1. The Inner Resilience Program had clearly been effective with younger children.
  2. The effort and enthusiasm of the teacher is paramount if the program is to succeed (teacher buy-in).
  3. Foster and support the social and emotional needs of the children first before attempting to teach.
  + **Yale University, Center for Emotional Intelligence, 1 June**

Dr Marc Bracket and his team have developed a social and emotional learning program called RULER that aims to build the emotional intelligence of children by increasing self-awareness and self-appraisal skills that assist them with regulating their emotions. RULER is an acronym that stands for recognizing, understanding, labelling, expressing and regulating emotions.

The RULER model is domain specific and age appropriate. There are specific lessons designed for each age group and the program demands that each school address aspects of cultural responsiveness in its charter. RULER has a focus on self-care. Self-regulation and entrepreneurship have proven to be integral components of the RULER model. Furthermore, entrepreneurship helps people become more resilient because they learn to deal with failure and accept challenges more readily. Entrepreneurship allows students to develop protocols designed to allow for taking calculated risk.

* + **The Eagle Aacdemy, Bronx New, York, 3 June**

The Eagle Academy was founded by David C. Banks in response to the New York Small Schools Movement, in which the aim was to develop schools that were culturally inclusive and designed to meet the needs of the specific and unique demographic of New York. An alarming report had surfaced prior to 2004 showing that 70 per cent of the New York state prison population came from seven neighbourhoods in New York City. The first Eagle Academy for Boys was established in the Bronx in 2004 as a response to that report and a strong desire to diminish the ‘prison pipeline’.

The Eagle Academy has a strong focus on pastoral care initiatives that are both culturally and context specific. Pastoral care is catered specifically to the African heritage of the students through student mentoring, rituals and community involvement.

In line with the context and culture specific approach, the Eagle Academy in the Bronx has come up with the acronym CLEAR, which stands for:

* + confidence
  + leadership
  + effort
  + academic excellence
  + resilience.

CLEAR is used at every available opportunity to give students the opportunity to refocus. For example, if there has been a disagreement the students are asked, ‘Are you being CLEAR?’ This approach refers directly to the underpinning themes explicitly taught within the acronym. Are they being *confident*? Are they demonstrating *leadership*? Have they given their best *effort*? Are they achieving *academic excellence*? And are they showing the necessary *resilience*? This was one of the best concepts I have seen in action.

*Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 5–6 June*

* + **Dalhousie University, Resilience Research Center, Professor Michael Ungar**

I met with Dr Michael Ungar, Director of the Resilience Research Centre in Canada. As a world leader in his field he put forward some insightful ideas, borne out of research, that shifted my thinking in about resilience:

* + Shifting the conversation around the concept of resilience

There is a need to shift the conversation from resilience as a disorder that is not really talked about (or is viewed in a negative light) to reframing resilience as a protective mechanism that, when fostered and cultivated, allows people to flourish and do well.

* + The Indigenous relationship

Dr Ungar suggested that what is needed for Indigenous communities is a counter narrative that does not focus on a disorder, but rather on recognising their culture and the connection the Indigenous communities have to it and their land. Indigenous elders should be given the opportunity to inculcate values and work with the community if the practice of resilience is to have a meaningful and lasting effect on this demographic.

* + Social policy and the ecological perspective

Developing resilience does not occur in a vacuum. Social policy forms an integral component of any resilience practice. Considering the interplay that the wider ecological perspectives have on a young person’s resilience is vital in maximizing the efficacy of the intervention.

* + Circus arts as a pathway to resilience

In Canada circus arts is an emerging field in resilience. Circus arts allows for entry at many points and gives students an opportunity to develop skills and resilience with few prerequisites in the area of physical literacy.

*Helsinki, Finland, 8–9 June*

* + **The University of Helsinki, June 9**

I met with educational researcher Anna Mikkola at the University of Helsinki. The the meeting focused on the following areas:

* Positive Psychology and Resilience

Culture specific risk factors for at-risk students have been identified in research spanning across the globe. While the context that applies to resilience may be different, the coping mechanisms are the same. Resilience is a social construction and it must be contextual to have the most lasting impact for the child.

* Shifting the conversation around high school dropout

High school dropout is often viewed as a student showing low resilience, but the Finns see it differently. Dropping out to take a different path is seen as being resilient and even entrepreneurial. This shift in the conversation empowers a student’s unique strengths rather than imposing a belief system that has been legitimised in conventional academic pathways.

* The Finnish School System

Several reasons lead to the Finnish School System’s success: the student population is homogenous; the teachers are highly educated (a masters degree is a prerequisite to access higher rates of pay and benefits); there is ‘generational cultural capital’ that is underpinned by a quest for learning, and learning frameworks are geared towards student-based pedagogies. Furthermore, the system does not allow for elite schools, which further reinforces the homogeneity of the system.

*Stockholm, Sweden, 10–12 June*

I met with Laura Ferrer-Wreder PhD, from Stockholm University. In terms of resilience, questions of identity (Who am I? Where am I going?) are pivotal points of departure in understanding the factors that underpin resilience. Identity becomes a salient point when one is facing different situations, whether they be crises or opportunities. For adolescents, having a good understanding and connection with their identity positively affects their ability to develop resilience.

Dr Ferrer-Wreder put forward the view that students should undertake a diverse range of pursuits. This gives them a wide range of opportunities in which to build resilience, cultivate self-regulation and discover their talents. This practice guards against over-investing in groups of individuals with narrow skill sets, which has been shown to negatively affect the development of ‘holistic resilience’ in a child.

Dr Ferrer-Wreder’s work in this area has led to programs such as PATHS and FAST TRACK, structured programs for social and emotional competence for pre-school ages and up. These programs provide solid research data for improving the social and emotional learning needs of students.

* + Escapism

Dr Ferrer-Wreder identified escapism as an ideal way for children to connect and re-connect with their social and emotional learning through movies and other fictitious escapes. Any activity that allows a child to escape from their current circumstances helps to reset their emotional centre, which allows for a greater reception of new learning and growth.

* + Bullying programs

Finland’s KIVA program appears to be addressing bullying in a positive way and has been well received in Scandinavia. Programs that address bullying must be strengths-based to give bullied students strategies, but must not neglect the bully. Meaningful results have occurred from addressing both the victim and the bully.

*London, United Kingdom, 14–23 June*

* + **University College London, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience – 14 June**

I met with Dr Lucy Foulkes, a researcher from the University College, London, who is leading a study investigating the effects of mindfulness on adolescents’ brains. This trial is comparing 300 students who are undertaking a ‘dot.b course’ that is run by the Mindfulness in Schools Project with another 300 students who are undertaking a different social and emotional learning intervention. This study aims to shed light on the value of mindfulness when pitched against a controlled social and emotional learning intervention.

* + **University of Brighton, 16 June, *The Resilience Research Cluster***

I met with Professor Angie Hart to discuss the groundbreaking research being undertaken by the Resilience Research Cluster at the University of Brighton. Professor Hart and her team are leading the way internationally with such programs such the Community University Partnership Program, Resilient Therapy, Academic Resilience Approach and Boingboing. The University of Brighton has the largest number of researchers in the world looking into a wide range of resilience research projects.

The Academic Resilience Approach has been identified as the leading resilience approach in the field. This program, developed by Professor Angie Hart, ticks all the boxes as assessed by the Resilience Framework (a checklist to identify what aspects of resilience are covered in programs). This program can be viewed with resources at the YoungMinds website: youngminds.org.uk

Professor Hart and her team agree that the best resilience programs are bespoke interventions that are applied directly to the school setting and that are cognisant of context and culture. The staff and student relationship is bidirectional. A happy and supported staff member will pass this positivity to the students, which in turn will decrease pressure and stress for all concerned. Resilience programs must engage all stakeholders for the most effective outcome.

* + **Wellington College, Berkshire, 17 June**

Wellington College are world leaders in resilience and wellbeing education. Wellington College enlisted the help of Simon Walker from Mind.World Education, who has developed a system called AS Tracking. Students are surveyed and based on the results teachers, parents and significant others are provided with data that can help predict how a student might respond in certain situations. A key component of the survey relates to asking questions that will give a better understanding of the psycho-social frameworks that can affect students’ learning and development. Some key questions are:

* + How much do you trust yourself?
  + How much do you trust others?
  + How much are you willing to embrace change?

Wellington also uses a coaching philosophy that focuses on training teachers to ask students relevant questions to help them develop self-regulation and positive direction skills. Guiding questions such as the ones above allow students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their own personal characteristics and, in turn, better apply themselves across a range of situations.

* + **University of Bath, 20 June**

I met with Sam Carr PhD to discuss the role of attachment theory on resilience. Dr Carr holds the view that the most powerful change agent that we face on this earth is threat. How we handle threats relates directly to resilience. Children who become immune or desensitized to threats learn:

* + not to show emotion — they don’t express their feelings because it has been reinforced that expressing yourself does not get you anything
  + the only way to comfort yourself is through others.

Developing resilience can assist in the overall wellbeing of children who may exhibit these characteristics.

* + Providing frames of reference

Providing appropriate frames of reference that address conceptual understanding of a child’s sense of self help empower a child across a range of learning and contextual domains.

* + Shifting the conversation: Are we really resilient?

Some argue that some children who have suffered from a lack of emotional attachment in fact become more resilient. Looking at this concept with a different lens, it can be argued that what those children become is masters of deception. They are not as resilient as first thought due to their desire to disengage from different aspects of their environment.

* + Changing the relationship with failure

If students are to become more resilient, we must change their relationship with failure. Students must be taught to see failure as an opportunity to reset and take stock. Failure should be seen as a checkpoint, not an endpoint – a marker for discovery. Cultivating a student’s relationship with failure so that they see value in the experience and an opportunity to explore their unique strengths because of it, is a critical component of self-regulating resilience.

* + The corporatisation of mindfulness

Dr Carr questioned the corporatisation of mindfulness, which is using mindfulness practices to improve work productivity or to help people to deal with others in a better way. He offers the view that mindfulness practice should be first and foremost about relinquishing control, and any other gains are by products of that.

* + **YOUNGMINDS – Resilience: ‘Ordinary Magic’ and Learnable Skills, 21 June**

YOUNGMINDS is a charity organisation that focuses on the wellbeing and mental health of young people. I attended the course Resilience: ‘Ordinary Magic’ and Learnable Skills.

The course was excellent in providing practical strategies that can be used on a range of levels not only to build resilience in young people, but to identify critical moments when self-reflection in a given situation can lead to empowering opportunities. Key findings include:

* + Provide students with various frames of reference that they can relate to, to improve confidence or even garner support. For instance, ‘Richard Branson struggled at school and became a billionaire.’ or ‘Dizzy Rascal (Rapper) had a really bad record at school but his music teacher showed faith in him. He honed in on the one thing he loved which was music.’
  + Help children find perspective.
  + Help children understand their own identity.
  + Resilience is about losing the attachment to certain situations.
  + Teaching children to develop empathy is a way to help them understand other people’s vulnerabilities and in turn feel more comfortable with their own.
  + Allow children to develop and foster imagination. Allowing children to think, to ponder, to be creative helps them find their own answers to life’s questions that may not be evident to them in the real world.

*Paris, France, 25 June*

* + **Graham Bassett, Barrister-at-law, Digital Resilience**

Cyberlaw and digital resilience intersect to forge a new frontier in the online world. More than 50 per cent of young people report being cyberbullied, and this statistic adds credible support for the need for education in this area. Mr Bassett identified five critical areas in which digital resilience has a significant effect on the developing child:

* + We are now dealing with a generation of children that have known nothing but an online world.
  + Children are often unaware of the wider ramifications that their digital footprint may have on them later in life.
  + The physical propinquity of the online world is a cause for concern. Damaging behaviours can occur because of the ‘veil of secrecy’ attached to online identity.
  + There is no self-authentication in cyberspace, leading to issues of false-identity in the digital world.
  + The nature of the online world allows information to be disseminated almost instantaneously across the world. While the online world may provide new and unique challenges in the realm of resilience and wellbeing, the strategies to overcome such challenges can be drawn from such existing modalities as self-regulation, support check-ins, developing growth mindsets, and mindfulness practice.

Recommendations

* + Resilience must be viewed as a component of a wider ecological perspective that is closely interrelated with social policy.
  + Self-regulation is a precursor to resilience, so training teachers, parents and significant others to seize opportunities that allow students to improve their ability to self-regulate are vitally important.
  + Students must be given opportunities to build resilience across a range of learning domains.
  + There is a vital need to reconfigure the perceptions attached to failure.
  + We must be better skilled at providing students with opportunities for self-discovery and support them in the quest to operationalise hope across a range of settings.
  + Resilience and positive psychology interventions must be specifically linked to the context and culture of the demographic to achieve the most effective outcome.

Conclusion

To maximise the efficacy of any resilience, positive psychology and wellbeing intervention, schools must closely consider the context and culture of their demographic. The NSW Department of Education’s Wellbeing Framework provides schools with a platform for connecting students with their learning by giving them opportunities to succeed and ultimately thrive.

Best-practice models of resilience, positive psychology and wellbeing practice must provide students with the opportunity to self-regulate their learning across a range of learning domains. The ultimate aim for any program in this area is to provide opportunities for students to operationalise hope so that they can flourish in the area of holistic wellbeing.

Finally, resilience programs are bidirectional and engagement of both staff and students is paramount for the success of the intervention.

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