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Positive Psychology

My classroom research paper, written in October 2009, for my Masters in Education asked the question: **Why and how should resilience be fostered in schools?**

The revised New Zealand curriculum and similar curricula internationally, recognise the importance of wellbeing and resilience as an integral part of school life. However, depression is evident at a younger age than ever before. The Christchurch Health and Development Study (2002), a longitudinal study of a birth cohort of 1,265 children, born in the Christchurch region in 1977, reported that 13% of teenagers between 14 and 16 years of age developed clinical depression. The authors noted (p. 12) that as well as other potential outcomes, depressed adolescents were at increased risk of school failure, anxiety disorders, later depression and a reduced likelihood of entering university.

If having students achieve to the best of their ability, is a key driver at school, then fostering student social and emotional wellbeing is a vital means to this end. According to Bernard et al. (2007, p. 3) resilience, positive social orientation and positive work orientation are factors that strongly affect social and emotional wellbeing.

There are multiple tools that can measure resilience whether it is defined as a trait, a process or an outcome. A wider array of tools can also measure a broader range of psychosocial conditions and there exists a vast assortment of programmes that claim to effect change. A major concern is that the validity of such tools, designed predominantly for an American setting, may bear little relevance to the New Zealand culture.

In Australasia there has been an increased focus on the work of Professor Martin Seligman. The teachings of the Positive Psychology movement can be seen in various schools in both Australia and recently, New Zealand. Seligman and his faculty from Penn University led in-service teacher training in the summer of 2008 at Geelong Grammar, Victoria. I visited Geelong Grammar, Corio Campus in April 2009 when in Melbourne at the AHISA Senior Staff Conference: Lead like it matters.

At the end of 2008, at a staff only day, it became clear that many of the teachers at Marsden wanted to see an increase in the resilience of our students. There is a wide array of programmes we could implement in an attempt to increase resilience and to foster better social and emotional outcomes: in fact Associate Professor Andrew Martin at the University of Sydney has published interesting research specifically on Academic Resilience.

The Senior Management Team at Marsden made a decision to apply the tenets of Positive Psychology, a branch of psychology that focuses on cultivating positive emotion, positive character traits and positive institutions. Consequently we have had a team of teachers explicitly teaching facets of this programme from the beginning of 2010 to our Year 11-13 girls. An advisor has been Denise Quinlan MAPP, Queenstown, who led a full staff workshop at the end of 2009 and made some suggestions about the design of our programme. Formal training is not yet available in New Zealand and so academic isolation is an issue.

My scholarship from the Heads of Independent Schools funded travel to Melbourne to visit a cluster of schools and practitioners who were part of the 2008 movement to begin teaching Positive Psychology. My travel allowed me to see how they have developed their teaching and to what extent it has permeated the culture of their schools. This research has allowed the PPP team (Positive, Purposeful People) at Marsden to reflect on their successes to date and to inspire adaptations to the current programme.

References

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- Fergusson, D. M., & Woodward, L. J. (2002). Mental health, educational and social role outcomes of depressed adolescents. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 59, 225-231.

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