

# **SABBATICAL REPORT**

**Positive Psychology in Education:**

**Strengths Programmes in Primary Schools**

**Ros McQuillan-Mains, Principal of Tainui School**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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I am very appreciative of my Deputy Principal Kaye Ballantyne for her capable leadership of the school during those 10 weeks ably supported by Ruth Harley, Cliff Stearn and the Tainui Staff Team.

The opportunity to investigate a part of education that will have positive benefits for both children and adults, and the chance to reflect and revitalize myself as a leader has been granted by the Ministry of Education. A special thanks to Denise Quinlan for her guidance, contacts and wisdom. To Jenny Fox Eades for arranging school contacts, modeling the strengths daily, hosting my stay, and showing me wisdom and giving me challenges. To Suzy C

Green for her dynamic enthusiasm and wonderful communication. To my principal colleagues in Australia and the UK who willingly shared their programmes and experiences, helping me to gain a more in depth knowledge of strength based programmes in school.

To my Positive Education principals in the South Dunedin Cluster for their friendship, collegiality and strong belief in Positive Psychology.

To my husband Rick, whose love and support made for an unbelievable time.

## **Background and Rationale**

Tainui School became part of a 3 year contract from 2006-2009 with South Dunedin Schools to implement a programme "Circle Time" which fosters the emotional well-being of children. This was successfully implemented in all classrooms at Tainui School, giving children a safe structure to voice their emotions. In the final year, I was part of the Circle Time Principal's Cluster group's visit to Melbourne to view schools who had implemented positive psychology through the strengths approach, and part of a seminar focusing on strengths at Victoria University.

Denise Quinlan, an Education Consultant studying her PhD through Pennsylvania University facilitated this trip. I came back inspired by the way this approach had changed adults in schools and the strategies it could give children to cope with difficulties in life and anxiety.

The South Dunedin Schools Cluster stayed together as a group-committed to implement Positive Education in our schools. The programme was launched in 2010 with a Teacher Only day facilitated by Denise Quinlan. Cluster schools staff attended. In March 2010 along with Mary McHugh-(staff member and lead teacher), I attended a 3 day training course in the strengths approach,

led by Jenny Fox Eades using stories. Stories are a powerful way for children to recognise and see the strengths in others and themselves.

As a school in 2009, we had established through consultation a set of 7 values. These values were explored and explicitly taught to children within the year, discussed at assembly, and recognized with certificates.

In 2010 we aligned the strengths to the values and explored our understanding of the strengths, values, and how you would see this in a practical way for adults and children. At the beginning of 2011 the South Dunedin Schools Positive Education Cluster had another Teacher Only Day launching the focus for the year-"Effective Relationships." The key strengths of Forgiveness, Fairness, Gratitude, Friendship, Love and Kindness are to be explored in schools fostering both teacher well-being and student well-being.

While I was well aware of the benefits of a Strengths Based Programme, I was keen to have the opportunity to read, study and reflect to gain knowledge and visit schools who had implemented the strengths programme successfully identifying the key components. This sabbatical also would give me time to explore the practical aspect of using strengths in my own life.

## **Sabbatical Programme**

### **1. Read and Reflect**

1. Celebrating Strengths-Jenny Fox Eades  
2008 CAPP Press

“The Goal of Celebrating Strengths is to build flourishing school communities, flourishing staff, flourishing pupils”.

Jenny’s book is divided into 3 sections-Theory, Practice and Classroom and School implications.

Jenny has a section in her introduction about forming positive habits. This was very evident in my visit with her and how she built the strengths into her own life-noting negative thoughts, understanding why they occur, and using strategies that counter these negative thoughts.

Her incredible depth of knowledge and understanding of the individual strengths, and her continual reflection and exploration of seeing those strengths in others, and in the stories she told.

2. Your Child’s Strengths-Jenifer Fox  
Penguin Books Ltd
3. Evidence based life coaching for Senior Students  
S Green, A Grant, J Rynsardt  
International Coaching Psychology Review Vol 2, March 2007
4. What and Why is Positive Psychology?  
S.Gable and Haidt  
Review of General Psychology 2005, Vol 9, No. 2
5. Positive Educational Practices Framework. A tool for facilitating the work of educational psychologists in promoting well being  
Toni Noble and Helen McGrath
6. Positive Education:Positive Psychology and Classroom Intervention  
Seligman Martin E.P, Ernst Randal M, Gillham Jane, Reivich Karen, Linkems March, Oxford Review of Education 35 3 , 293-311
7. The Science of Optimism-Tali Sharot ,Time Magazine June 6, 2011 adapted from The Optimum Bias
8. Harvard Magazine-April 2011 Building Resilience  
Seligman Martin E.P

## **2. Professional Development**

1. Interview with Dr Suzy Green
2. Attend the Australia Positive Psychology in Education Symposium
3. Attend the Applied Positive Psychology in Education Workshop
4. Interview Jenny Fox Eades and observe and reflect on her modeling the strengths approach in her work and life
5. Complete a daily mindfulness activity stating an intention, a dedication and a strength that supported the intention.

## **3. Visits**

1. Bollington Cross Primary in Macclesfield
2. Frodingham School-Scunthorpe
3. Henderson Ave-Scunthorpe  
Cath Lloyd
4. John Donne School, Peckham, London  
Evelyn Holdsworth and Nick Tidesley-joint head teachers  
[www.johndonne.southwark.sch.uk](http://www.johndonne.southwark.sch.uk)

## **4. Findings**

Interview with Dr Suzy Green

### Culture Change in implementing Positive Psychology into schools

-A cultural change can take up to 5 years and the go slow approach is important

-This approach can be confronting for some, and that acceptance and acknowledgement of individuals' position is needed

-Leaders need to trial this approach with themselves to see and speak the benefits

-The structures of Professional Development Days, Training and Coaching of leaders are all important

-A measure of the culture change and shift is important

-Mentoring can be enhanced by coaching

-Solution focused training can look at the thoughts that are hindering you

-Get your mind to work for you instead of undermining you

A successful structure is to train-then have regular coaching sessions-to keep the programme sustainable

Courses:

1. Graduate Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology Sydney University
2. Centre for Coaching Psychology : Leading Pioneers in the field of Cognitive Behavioural Coaching Stephen Palmer, Director
3. Diploma in Psychology Open Polytechnic  
Aaron Jarden NZ Head of Positive Psychology Association, Auckland
4. NZ Association of Positive Psychology 2011 Conference  
9,10 September 2011
5. Australian Positive Psychology and Wellbeing Conference 23-25 March 2012

**AUSTRALIAN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN EDUCATION  
SYMPOSIUM**

“The Power of Partnerships”

Dr Jim Knight Keynote Speaker

Dr Jim Knight talked about the humanising conversation where both parties were better off for a conversation and have a sense of equality. He discussed the principles that embody this.

- 1) Equality-feeling equal value
- 2) Choice-the need for reasonable choice
- 3) Voice-speak in a way that is meaningful
- 4) Dialogue-humility, faith, hope and love
- 5) Reflection-thinking together in a real life situation.

## Positive Psychology in Schools

Megan Booth, Hollybox Positive Resources

Use of Art Therapy to optimise wellbeing of staff, students and school communities.

Art Therapy-can be the use of creative activities to optimise physical, mental, emotional spiritual wellbeing.

Positive Art Therapy can build individuals strengths through identifying, exploring and developing the strength so that it focuses on positive emotion reducing negative and gives the opportunity for mindfulness and enjoyment, flow and mastery.

[www.anzata.org](http://www.anzata.org)

## “Growing Leadership Capacity”

Peter Kaldor and Ben Weir

Both Peter and Ben had a passion to help people make a difference in their life, through identifying and contributing our strengths alongside others. This exploration of our own strengths can be an important component of our wellbeing. Leading with strengths can involve:

1. Developing Shared Directions with an emphasis on the future, building head and heart, facilitating everyone contributing
2. Creating a secure base-using clear, positive structures, effective communication, a culture of optimism
3. People focused-really listening deeply and connecting people

## “Wellbeing and Resilience in the Classroom”

Greg Donoghue and Siobhan O’Brian

Sunshine Harvest Primary School

Both Greg and Siobhan along with Ardoch Foundation implemented a Positive Psychology based wellbeing and resilience programme called ROCKED-

R-Resilience

O-Optimism

C-Confidence

K-Kids

ED-Education

They created a Positive Education Syllabus based on 4 notions-

1. Thrive 2. Relate 3. Cognite 4. Master
2. This was delivered through weekly classroom sessions to all students, weekly small group sessions to targeted students, community hour and staff development. They saw resilience as a skill, measurable, learnable and teachable.

## “Celebrating strengths”

Justin Robinson

Geelong Grammar

All staff are trained in Positive Psychology. Teachers with their new class identify initially one unique thing and one character strength with their children. This is an initial observation-strengths can’t be identified with a fixed mind set. He saw strengths as Values in Action.

A value is a resource for strength action.

## Positive Psychology in Education Workshop

Suzy Green and Paula Robinson

### Positive Psychology

There is a myth that people think that this psychology means happiness. What it really does is recognise the range of people's emotion and for individuals to recognise negative emotion and be able to reframe this to function at an improved level. If we are functioning well then we can use strategies to function better and optimise our cognitive functions to live in a more positive realm.

Reference: Tal Ben-Shahar "Happier"

Tali Sharot "Science of Optimism"

### Self Determination in the Classroom/School

I learned that this theory of individuals motivation and personality involves the need for

- a) autonomy-need to have control and choice
- b) need for competence-a sense of achievement that builds confidence

- c) the need for relatedness-to be connected and loved.

In school environments, be it professional development or teaching in the classroom, learning activities need to encompass choice, choice of thinking. Activities can be scaffolded to create success, and use of specific praise will lead to a sense of competence. Opportunities need to be available to foster positive relationships for all.

A sense of belonging is crucial for young learners.

A sense of value and unconditional love.

### Hope Theory

Most children have the capacity to hope and this strength can be used in a way that supports a child, framing learning goals to guarantee success. Children with high levels of self-esteem will have high hopes, a number of goals and have the capacity to think of different ways of

achieving goals. Teachers discussion around setting learning goals need to be around different ways of achieving these goals. Strategies around healthy thinking of when they fail to achieve these goals, and encouraging learners to be open minded and positive is important. The challenge with all learners is how to change ANTS-Automatic Negative Thoughts to PET-Performance Enhancing Thoughts. Hope for children is crucial. As teachers of children we can foster high levels of hope and encourage children to utilise this hope as a way of creating several goals and ways to achieve these learning goals.

“Research has shown that children, adolescents and adults with high hope do better at school, as athletes, have better health, have better problem solving skills and are more adjusted psychologically. (Snyder 2002, Snyder, Cheevers and Michael 1999)

### Broaden and Build Theory

Positive emotions expand our thinking to see the bigger picture and action. Negativity restricts our thinking and possibilities.

“You have within you the fuel to thrive and to flourish and to leave this world in better shape than you found it” Fredrickson, B and Losada, M

Flourishing individuals have 3 positive thoughts to 1 negative. Strategies to increase positivity and reduce negativity are found in Seligman’s work eg. “What Went Well” exercise

Seligman’s book-“Flourish”

### Gratitude in Schools

Integrating What Went Well into class and assembly

Recognising contribution of students and staff to the school culture

Celebrating achievement

Encouraging kindness and gratitude in the classroom by teachers

Gratitude boards, trees and cards.

[www.positivepsychologyinstitute.com](http://www.positivepsychologyinstitute.com)

## **Interview with Jenny Fox Eades**

### **Implementing Positive Psychology in Schools to Foster Cultural Change**

Kids like the strengths approach. If it didn't work children would know

You can't change people, you can change the environment

Be warmly positive, respectful not imposing

Create positive rituals or habits

The Alexander Technique-fosters mindfulness

Deliberate practices-fosters mindfulness eg. At the end of the day-reflect, express gratitude and think about how you want to be tomorrow. Daily intentions, dedication and strengths practice

Strengths Keyring-mindful strategies. Pick a different strength daily and look for it in other people and try to use it yourself. If there is an issue-how can you use your strength to solve it. Keep using strengths and look for them in others.

The way we converse about strengths is important

It is the language we use "Tell me about the strengths you enjoy"

Strengths are behaviours

Children always communicate. It is how we respond to children that matters. We need to be positive, human and humorous. As teachers we can foster children using strengths to address issues or weakness.

This approach is about kids knowing what they are good at.

## **Bollington Cross School Visit**

Belinda Catt and Jenny Fox Eades took strengths lessons and an assembly with the whole school. This school had implemented the Strengths Approach for 3 years and both Jenny and Belinda had been involved in facilitating this development within the school. The Principal Julie Downing, liked the story telling component and the way it fostered children's imagination in creating stories, giving children a voice. The strengths have given a window to be creative. The school was good at celebrating individual strengths. For professional development the

teaching team were coaching strengths together, informally, team teaching and peer mentoring.

Lessons were structured around highlighting strengths and relating them to objects and involving children in a teaching discussions around strengths.

A story was told and then the children strengths spotted afterwards. Then children were involved in a purposeful activity where they practised the strength eg. creating their own stories with a story bag, speakers and listener games linking the strengths activity to the school assembly strength, use of sign language for a strength.

It was evident that learners used the language of strengths with ease and meaning. Teacher's responses were positive, specific and framed in a way that fostered mindfulness, creativity and meaning.

### **Scunthorpe Schools Visit with Belinda**

#### **Frodingham School**

Judith Gray Head Teacher discussed her school's approach to strengths. The school uses 15 strengths and festivals that focus on strengths eg. Festival of Community focusing on Leadership. Each strength is also referred to in British Sign Language. Strengths are introduced at a school assembly in the context of a Festival. There is a focus on strengths spotting, strengths wheel and stories that relate to school strengths. This school has linked this development to Non-Violent Communication-(Marshall Rosenberg) which focuses on empathetic learning in a solution focused way. If there is an issue-sit and talk it through, what is the problem, what can we do, what is the solution.

Strengths spotting is used in classes eg. Children in a circle identifying one strength they see in other children. This helps change the perception of others. Teachers have story packs for strengths teaching. Staff were involved in Professional Development looking at Explanatory Style, fostering their own awareness. Judith was emphatic about this philosophy being paramount to who the school was. Teachers and children all tell stories.

**Key Learning**-Who is responsible for what you think, say, do feel. You have the choice!

### Henderson Avenue Primary School

602 children Principal-Cath Lloyd 4-11 years with an attached children's centre for 0-3 years

The school implemented the Strengths Approach 2 years ago. This has involved lots of training, teacher modelling, strengths assembly timetable, strengths boards and storytelling. Cath said that this approach had helped to turn the school around-children were better problem solvers, they responded more thoughtfully, there was a more positive ethos within the school, and teachers were reinforcing it all the time. Stories were used at assemblies with before and after questions. Assembly awards recognised the strengths in children. These children had a Reward Tea Party with the Principal. A resource that they found successful was Story Spinners from stories around the world-  
[www.storiesfromaroundtheworld.com](http://www.storiesfromaroundtheworld.com)

### John Donne School London

Shared Leadership: Evelyn, Nick

Shared Leadership for 7 years 430 children 3-11 years

The school's starting point in developing their Strengths Approach was a visit by head teachers to India-Bangalore-to look at Values. The school visits and richness of that experience resulted in involving Jenny Fox Eades introducing the Story Telling Technique focusing on strengths. Children learned to tell stories, recorded them and sent them to their partner class. Teachers initially were cautious about discussion. Staff with high emotional literacy grasped the concept immediately.

The strengths programme is integrated through the reading Programme with the belief in the power of stories. Each age group has challenging stories and concepts that provide strengths discussions. This school has a large population of West African, black Caribbean and South African children so the cultural context of themes is important. The school has a Philosophy teacher who models and coaches the teachers. They also have a Philosophy for Children Programme that involves storytelling. Staff had a One Day Conference away from the school. They created a chart with their thoughts on Hopes and Dreams for children. This gave a sense of whole school togetherness and the philosophy was if everyone

holds each other safe no one can fall out. They had a staff/parent choir. The school used 1 strength for each term and used all 24 strengths.

## **Conclusions**

- Positive Psychology is a proven science that is shown to lift levels of wellbeing and resilience
  - Anxiety and stress levels are different for everyone. High levels prohibit personal development, reduce immunity system, result in physical symptoms.
  - Strengths are Values in Action
  - The strength approach expands the understanding of a value when it is taught in a meaningful context.
  - The power of telling a story is for both adults and children
  - Looking at what is right with a child's strengths will frame a positive state of mind with adults working with children.
  - Living and modelling values/strengths is difficult and requires mindfulness, reflection and open mindedness.
  - To change a habit or a way of thinking requires awareness, practice, reflection and effort.
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- Setting a daily intention on how you want to be and reflecting a positive framework primes the mental environment-You are what you think
  - You have a choice in the way you think and often an automatic response is within a negative framework based around preservation of self and ego.
  - Mindful strategies reduce anxiety and allow cognitive thinking to operate.
  - There are challenges in equipping children with strategies that will help them relate, connect, succeed, and flourish.
  - Hope is essential for all-that things will get better.
  - If strengths are discussed and used collectively as a group then the culture improves and the collaborative approach of drawing on everyone's strengths is actioned. A sense of autonomy for all.
  - We have energy to use for children. If we as educators feel positive, transfer the vibrant energy for children and adults, our communication will flourish. If we allow our minds to defer to the negative about our children, colleagues or change it depletes our energy for the child.
  - Issues and problems can be solved in a solution focused way.
  - Surround a child with love and positive thoughts, see their strengths, and believe in their success.

## **Implications**

1. Review our Tainui School Positive Education Plan collectively with staff.
2. Continue strong links with the South Dunedin Cluster, Denise Quinlan supporting Professional development and Leadership days.
3. The effective structure of Circle Time can be used to integrate strengths and mindful strategies.
4. To further align our values with strengths, redevelop explicit teaching plans, provide resources that support teaching.
5. The component of oral story telling needs a place in our literacy program for learners
6. Staff development and training is crucial with opportunities to explore, practice and teach storytelling and mindful strategies.
7. The language of the strengths in everyday teaching is important to embody.
8. To develop mentoring skills in all teachers using the strengths approach as part of the appraisal system.
9. To develop a parenting program that reflects the mindful strategies taught at school.
10. "What Went Well" integrated into classroom, syndicate, executive and staff meetings
11. Assemblies to model Values/Strengths through stories. Introduce "Tea with the Principal" for Values/Strengths Certificates.
12. Build on our Whakapapa-our stories for our children in cultural context. Keep existing stories alive. eg Matamata
13. Explore models of conversation : Non-Violent Communication, Compassionate Communication, Open to Learning Conversations.
14. Build up a Staff Positive Psychology Resource Library.

