

SABBATICAL RESEARCH REPORT TERM 4 2008

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Research life skills programme called Cognitive Behavioral Theory and consider its introduction into New Zealand Education.

I want to share with educators my findings about an exciting new programme that I saw in action at Geelong Grammar School in Victoria, Australia.

This report comments on other social skills programmes especially Skills for Growing / Adolescence. There are so many social skills programmes that I also address the question if we need any of them. Our classroom teaching techniques often teach social skills and at the very least model social skills.

I am going to start with my Geelong Grammar School experience. My school is a Decile 1, Napier school and my first reaction when I found that a programme that I had been following since 2006 was being introduced for the first time in Australia in Geelong, was great. I knew Geelong was an industrial city (Think Ford Falcons) and its socio-economics would have to be similar to Henry Hill School. It appears that I was one of the few people in Australia or New Zealand who did not realize that Geelong Grammar was one of Australia's most prestigious private schools. It did not make any difference as we know children are children no matter how different their socio-economic background.

The great thing about sabbaticals is that you often get the chance to experience a school. A friend of mine reckons he could do an ERO of a school by just spending 10 minutes in a school. So much research is bound up now with data, empirical arguments when a gut feeling tells you all you need to know. I quickly realized that the Geelong Grammar School pupils were not elitist, over competitive, aggressive but were grounded, cooperative engaged and fun loving. Just like most of our children. I wondered did Cognitive Behavior Theory based programmes have anything to do with the 'feel' of Geelong Grammar School.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory is also known as the 'Happiness' programme. I will use the abbreviation CBT. CBT is based on positive psychology. A form of psychology that has been championed by Professor Markin Seligman (Pennsylvania University USA). He is one of the worlds leading psychologists. He developed positive psychology programmes for young people from the following key recommendation:

'Seligman's biggest recommendation for lasting happiness is to figure out your strengths and find new ways to deploy them.' Some schools in the U.S.A. developed programmes based on this recommendation. United Kingdom schools picked up on it. They have sent a large number of teachers to Pennsylvania to be trained so that they can use a positive psychology programme in their schools'.

This spread has reached Australia through Geelong Grammar School. It has not yet been established in New Zealand.

The life skills programme focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. At Geelong students are taught to identify and use many of their strengths and traits that they already have e.g. kindness, originality, humour, optimism and generosity.

The students I saw at Geelong were Year 7 and Y8 pupils. They had identified their strengths and were getting feedback from their colleagues. I did not see any put downs, and pupils seemed realistic and confident.

The theory is that by recognizing and using these signature strengths they will develop natural buffers against negativity and mental illness. The key phrase is ...'using these signature strengths'. Once Geelong's pupils have identified their strengths they then have to use them. This school gives their students opportunities and responsibilities to prove themselves. This is done in a safe, non threatening and not in an over-competitive environment. It is important to note the Geelong had this environment before the programme was introduced.

It is thought that by recognizing and using these signature strengths they will develop natural buffers against negativity and mental illness. They build on the resilience we all have. It is about building positive emotion, virtue and strength.

I examined over 15 life skills programmes during my sabbatical. I tried to compare them in value to New Zealand's most successful life skills programme, Skills for Growing / Adolescence.

Skills for Growing / Adolescence is now approximately 20 years old. It has become wide spread in New Zealand and 10 to 15 years ago a quarter of New Zealand classroom employed teachers were trained in this programme. The school that I am Principal of taught this programme in every classroom twice a week. Like many schools Skills for Growing / Adolescence is now only taught in 6 week blocks and only in some classes.

I did not find a life skills programme, except for Geelong's programme, that had the promise of Skills for Growing / Adolescence. The Skills for Growing / Adolescence covers the areas of finding your strengths and using them. It does this in conjunction with a large range of life skills. On the other hand the 'Happiness' programme concentrates on strengths and using them.

CONCLUSION:

Globally this happiness programme is being picked up. The programme is based on sound theory – positive psychology – and needs to be piloted in New Zealand.

Skills for Growing / Adolescence is still a programme that can be used to give pupils life skills, however although it still has many teachers who use it, too many have stopped using it. A programme needs to stand on its own feet, especially when it has had a good start, and is backed up by a strong infrastructure. Skills for Growing / Adolescence does not appear to be doing so.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Key Activities:

Introduce the programme into

- a) Primary School
- b) Intermediate School
- c) High school



Principal and B.O.T. member visit Geelong Grammar and see the programme in action



Principal and or senior teacher Complete ON-LINE training course in positive psychology – 6 week Course (University of Pennsylvania runs these courses)



Select a syndicate to pilot the programme and arrange for them to see the programme in action.



Pilot the 'happiness' programme in one area of the school



Review – share findings and consider other areas of the schools for inclusion.

This is how I plan to pilot this programme at Henry Hill School, Napier. We will use a Year 5 and Year 6 syndicate of 5 teachers. It would be a help to have an Intermediate and a High School join us in trialing a programme that appears to be gathering momentum because pupils respond to identifying their strengths and then finding ways to use these strengths.

My sabbatical also gave me the time to consider whether there is any need to teach life skills separately when good teachers teach them anyway – in every lesson – in the playground – at assemblies – on the sport field.

Couple the life skills teaching with the achievement of success in an area of the school and students are very likely to have resiliency and confidence. Two very important life skills.

Alongside the pilot of the 'happiness' programme I plan to raise funds for more support teachers. I believe talented support teachers increase students chances of success. This success should ensure the establishment of life skills.

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