

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT, TERM THREE 2019

MARK MCCALLUM

TAONUI SCHOOL

“RESEARCH POSSIBLE METHODS OF ADOPTING A GROWTH MINDSET APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ORDER TO REDUCE CURRICULUM ANXIETY”

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the Taonui School Board of Trustees, the Ministry of Education and TeachNZ for granting and allowing me to take this Sabbatical – it was a privilege to have this time to spend on an inquiry that is both close to my heart and which aims to improve the mental health of our learners in relation to their engagement with the New Zealand Curriculum. I have also appreciated the time for reflection and refreshment, for personal growth and the chance to step back and take a break from the demands, challenges and all-consuming role of Principal.

Executive Summary

Society is aware of the increasing numbers of people battling with anxiety related issues. Anxiety being defined as “*An emotion characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes*” (American Psychologist Association). Simply explained, anxiety is a fear of the future or future events. New Zealand Schools are charged with supporting and encouraging all learners to achieve to a personally high level within the New Zealand Curriculum. As Teachers we know that many children, in our classrooms and schools, battle anxiety related issues on a daily basis.

While completing this research it has become clear that in order for teachers and schools to be effective in supporting our anxious students we must undertake a “Growth Mindset Paradigm” shift concerning teaching practices and curriculum delivery.

It is not a “Growth Mindset method of teaching” we need to adopt however, it is a deeply rooted mindset or paradigm shift in each of our professional minds. A deeply rooted growth mindset paradigm shift undertaken by staff has the potential to transform our schools. **At the heart of this paradigm shift is the deep belief that all people (children and adults) are learners, with room for improvement.**

Implementation of a genuine Growth Mindset paradigm shift generates an expectation which allows all people, as learners, the space and ability to take risks, to make mistakes without negative consequences.

Most importantly, this mindset views perceived failure as a genuine learning opportunity. Once this learning culture is effectively embedded into our classrooms and schools we will create a learning environment that is more willing to support our anxious learners.

Once the “Growth Mindset Paradigm” has been adopted by staff, schools then need to ensure explicit teaching for students around strategies for managing anxiety and developing resilience takes place. The issue of anxiety needs to be brought into the open and discussed.

International research, especially coming out of Canada and Australia, has provided the teaching world with methods and strategies in order to reach and improve the learning for our anxious students.

When reviewing our Curriculum delivery models it would be wise, and beneficial for our learners, for us to take notice of best practices to support our anxious learners.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was:

- 1) To understand how we can develop and adapt our curriculum and learning experiences to better include and engage our children who are suffering from anxiety.
- 2) To understand what daily actions we need to undertake as teachers and as a school to ensure success for our anxious learners.
- 3) To share methods and or support available with our students, families and colleagues that could help improve learning and life in general.

Background and Rationale

As a school community we have multiple children, from year 0-8, presenting with anxiety, in many various forms. All our staff support anxious learners and parents.

Anxiety can have a significant effect on an individuals ability to progress and engage fully with the curriculum and learning opportunities as well as limiting the quality of life, i.e Joy they experience. In some situations attendance is also compromised. Longer term there is concern over the link between a child with anxiety and the quality of their mental health in later life.

Many families are desperate for help and support and are unsure of what to do or where to go for support concerning their anxious child.

It is important for educators to have an appreciation around what these children and families experience and be able to support the child with action.

As Principal I expected my findings would enable me to better support and assist staff to enhance student learning in the classroom. It would also provide me with resources to better support families in my work supporting and encouraging them as well.

In summary, this research will help us as staff at Taonui School to be more responsive and better equipped to help children to develop strategies to improve their mental health.

Findings & Implications

Section 1) The Issue of Anxiety

This research spent some time looking at the reasons suggested for the increased rates of anxiety experienced by children, however this is a huge topic and not the focus. This section intends to provide an understanding of how anxiety may present for students.

It is important to note that some anxiety is helpful – it helps us react to stresses or potential threats, by quickening our reflexes and focusing our attention, and it usually settles once the stressful situation has passed. **The fact that some anxiety can be helpful should be openly discussed regularly in the classroom and with families. Not all levels of anxiety should be feared.**

Anxiety is a normal and often healthy emotion. However, when a person regularly feels disproportionate levels of anxiety, it might become a medical disorder.

Anxiety disorders form a category of mental health diagnoses that lead to excessive nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worry

These disorders alter how a person processes emotions and behave, also causing physical symptoms. Mild anxiety might be vague and unsettling, while severe anxiety may seriously affect day-to-day living. Anxiety is when those feelings don't go away, they're extreme for the situation, and the person suffering can't seem to control them.

When anxiety is severe or there all the time, it makes it hard to cope with daily life.

The feelings:

1. are quite intense
2. last for weeks, months or can keep going up and down over many years
3. negatively affect your thoughts, behaviour and general health
4. leave you feeling distressed and not enjoying life.

Anxiety can cause physical symptoms like pain, a pounding heart or stomach cramps. For some people these physical symptoms are their main concern.

Anxiety can also affect other areas of life – like the ability to cope, perform at school and can affect relationships with friends, teachers and family.

It is common for people who have anxiety to also feel depressed. The symptoms of anxiety and depression can overlap.

Worrying and the symptoms of anxiety can creep up on you gradually. This can make it hard to know how much worrying is too much.

Some common anxiety symptoms include:

1. hot and cold flushes
2. shaking
3. racing heart
4. tight feeling in the chest or chest pains
5. struggling to breathe
6. snowballing worries that get bigger and bigger
7. a racing mind full of thoughts
8. a constant need to check things are right or clean
9. persistent worrying ideas that seem 'silly or crazy'.

If these symptoms are present they may help to provide adults indicators of an underlying anxiety disorder. There are different kinds of anxiety disorders, but these are the most common:

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is when people worry about a number of things, on most days for six or more months. It usually affects young adults, and women more than men. The anxiety is about a wide range of situations and issues, not just one specific event. It can be hard to control it and finds its way into all parts of daily life.

Phobias are extreme and irrational fears about a particular thing. They can be so great that the person goes to great lengths to avoid it, even if it's harmless. For example social phobia is fear of being judged or embarrassed in public, even in everyday situations like when eating, speaking at school or making small talk. Another type is agoraphobia, often thought to be a fear of open spaces. It is also a fear of being closed in, or away from a safe place or person who makes you feel safe. It can be extremely disabling and frightening, and can leave people unable to leave their home.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is when a person has unwanted, intrusive, persistent or repetitive thoughts, feelings, ideas, or sensations (obsessions) which cause anxiety. So they then carry out actions to reduce the anxiety or get rid of those thoughts. For example, the person may be afraid of germs and try to relieve the anxiety through repeated hand washing or avoiding touching things like door knobs. They may know these thoughts are unreasonable but be unable to stop them. When OCD is severe and left untreated, it can be very distressing, and get in the way of school and normal life at home.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a reaction to a highly stressful event outside the range of everyday experience when a person feels very unsafe or threatened. These are unusual experiences such as war, violent attack (verbal, physical or sexual) or a natural disaster. The symptoms usually include irritability, anxiety, flashbacks, repeated nightmares, and avoiding situations that might bring back memories of the event.

Panic Disorder is when a person has panic attacks. These are intense feelings of anxiety along with the kind of physical symptoms and overwhelming sensations you would have if you were in great danger, like a pounding heart, feeling faint, sweating, shaky limbs, nausea, chest pains, breathing discomfort and feelings of losing control. The symptoms rise and peak rapidly. The effects can be so severe that people experiencing panic attacks can believe they are dying. Despite being frightening and very uncomfortable they are not life threatening.

Anxious children will present themselves in many different ways in our schools and classrooms, often the most obvious indicator we will have as professionals is the avoidance or outright refusal to undertake tasks. If the anxiety is more than what would be expected for a normal functioning child and seems to be occurring on an ongoing basis schools need to work with families to seek medical support. At this level the anxiety may be viewed as a potential mental health issue and where medical intervention could be helpful. In our experience health nurses are a good option for supporting families. They are skilled to ensure the right process is followed to access the appropriate support. Social workers are also skilled and able to work in this area. School connections and willingness to engage with health and social support, ie social workers and counsellors will be crucial to support the child.

Section 2) Growth Mindset; Making the Paradigm Shift

“Growth mindset is an overall paradigm for personal development rather than a pedagogical tool for measuring academic accomplishment” -David Hochheiser

Educational professionals must nurture a growth mindset within themselves and in the classroom environments they work in, they need to ensure that they make a paradigm shift in their thinking. School staff must have an uncompromising view that:

“We can change, and so can other people”.

Research has found that children who have a growth mindset – the belief that people have the potential to change – are more likely to show resilience when things get tough.

Children who believe that people can change report less stress and anxiety, better feelings about themselves in response to social exclusion, and better physical health.

Carol Dweck has undertaken substantial work around this concept. She explains students’ mindsets, the way they perceive their abilities, fall somewhere between two opposites:

Fixed Mindset — Students believe their skills, talents and overall intelligence are fixed traits. They may resist learning and trying to improve, typically feeling embarrassed when not understanding something.

Growth Mindset — Students know they can develop their skills and talents through effort and persistence, as well as being receptive to lessons and feedback. They generally believe they can improve through hard work and trying new learning methods.

Dweck believes that if you can shift students towards the Growth aspect, you can improve the level and frequency of their achievements. This is because mindset plays a prominent role in self-motivation.

A school wide or classroom focus on “Growth Mindset” strategies helps students understand the values of effort, persistence and trying new learning methods to cultivate their talents and abilities.

Dweck and more lately Angela Duckworth have provided many suggestions as to ways in which teachers can encourage a Growth Mindset aptitude. Undertaking a google search on this topic will provide many examples to experiment with.

The key actions Dweck believes schools and teachers need to focus on are:

-Avoid Praising Intelligence and Sheer Effort

- Instead, give feedback that highlights the values of planning and trying different learning strategies.

-Use Diverse Teaching Strategies:

- **Content** — When applicable, use videos, audio clips, presentations and physical manipulatives such as blocks in your lessons.
- **Processes** — Give students chances to not only work individually, but in pairs, small groups and big groups.
- **Products** — Let students demonstrate understanding of content in a variety of ways on tests, projects and assignments.

-Teach the Values of Challenges

-Encourage Students to Expand their Answers

-Explain the Purposes of Abstract Skills and Concepts

-Allow Time for Goal-Based Journaling

The goal should be:

Specific

Measurable

Attainable and Agreed-Upon

Realistic

Time-Based

-Say “Yet” More Often

The word “yet” can change disparaging sentences into positive ones, promoting growth, according to Dweck. This linguistic trick works especially well with sentences that include “can’t” or “don’t,” because it reverses the negative connotation.

See for yourself by adding “yet” to the end of these sentences:

I can’t do long division... yet

I don’t have the skills to answer this question... yet

I don’t understand dependent and independent clauses... yet

-Help Students Change their Language

-Use Success Folders

- **Create the Folders** — Give each student a folder, the kind made of cardboard or stiff paper. On the cover, ask them to draw a picture or write a short story that depicts their personal concepts of success.
- **Personalise the Folders** — Every day or week, allot time for students to add personal examples of successful learning to the folder. These can be summaries of tasks they completed, explanations of new concepts they learned or tests and assignments they aced.
- **Reflect on the Folders** — To begin each week on a high note, have students look through their success folders. This encourages them to reflect on their achievements, providing first-hand evidence of growth.

When an educator or a school purposefully adopts a Growth Mindset practice the results can be powerful in the lives of the learners that are being influenced. If teachers develop a natural teaching strategy which models growth mindset practices it is clear a paradigm shift has been made in their professional lives.

In their book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker point out the issue that often develops when change initiatives are initiated "a task to complete rather than an ongoing process." If we really want to improve our schools, our work, and the education of our students, we can do so by adopting a new mindset -- for everyone -- that would include:

- 1 Being humble enough to accept that there are things about ourselves and our practices that can improve
- 2 Becoming part of professional teams that value constructive critique instead of criticism
- 3 Treating setbacks as formative struggles within the learning process instead of summative failures
- 4 Realising the restrictive role that timelines can play in reaching high standards, and using foundational philosophies so that everyone's growth is supported
- 5 Create flexible grouping at all times so that nobody's trapped in any one curriculum level or particular type of work.

Schools must ensure that all their people make a Growth Mindset paradigm shift. Once

this has occurred the environment is set to reduce anxiety and increase participation with the curriculum.

Section 3) Resilience

In examining the past research there appears to have been three waves of resilience research with an emerging fourth wave (Wright & Masten, 2005).

1. The first wave focused on the individual factors that made a difference, focusing on personal traits and characteristics.
2. The second wave noted individuals develop in the context of the systems around them with a focus on interaction and the process of building resilience.
3. The third wave focused on creating resilience when it was not likely to occur naturally.
4. The fourth wave and beyond is likely to grapple with the current western cultural beliefs in individualism, which undermines the efforts in promoting a culture of connectedness and belonging (Wright & Masten, 2005).

Even though Wright and Masten made this claim in 2005 it would seem that their understanding has much merit and relevance today. There is much research to show that our dependence on technology and personal devices have reduced the amount and depth of personal connections with those around us, this has a huge implication on relationships and mental health.

It is now widely accepted that there is a set of human strengths that are the most likely buffers against mental illness: courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty and perseverance.

Much of the task of prevention will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to foster these virtues in young people. As a New Zealand School we can be pleased that our curriculum has these virtues at its core. Our key competencies provide an excellent framework with which to base our resilience teaching programmes around.

Significant work has been undertaken by Lyn Worsley and “The Resilience Centre” based in Australia around developing resilience. The resilience centre is very clear in its suggestions for how teachers and schools need to implement resilience into our schools.

Lyn believes that schools that promote resilience and academic resilience, showed the following characteristics:

1. Students have a sense of belonging and acceptance
2. Students have a significant relationships with at least one teacher
3. Teachers have high expectations for all students

Summary of Resilience Enhancing Factors:

Resilience needs relationships, not uncompromising independence.

Research tells us that it's not rugged self-reliance, determination or inner strength that leads kids through adversity, but the reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship. In the context of a loving relationship with a caring adult, children have the opportunity to develop vital coping skills. The presence of a responsive adult can also help to reverse the physiological changes that are activated by stress. This will ensure that the developing brain, body and immune system are protected from the damaging effects of these physiological changes. Anyone in the life of a child can make a difference – family, teachers, coaches – anyone.

Increase their exposure to people who care about them.

Social support is associated with higher positive emotions, a sense of personal control and predictability, self-esteem, motivation, optimism, a resilience. Kids won't always notice the people who are in their corner cheering them on, so when you can, let them know about the people in their fan club. Anything you can do to build their connection with the people who love them will strengthen them.

'I told Grandma how brave you were. She's so proud of you.'

Let them know that it's okay to ask for help.

Children will often have the idea that being brave is about dealing with things by themselves. Let them know that being brave and strong means knowing when to ask for help. If there is anything they can do themselves, guide them towards that but resist carrying them there.

Build their executive functioning.

Strengthening their executive functioning will strengthen the prefrontal cortex. This will help them manage their own behaviour and feelings, and increase their capacity to develop coping strategies.

Some powerful ways to build their executive functioning are:

- establishing routines;
- modelling healthy social behaviour;
- creating and maintaining supportive reliable relationships around them;
- providing opportunities for their own social connections;
- creative play;
- board games (good for impulse control (taking turns), planning, working memory, and mental flexibility (the ability to shift thoughts to an alternative, better pattern of thought if the situation requires));
- games that involve memory (e.g. the shopping game – 'I went shopping and I bought a [puppy]'; the next person says, 'I went shopping and I bought a [puppy and

a bike for my t-rex]'; next person ... 'I went shopping and I bought [a puppy, a bike for my t-rex and a hot air balloon] – the winner is the last one standing who doesn't forget something on the shopping list;

- exercise;
- giving them opportunities to think and act independently (if they disagree with you and tell you why you're wrong, there's a plus side – their executive functioning is flourishing!);
- providing opportunities for them to make their own decisions.

Encourage regular mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness creates structural and functional changes in the brain that support a healthy response to stress. It strengthens the calming, rational prefrontal cortex and reduces activity in the instinctive, impulsive amygdala. It also strengthens the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. When this connection is strong, the calming prefrontal cortex will have more of a hand in decisions and behaviour.

Exercise.

Exercise strengthens and reorganises the brain to make it more resilient to stress. One of the ways it does this is by increasing the neurochemicals that can calm the brain in times of stress. Anything that gets kids moving is great!

- throw a frisbee;
- kick a ball;
- give a hula-hoop a spin;
- dance stars;
- walk the dog;
- superhero tag (the tagged one stands in the middle of a circle on the ground, a superhero saves them by using their superhero powers to fly with running feet through the circle);
- detective (in the park or backyard ... first one to find five things that are green; or five things starting with 's'; or seven things that could be used for dress-ups; or ten things that smell gorgeous – ready, set, go!).

Build feelings of competence and a sense of mastery.

Nurture that feeling in them – that one that reminds them they can do hard things. You'll be doing this every time you acknowledge their strengths, the brave things they do, their effort when they do something difficult; and when you encourage them to make their own decisions. When they have a sense of mastery, they are less likely to be reactive to future stress and more likely to handle future challenges. 'You're a superstar when it comes to trying hard things. You've got what it takes. Keep going. You'll get there.'

Nurture optimism.

Optimism has been found to be one of the key characteristics of resilient people. The brain can be rewired to be more optimistic through the experiences it is exposed to. If you have a small human who tends to look at the glass as being half empty, show them a different view. This doesn't mean invalidating how they feel. Acknowledge their view of the world, and introduce them to a different one.

'It's disappointing when it rains on a sports day isn't it. Let's make the most of this. What's something we can do on a rainy day that we probably wouldn't do if it was sunny?' The idea is to focus on what is left, rather than what has been lost.

Teach them how to reframe.

The ability to reframe challenges in ways that feel less threatening is linked to resilience. Reframing is such a valuable skill to have. In times of difficulty or disappointment, it will help them to focus on what they have, rather than what they've lost. To build this skill, acknowledge their disappointment, then gently steer them away from looking at what the problem has cost them, towards the opportunities it might have brought them.

For example, if a rainy day has meant sport has been cancelled,

'I understand how disappointed you are about not playing today. I'd be disappointed too. What can we do because of the rain that we might not have been able to do otherwise?' (If they're really disappointed they might need your help.) 'You could snuggle up and read a book, watch a movie, play a game inside, walk in the rain, we could cook and throw a pretend party or have a fancy afternoon tea.'

Model resiliency.

Imitation is such a powerful way to learn. The small humans in your life will want to be just like you, and they'll be watching everything. Without pitching it above what they can cope with, let them see how you deal with disappointment. Bringing them into your emotional world at appropriate times will help them to see that sadness, difficulties, disappointment are all very normal human experiences. When experiences are normalised, there will be a safety and security that will open the way for them to explore what those experiences mean for them, and experiment with ways to respond.

'I'm disappointed that I didn't get the job, but that's because it was important to me. It's nice to have things that are important to you, even if they don't end the way you want them to. I did my very best in the interview and I know I'll be okay. That one wasn't the job for me, but I know there is going to be one that is perfect. I just have to keep trying and be patient.'

Facing fear – but with support.

Facing fear is so empowering but to do this, they need the right support – as we all do. Kids can be fairly black and white about things so when they are faced with something difficult, the choices can seem like only two; face it head on or avoid it at all costs. But there is a third option, and that is to move gradually towards it, while feeling supported and with a certain amount of control. Encourage them to take safe, considered risks.

Don't rush to their rescue.

It is in the precious space between falling and standing back up again that they learn how to find their feet. Of course, sometimes scooping them up and giving them a steady place to be is exactly what they need to find the strength to move forward. The main thing is not to do it every time. Exposure to stressors and challenges that they can manage during childhood will help to ensure that they are more able to deal with stress during adulthood. There is evidence that these early experiences cause positive changes in the prefrontal cortex (the 'calm down, you've got this' part of the brain), that will protect against the negative effects of future stress. Think of it like immunisation – a little bit of the pathogen, whether it's a virus or something stressful, helps to build up resistance or protect against the more severe version.

Meet them where they are.

Resilience isn't about never falling down. It's about getting back up again, and there's no hurry for this to happen. All of us experience emotional pain, setback, grief and sadness sometimes. Feelings always have a good reason for being there, even if they can feel a little pushy at times. The key for kids is to learn to respect those feelings (even the bad ones), but not let them take charge and steer towards trouble. Sadness and grief, for example, can make us want to withdraw for a little while. It is during the withdrawal that information is reflected upon, assimilated and processed so that balance can be found again. If this is rushed, even if it is in the name of resilience, it can stay as a gentle rumble and show up through behaviour, sometimes at wildly unexpected times.

Nurture a growth mindset.

We can change, and so can other people.

Research has found that children who have a growth mindset – the belief that people have the potential to change – are more likely to show resilience when things get tough.

Let them know that you trust their capacity to cope.

Fear of failure isn't so much about the loss but about the fear that they (or you) won't be able to cope with the loss. What you think matters – it really does. You're the one they will look to as a gauge for how they're going. If you believe they have it

in them to cope with the stumbles along the way, they will believe this too. This isn't always easy. We will often feel every bump, bruise, fall or fail. It can be heartbreaking when they struggle or miss out on something they want, not because of what it means for us, but because of what we know it means for them. But – they'll be okay. However long it takes, they'll be okay. When you decide, they'll decide.

Build their problem-solving toolbox.

Self-talk is such an important part of problem-solving. Your words are powerful because they are the foundation on which they build their own self-talk. Rather than solving their problems for them, start to give them the language to solve their own.

Some ideas:

- What would [someone who they see as capable] do?
- What has worked before?
- Say as many ideas as you can in two minutes, even the silly ones? Lay them on me. Go.
- How can we break this big problem into little pieces?

Make time for creativity and play.

Problem-solving is a creative process. Anything that strengthens their problem-solving skills will nurture their resilience. Children are naturally curious, inquisitive and creative. Give them the space and the time to play and get creative, and they'll do the rest.

Shhh. Let them talk.

Try to resist solving their problems for them. Instead, be the sounding board as they take themselves to wherever they need to be.

As they talk, their mind is processing and strengthening.

Try, 'how', not 'why'.

When things go wrong, as they will, asking kids 'why' will often end in 'don't know'.

Who knows why any of us do silly things or make decisions that aren't great ones.

It is essential that schools focus on Resilience and the teaching of strategies to support this. The key competencies area of the New Zealand Curriculum encourages this to be weaved through all learning areas.

Conclusion

It is almost certain that schools will continue to be challenged with children suffering from anxiety. In most classrooms across New Zealand there is likely to be multiple children with this mental health challenge.

There are actions that educational professionals can undertake to improve the situation which will ensure these learners engage and develop as expected. The biggest influence will come from a deep Growth Mindset driver from school leaders and staff. Schools must fully believe that people can change and develop, nothing stays the same! Staff must believe in the potential of all people and work hard to convince learners of their individual potential.

Teachers and Parents who are able to identify behaviour as having an anxiety basis are more likely to help the child to find coping strategies and in turn, develop resilience. Ideally schools will discuss anxiety and strategies around reducing anxiety. On the more serious side of anxiety, teachers and parents must hold on to the fact that anxiety disorders are treatable. The wisdom to seek outside medical support could be very useful for the child and family suffering. There is a need to view anxiety as a condition more seriously than we may have done in the past.

The importance of explicit teaching of resilience strategies cannot be overstated. This should be a major aspect of all schools values systems if we are serious about helping our learners overcome anxiety. Providing a resource of strategies for all our learners helps them both immediately as well as in the future and is a significant and important investment.

References

anxietycanada.com

Want to Know about Anxiety? Adam Felman (2018)

depression.org.nz

Building Resilience in Children; Karen Young

Professional Learning Community at Work; Richard DuFour & Robert Eaker

Mindset; Changing the way you think to full your potential, Dr Carol S. Dweck

Growth Mindset: A Driving Philosophy, Not Just a Tool; By David Hochheiser(2014)

The Resilience Centre, Australia

The Resilience Doughnut: Combining Strengths to survive; Lyn Worsley (The Resilience Centre, Australia) 2015

Building teacher resilience Jo Earp - Teacher Magazine - 12 October 2016

Mental Illness in Children: Know the signs; Mayo Clinic