

# Premier's Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

## Can positive psychology have an impact on youth depression if accessed at an early age?

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## **Introduction**

As part of The Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship I wanted to investigate whether Positive Psychology did actually have an impact on youth depression if accessed at an early age. My study tour took me to the United Kingdom. I had the privilege of working with some very interesting and innovative people which made my tour remarkable and memorable. Some of these people were John Wills (Aware); Peter Moroney (So Sad); Paniko Koureas (Haberdasher's Aske's Academy); Jenny Fox Eades (Celebrating Strengths/Strengths Gym); and Sylvia Jones, Coordinator for School-Based Counselling for the Welsh Assembly. What most of these individual's workplaces had in common was the focus on well-being in schools and how that would help reduce depression and suicide in adolescents. These schools concentrated on students' happiness, strengths and well-being rather than academic achievement. This resulted in students coming to school more often, being happier and, as the happiness and well-being rose, so did the academic achievement.

## **Significant learning**

### ***Ireland***

#### **Dublin**

I visited an organisation called 'Aware'. This organisation is similar to *Beyond Blue* in Australia and I met with Aoife Brennan who took me through what Aware is all about. I was particularly interested in their 'Beat the Blues' program which was run in schools with senior students and goes for 90 minutes. I met with John Wills who is the presenter of the program and learned some interesting facts about suicide in Ireland.

Unfortunately, many suicides are not reported and, because of this, the numbers are quite different. The National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention quoted that suicide has risen from just 186 in 2000 to 460/600 in 2007. NSASP also points out that these figures are probably understated because of the number of deaths of undetermined cause recorded in recent years. Many suicides are not reported or are recorded as accidental death, and many youths are amongst the suicides. As well as this one in three people in Ireland has depression. The difficulty about running groups as such in Ireland is not being able to talk about suicide with the senior students. That is not allowed as the Catholic Church restricts what can be said in schools; so John talks about depression and strategies to combat it. John also informed me that the National Standards in Ireland require all people who work with children, adolescents and adults be trained in *Assist* - a suicide prevention training program from Canada. This means that people who work in this area, such as counsellors, health workers, and some school personnel all employ the same techniques, scripts and procedures to manage a crisis. This is a great idea and could be incorporated into the Australian system as many times I have heard people comment that they just did not know what to say or how to help.

#### **Drogheda**

I contacted *Save Our Sons and Daughters (So Sad)* a charitable organisation set up by Peter Moroney who lost his son to suicide a few years ago. I came upon this organisation quite accidentally as I was having no luck getting in contact with the Samaritans. *So Sad* is similar to Lifeline. Peter is also an *Assist* trainer and he explained how all of his staff is also trained in *Assist*. *So Sad* works on

an emergency call out 24 hour basis in Drogheda, Navan, Dundalk, and Cavan. What I found amazing about *So Sad* was that anyone who was in crisis – be it the person who is at risk or those around them, got help within 20 minutes to an hour. Someone from *So Sad* would go out and sit with them until a general practitioner or mental health worker could arrive. That person is *Assist* trained as well. From there, regular contact is continued, so no one is left alone.

## **England**

### **London**

Haberdasher's Aske's Federation Hatcham College provides a school-wide approach to well-being and is run by Paniko Koureas and Dr Ilona Boniwell. In 2008, the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation took the decision to formally endorse well-being, in a joint venture with the University of East London, based upon the belief that it could assist all students in developing a more positive and enabling approach to life. The aim was to develop a comprehensive and evidenced based curriculum which would enhance all aspects of student well-being whilst endeavouring to ensure that the college remained a positive institution. Originally I was to meet with Dr Boniwell; however, this was not possible and I met instead with Paniko Koureas. Haberdashers' Aske's Federation is an Academy State School (co-ed with single sex teaching); it has an annual intake of 200 students into Year 7, including the whole spectrum of abilities from lowest to highest. Preference does go to zoned students. The reasons for their choice of this project are:

- British students have the lowest level of well-being of all the industrialised countries, and
- 65 percent of primary students have a positive school experience whereas only 27 percent of secondary students do
- Research indicates (Well-being In Action, 2010) that the more 'academic' a school is, the lower the levels of student well-being.

The Office of National Statistics (2004) stated that 11 percent of youth aged 16-24 suffered a major depressive disorder. The UK government developed *Every Child Matters* partly in response to the death of a child where the supports appeared to have broken down. One of the aims of *Every Child Matters*, cited in 'The Children's Plan' is ... "to improve children's well-being by 2020 through nurturing happy, capable and resilient children".

I observed a number of lessons ranging from Year 1 to 9. The first classes I observed were Year 7 boys and then Year 7 girls. This was interesting as the school has one lesson a week called "Well-being" involving the use of a booklet. The teachers run the program voluntarily. For Year 7 students it is a subject that is included in their curriculum and not an unusual subject whereas for the rest of the grades some of the students do not take it as seriously as they regarded it as a 'fill in'. The Year 7 boys were learning about 'Savouring' and when the teacher asked what they thought savouring was a young lad put up his hand and likened it to eating a piece of chocolate very slowly and making it last. This gave the others a perfect example of savouring and the class then had to make a menu of their own with foods that make them happy. The Year 9 girls were learning about Happiness across cultures. They were amazed that England was way down on the list of happiness and countries like South Africa were higher up. It raised a lot of discussion about wealth and whether it makes people happy or not. Year 9 boys were learning about Resilience and the *START* method: S – situation, T – trigger, A – Automatic response, R –

reaction, T – tale. The teacher showed a video of a violent reaction from a well known soccer star on the field. A great discussion ensued on how he could have done things differently and not lost an important game for England. Another Year 9 girls' class was focussing on well-being posters and dioramas to make class rooms more warm and welcoming.

The Years 7, 8 10, and 11 have specific programs whereas Year 9 use the Year 8 program and the Year 12 program is not complete yet.. The infants' class program is run weekly and focuses on the basics of well-being and strengths. Temple Grove is one of the infants schools attached to Haberdasher Aske's and one of the teachers from the secondary school volunteered to teach the infants classes. I observed her teaching a Year 1 and a Year 2 class on Kindness.

### **Macclesfield**

I met with Jenny Fox Eades. Jenny is an author and education advisor. She visits schools and colleges and runs various training days as well as conducting her 'Celebrating Strengths' program in schools. We spent a day discussing her program and visiting Tytherington High School where *Strengths Gym* is run. I met two Year 9 students, Rowan and Noah, who took on the role of leaders in the *Strengths Gym* program. They are very involved in the activities and offer suggestions for *Strengths Day*. These included a skateboard day which shows courage and persistence; and dress up days which show creativity and friendship. They also have meetings which they call "scrum meetings" where Jenny meets with a teacher, Rowan and Noah to discuss future plans and ideas. Scrum meetings are very structured and give the boys leadership and responsibility. During a scrum meeting only invited speakers are allowed to speak. After talking to the boys, it was evident that they enjoyed their role, were gaining leadership qualities and felt their ideas were listened to.

### **Scunthorpe**

I went to Henderson Ave Primary School and observed Jenny running *Celebrating Strengths (CS)*. It was great to watch students and teachers being so involved in positive interactions. It was also wonderful to see their walls decorated with all the children's work with *CS*. *CS* uses story telling to promote positive psychology. Stories such as *The Musicians of Bremen* which uses the strength of friendship and *Hansel and Gretel* which uses the strength of creativity to name a few. I interviewed Kathy Lloyd the principal who was impressed with the results in her school, seeing positive changes in the students. Most of the students came from third generation unemployed families with few aspirations. *CS* was creating confidence in the children so that they talked about what they wanted to be when they left school. Kathy also stated that there is much less anxiety in the children and much more confidence. *CS* reinforces the aspects of positive psychology through dance and drama as well. It is used to build a community in the school, it unites the staff who need to embrace it and use it as a whole school approach to get results. Staff have training one hour a week where they talk about *What Went Well (WWW)* focussing only on the positives. For example one teacher said children who had been fighting lately went off and worked things out on their own realising that they needed to be kinder to each other. Sitting in their training hour it was evident that the staff really did take the philosophy on board and were using the language of positive psychology. Staff commented that there was more team work now amongst the staff and the kids were getting on better.

Frodingham Infants' was another school which participates in *CS*. I spoke with Judith Gray the Principal. Here the ages are three to seven years. Already the children are learning about *CS*. Parents are also involved and parent workshops on strengths are run. As a result, they are now starting to use the language at home as well. I spoke with two four year olds and was surprised at their responses. The first, a young girl, was asked what strength had she shown that day, she responded by saying that she showed the strength of friendship as she saw one of the other kids by themselves so she went and played with them so they wouldn't be alone. The other child, a boy, was asked the same and he responded that he showed the strength of leadership as he had seen a boy picking on another boy and went over and said to him to leave him alone as he wasn't being nice. I then spoke with some Year 2 children and this is what followed being asked the same question:

Abraham (7) – I have the strength of courage and persistence, whenever I fall over. I try not to cry

Cooper (7) – I have the strength of persistence, I keep on trying and do my best

Katy (6) – I have the strength of kindness, persistence and courage because if someone is unfair in the playground I help them see what they are doing wrong.

Judith said that *CS* is a universal language in the school. One thing that seems apparent is that poor behaviour shows a downward trend. The strength of Self Control is used and children are taught that 'you own what comes out of your mouth and therefore you are responsible for what you do'. Judith told me about a young boy who was always in trouble for pushing in. The teacher told him that he showed the strength of leadership in wanting to be in the front but now needs to let others have a turn to show their strengths. He accepted this and is now able to take turns. There is also the use of mindfulness and calming down equipment. For example they use a mirror to recognise anger. Frodingham Infants' achieved an 'Outstanding' grade from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the report highlighted the dedicated care and guidance by all staff which encouraged pupils to love learning and develop the personal attributes that helped pupils succeed

## ***Wales***

### **Wrexham and Cardiff**

I met with Sylvia Jones, Coordinator for School-Based Counselling for the Welsh Assembly. I attended the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Conference in Wrexham which focussed on Child Well-Being. The Welsh Assembly has espoused the stance that children need to be happy at school. Sylvia explained that many Welsh students were not attending school due to academic pressure. The Welsh Assembly decided to focus on well-being, getting the children back to school and not focussing just on academic achievement. The outcome was that as the children became happier, they attended school more and the academics rose without the stresses attached. I visited a number of Welsh schools in the surrounds of Wrexham and found them to be accommodating to the students' needs. They have different counsellors attached to the schools, with one a mental health counsellor from CAMHS and another from *Eye-2-Eye*, a school based counselling service. I observed these counselling services in Beddau, Pontyprydd School Cardiff. These offices are very accessible to students and the students have a "hang out area" there as well. I also visited *The Place2Be* at Herbert Thompson Primary School. There was an area entirely dedicated to counselling within this school.

One school in Wales gave a presentation on Bullying at the conference. This school has established a drop-in centre run by the students (similar to our SRC). If students are having trouble with bullying then the leaders deal with it themselves, similarly to the way peer mediation works. It appears to run very well with very little bullying occurring since it started.

I spoke with a number of principals and staff in Wales and found that they were very supportive of the well-being approach. It did take some effort on their part but they found that the results were well worth it.

## **Conclusion**

I visited many places during the tour and found that when well-being was being approached as a whole school strategy, meaning that all teachers embraced it, it worked extremely well. Students appeared happier, teachers appeared happier with more satisfaction in the workplace and there was an overall satisfaction within the school. Bullying was decreasing as students took more notice of people who were lonely or having problems. Students were more confident and were able to take more leadership roles. This approach seemed more successful when compared with having well-being lessons as a once a week lesson where the students are not completely immersed. Nor did students or teachers in the once a week lesson model appear to take the positive psychology approach as seriously.

I was also very impressed with what Ireland is doing with the *Assist* training. Having a universal language with critical incidents can be very comforting to all people involved in the incident.

There has not yet been enough research as to whether positive psychology approaches, badged as “well-being” in schools do decrease youth depression and suicide. However, from what I observed, together with the fact that there are more students attending school in Wales, it could be worth trying in our schools. I have already started some strengths-based activities with students and I teach children relaxation/mindfulness as part of my counsellor role but feel this is not enough. In our educational system in NSW so much pressure is put on our senior students to do well in the HSC that we tend to forget about their well-being. I deal with senior students who have anxiety and depression problems exacerbated by the HSC and their feelings of despair associated with not being good enough. Some students who have chosen not to do an ATAR do very well in their exams and are stress-free. I would like to see well-being commence in our schools in Kindergarten as a whole school approach and followed through to Year 12. We could then evaluate whether the approach reduces depression and anxiety. It appears to build resilience and confidence. Training parents in the “talk” also seems a big job. However, if parents in places like Scunthorpe where there are three generations of unemployment are accepting it, then this should be enough incentive to give it a go.

## **Resources**

[www.celebratingstrengths.com](http://www.celebratingstrengths.com) Jenny Fox Eades

[www.strengthsgym.co.uk](http://www.strengthsgym.co.uk) Positive Psychology Research Centre

[www.theplace2be.org.uk](http://www.theplace2be.org.uk) Making a lifetime difference to children in schools, Linda Nicklin

[Alison.theaker@rhondda-cynon-staff.gov.uk](mailto:Alison.theaker@rhondda-cynon-staff.gov.uk) Eye to Eye Youth Counselling Service

[Sylvia.Jones@Wales.GSI.Gov.UK](mailto:Sylvia.Jones@Wales.GSI.Gov.UK) Coordinator for School-based Counselling

[www.sosadireland.ie](http://www.sosadireland.ie) Peter Moroney, Save Our Sons and Daughters

[www.livingworks.net](http://www.livingworks.net) Assist Training Program

[www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie) Aware: Helping to defeat Depression

Haberdashers' Aske's Foundation & University Of East London (2010) Well-being in Action.

*See Me Beautiful.*

By Red and Kathy Grammer

And used by Jenny Fox Eades in her Celebrating Strengths. This poem really made an impression on me.

See me beautiful  
Look for the best in me  
It's what I really am  
And all I want to be  
It may take some time  
It may be hard to find  
But see me beautiful

See me beautiful  
Each and every day  
Could you take a chance  
Could you find a way  
To see me shining through  
In everything I do  
And see me beautiful?