

Premier's Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Enhancing adolescent mental health within the school context

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Introduction

During the past 10 years strengths based psychology has been utilised in many schools by guidance personnel and Wellbeing Teams. Additionally there exist other therapies including Narrative Therapy, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Solution Focused Therapy that support students who experience emotional distress. Recently in my work as school counsellor and DGO it has been my focus to use positive psychology and to intertwine this with traditional psychological approaches to enhance the mental health of my clients. A secondary focus has been the emotional and mental health of school personnel and utilising positive psychology to enhance staff morale.

Rationale

According to the World Health Organisation, by the year 2020 depression will be the second most debilitating condition in the developed world. Adolescent depression in Australia appears to be increasing. Martin (2007) suggests that the increase in depression could be measured by the number of prescriptions of antidepressants issued to adolescents and young adults. The Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that in 1995 an estimated 14,500 people in the 15-24 years age group were prescribed antidepressants, whereas 10 years later, in 2005, about 80,000 of this cohort can be estimated to have used antidepressants (ABS, 2006).

There is substantial research in Australia, United States, United Kingdom and European Union that supports strengths based psychology focus within schools for both staff and students.

Generally, society is acknowledging that a problem with depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses exists. This statement is based on the following evidence:

The 2007 National survey on Mental Health and Wellbeing by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

- 45% of those surveyed aged 16 – 85 years had experienced a mental disorder at some point in their life
- One in five Australian adults experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months
- Younger people were more likely to have a mental disorder – 26% of people aged 16 – 24 years and 25% of people aged 25 – 34 years had a disorder compared to 6% of people aged 75 – 85 years
- Only 35% of people with a mental disorder sought access to health services for their mental health problems
- Suicide is the main cause of premature death among people with a mental illness, more than 10% of people with a mental illness die by suicide within the first 10 years of diagnosis

Focus of learning

The Anika Scholarship enabled me to attend a number of conferences that focused on different psychological methodologies and varying clientele. The conferences were The Festival of Education at Wellington College; European Social and Emotional Conference in Manchester; The European Psychological Conference in Istanbul; Narrative Therapy Conference in Brazil

and the 2nd World Congress on Positive Psychology. Each conference had a different focus, and due to the constraints of this report, I will highlight the presentations of speakers who have made significant contributions in their field, but who are not internationally well known.

Festival of education

Wellington College

This Festival of Education had a plethora of speakers who have developed strategies to support the child as a whole regardless of gender, socio-economic status and ability. As Anthony Seldon (Master of Wellington College) wrote 'This time of flux represents great opportunities but also great dangers to all fields of education: primary, secondary and tertiary, in schools and institutions both private and public. At stake is the intellectual, cultural and psychological health not only of our extraordinary young people, but also this country and its position in a changing world.' The highlights from this conference were:

How to fix our schools - Anthony Seldon

Anthony Seldon promoted five ways to change learning in our schools:

1) Change from rote learning to genuine learning

- a) Assessment in different and broader ways
- b) Teachers teach what they find interesting
- c) Learning is the process of living
- d) Look at the theory of knowledge – why and how we know
- e) Promote the Harkness Model: table is oval and the teacher is part of the circle.

2) Partnership in education

- a) Partnership with state and independent schools
- b) A great adventure in life where everyone is a learner – student, parent and teachers
- c) Changing students' attitudes to learning and improve communication between all parties.

3) Holistic education

- a) Lead out what is within a child
- b) Accept every child has extraordinary possibilities within them
- c) 8 aptitudes and in pairs
- d) Logical and linguistic aptitudes
- e) Creative and physical aptitudes
- f) Personal and social aptitudes
- g) Spiritual and moral aptitudes

4) Wellbeing and standards

- a) Service;
- b) Exercise;
- c) Belonging;
- d) Gratitude;
- e) Strengths;
- f) Stillness;
- g) Control of life;
- h) Savouring;
- i) Creativity and hobbies;

j) Lifelong learning

5) Leadership

a) Encourage leadership in all students

b) Leadership encourages confidence and the ability to manage situations and resolve conflict

c) The ability to learn about hardship and the physical challenge

European social and emotional conference

Manchester

The conference theme was 'social and emotional education across the world: celebrating diversity in theory, research and practice.' The presentations covered topics including: implementation of interventions, changing student behaviour, teacher training, workforce issues, mindfulness, and issues relating to special educational needs. There were presentations from over 30 countries.

I co-presented with Meredith Ash (Principal of North Sydney Girls High School) on Improving Mental Health Sustainability In A Selective Girls High School Environment. The focus of our presentation was the three significant welfare issues namely, anxiety, depression and self harm at North Sydney Girls High School. This situation is not unique to North Sydney Girls High School and similar situations have been identified at other selective high schools across states and territories by Dixon and Gow (1993) using a Social Comparison Theory and by Kalliope Emmanouilidou (2007) whose research investigates the negative social emotional attributes which affects learning outcomes.

Our presentation spotlighted the whole school Social Emotional Learning Programs, based on positive psychology, currently implemented to develop the students' resilience (values and wellbeing), connectedness (engagement with family, school and community) and innovations (incorporating the big picture framework). Specifically, the following was addressed at the presentation;

- Year 7 – Implementing Program Achieve;
- Year 8 – Big Sister /Little Sister Program;
- Year 9 – High Resolves Program;
- Year 10 – Utilising the Mental Toughness Questionnaire and program;
- Year 11 – Developing a Coaching / Positive Psychology Program;
- Year 12 – Intensive School Counsellor Involvement.

This whole school social learning plan encompasses the Nel Noddings quote (2005: page?) of 'We should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others'.

However the highlight of the conference was the keynote presentation entitled 'Why Listening To The Voices And Views Of Children And Young People Should Be The Basis For Promoting

Their Social And Emotional Competence' by Sir Al Aynsley Green (First Children's Commissioner for England) was received with a standing ovation.

Lord Green discussed the The Good Childhood Inquiry 2009 which he described as a searing commentary on childhood today which highlights excessive individualism, soaring family breakdown, commercialisation, overly-competitive education and dire poverty. He described this in the context of emotional and mental health in childhood where one in ten children has a diagnosable mental health disorder. Also of note were the particularly vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers, young carers, children in care, disability, children who have been abused, bereavement and the hidden harm of young people with drug or alcohol issues. The statistics that follow describe what some children are exposed to:

- 300,000 children with drug misusing parent
- 850,000 children with alcohol misusing parent - Impact of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum
- 160,000 children of prisoners
- Parental mental health: < 50% of adult mental health users are parents
- Domestic violence: 700,000 recorded episodes in one year
- 175,000 young carers in the UK – high risk of mental health problems

Lord Green also highlighted the increased burden of mental health for school personnel. He states that in a 1000 student secondary school, at any one time:

- 100 students will be suffering significant mental illness
- 50 students will be seriously depressed
- 10-20 students will have an obsessive compulsive disorder
- 5-10 girls will be affected by eating disorders
- 35-60 students are bereaved of someone close

But only 25% of adolescents with clinically significant mental health problems will be accessing the services they need. Therefore we need to promote emotional resilience in children by having appropriate trained personnel in schools who students can turn to, where confidentiality exists, and there is a promotion of mental health which includes social and emotional learning programs including Primary and Secondary SEAL(Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools and Roots of Empathy.

12th European congress of psychology, Istanbul

The theme for this congress was "Understanding and Embracing Diversity". There were speakers from over 70 countries, with 36 invited speakers, more than 800 oral presentations and 1700 poster presentations. There following describes the highlights to demonstrate strategies that can practically support students with depression and trauma as well as approaches being developed in the laboratory.

School program for emotional development (SPED), University of Oviedo Spain

Presenter: Eduard Garcia Gueto.

The following program was developed for children within primary schools for all children. This is reported as students who attend mainstream schooling, children who have anxiety and depression and also looks at perfectionism and parents.

The basic premise as described the University of Spain suggests that:

$$\textit{Capacity} + \textit{effort} = \textit{academic performance}$$

However this is incomplete as we need to add psychological welfare therefore,

$$\textit{Capacity} + \textit{Effort} + \textit{Psychological Welfare} = \textit{Academic Performance}$$

Research shows that if children are emotionally healthy the better the academic performance.

Research states that academic performance is related to psychological emotion. The aim was to develop a program to improve children's psychological emotion.

The program was based on six blocks:

- Presentation to the students
- Emotional Education
- Detective Thinking
- Positive Activities (Games and physical exercise)
- I Can Say No
- Problem Solving

The children had homework to complete and parents and tutors were also shown the program and had individual input from the researchers. Results indicated that the program was positive and more effective when the tutors applied it to their class, rather than psychologists applying it to small groups.

The effect of the school program with children with anxious and depressive symptoms

Presenter: Adan Robles.

Mr Robles reports that 15% of primary school aged children in Spain suffer from depressive symptoms. Additionally, depression appears to be related to anxiety, irritability and a feeling of hopelessness. There was statistical significance in relation between:

- Depression with irritability
- Depression with anxiety
- Depression with feelings of hopelessness
- Depression with academic performance.

Post intervention classroom teachers and parents noted a significant reduction in depressive symptoms, irritability, anxiety and academic performance. However there was no reduction in the feelings of hopelessness. Therefore PEDE is an effective psychological treatment and that depression affects irritability, anxiety and academic performance.

The effect of the school program with children on perfectionism levels and parental perception

This area of the research focused on perfectionism and parental pressure. One can differentiate perfectionism into the following:

- Self oriented perfectionism – I always try to be the best in my class.
- Other oriented perfectionism – if people think that I made a mistake, they think I am no good at all.
- Socially prescribed perfectionisms
- Parent pressures perception – my parents expect me to be the best in everything
- Adaptive perfectionism – perfectionist striving
- Maladaptive perfectionism – negatively relates to academic performance.

After the program had been implemented, it was found that all levels of perfectionism had been decreased (research citation?).

From flashbacks to flashforwards

Presenter: Emily Holmes

Dr Holmes illustrated how mental imagery helps professionals in practice and illustrates this in terms of theory. Mental imagery is when we see in our mind's eye, hear with our mind's ear and so on. Imagery has interesting characteristics that allows us to remember or to make creative leaps. However affect-laden and intrusive images cause distress across a range of psychological disorders. The following is a brief description of the terms used by Dr Holmes.

(1) *Mental imagery and emotion.* 'It has long been assumed that mental imagery has a special relationship with emotion. However, while affect-laden images are striking to clinicians, experimental work has been lacking.' Supportive research was discussed regarding the hypothesis that compared to verbal processing, mental imagery has a more powerful impact on emotion .

(2) *Flashbacks.* 'In comparison to studying memory that is deliberately recalled we know relatively little about involuntary, intrusive memories and images. Distressing intrusive images – flashbacks to a past trauma are the hallmark of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).' Research completed by Dr Holmes suggested that visuospatial cognitive tasks, including the computer game Tetris, appear to protect against analogue flashback development .

(3) *Flashforwards.* 'Intrusive mental imagery can also occur of the future, such as - flashforwards to suicidal acts or manic pursuits in bipolar disorder.' Clients with depression find it difficult to deliberately generate positive imagery about the future.

Research in experimental psychopathology may inform our understanding of the mechanisms underlying psychological disorders. It can suggest avenues for treatment innovation, unlike traditional therapies.

After the school shootings – Responses from Finnish psychology to the need of support

Presenters: Eija Palosaari, Tuija Turunen, Nina Lyytinen, Tiina Taijonlahti

Professionals from the Finnish Psychology Association presented on the aftermath of the trauma from the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings. Australian school psychologists can learn about serious incident management from their experience

In Jokela an 18 year old shot and killed six students and two staff members including the principal and school nurse and then committed suicide. Three months later there was a school shooting in Kauhajoki.

Eija Palosaari discussed the after care principles in both school shootings. She identified the following key principles:

- In crisis work After Care requires expertise and specialised leadership in planning, collaborating and evaluating the needs for local and widespread services
- Clear division of tasks is required so as not to blur location of the accident and victims place of residence
- Psycho-education is needed on many levels
- After Care intervention commences in line with similarities in the victims experience and natural peer groups
- After Care has to reduce gradually and the information and special skills have to be consolidated into permanent service structures

Tuija Turunen then discussed Post Traumatic Stress symptoms amongst school personnel. The nature of this catastrophe was such that it was an intrusion into the safe environment, which exposed the school community to trauma including PTSD. Additionally it was a centripetal catastrophe as it affected all inhabitants of Jokela community.

The school community comprises four groups including students, parents, teachers, other personnel. After such an event, the teachers have a more important role including and reconstructing a safe environment for growth and learning, therefore teachers need assistance to understand the normal crisis reaction. Ms Turunen discussed the different approaches for different crisis phases:

1. Shock phase (first five days)
2. Return to School Work
3. Transition from Crisis Work to Permanent Support System (about two weeks after incident)
4. Long Term Support System

Nina Lyytinene discussed the need for psychologists at the school, suggesting they are essential to ensure the coping of the students and staff in crisis, providing comprehensive psychosocial support and suitable treatment for students and staff. Their work is essential in the following areas:

1. Immediate Crisis Work
2. Systematic Work
3. Psychosocial Support
4. Crisis Therapies
5. Special Therapies

10th international conference on narrative therapy and community work, Salvador, Brazil

This conference provided me with the opportunity to explore Narrative Therapy with clientele of all ages and in all settings. Presenters were from all over the world including Brazil, Uganda, USA, UK, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Chile, France, Canada, Norway and Austria. Although there were many highlights, the most enlightening was the following.

From gender 'disturbance' to gender belonging

Presenter: Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad (Norway) is a physician, a family therapist, a specialist in clinical sexology, an associate professor at the University of Agder, a father, grandfather, a spouse and an open transperson.

Dr Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad is a pioneer of demonstrating ways of responding to families, friend networks and schools when a child's unusual gender expressions are causing disturbance. Dr Pirelli Benestad refuses to see a child as disturbed. Instead he works with the family and networks to create contexts of belonging. The following is a synopsis of his presentation:

Dr Pirelli Benestad described the seven options of gender belonging including Male and Female, Intergenders (born with both male and female genitalia), Transgender, Gender Dismissers, Personal Genders (do gender in their own way) and Eunuch Genders (males who have their testicles taken away).

Society in general assumes that there are only two genders. They are described as opposites, templates of beauty and are as Pirelli Benestad describes *Top Shelf Requirements*. The other five options will not be found on the *Top Shelf* as they are ugly, unwanted, shameful and disturbing. An unethicised offer is not an offer of positive belonging

The challenge for the people who do not ascribe themselves to the traditional binary gender system is to present them to the world. Additionally, for the world to appreciate and welcome that which is presented. It must be remembered that if no-one dares nothing happens. People need transpositivity and or multigender positivity.

Gender expressions may create disorder. Although there is no substantial proof that children who are transgender suffer from any kind of disorder or disturbance, what we do know is that they disturb their parents, family, teachers, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and the rest of the networks. Interestingly, research suggests that somatic boys are far more disturbing than somatic girls. Dr Pirelli Benestad describes the networking process as very important. He describes the Six Rings of Ripples, beginning with the family and ending with the media.

Second world congress on positive psychology, Philadelphia

There are so many highlights from this extraordinary conference. A phenomenal beginning with the fathers of positive psychology discussing their latest theories including Dr Martin Seligman on the theory of PERMA; Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his son Dr Mark Csikszentmihalyi engaged in an East West Dialogue and Dr Ed Diener presenting his findings on the science of wellbeing and positive psychology. The other two highlights were Dr Barbara Frederickson with her new theory: Love – A New Lens on the Science of Thriving and Dr Robert J Vallerand discussing The Role of Passion in Optimal Functioning in Society. Further information is available freely on the internet. For a fuller description of this conference, please contact me @

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Conclusion

This study tour has enabled me to explore many psychological therapies, (both practical and those still in the laboratory) and positive psychology. This has enabled me to reflect, consolidate and expand my repertoire to support children with mental health disorders, especially those children who are at risk of anxiety and depression. The highlights of each conference demonstrate the need for increasing support of our youth to help them not only survive but thrive.

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