

Sue Meaby's development work  
**Strategies to support students'  
emotional wellbeing**  
at Heathcote School, Stevenage

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Sue was responsible for the day-to-day management of the Learning Support Unit (LSU) at Heathcote School, a secondary school in Stevenage. The regulation of emotion was a key issue for many students at the school, so Sue wanted to raise the profile of emotional health and develop better strategies for supporting students.

Sue attended an eight day course as part of the UK Resilience Programme provided by the local authorities in South Tyneside, Manchester and Hertfordshire. When she shared an outline of the programme with colleagues at the school, they seemed responsive to her proposal to use the programme with Year 10 students. The Resilience Programme was derived from the 'Penn Resiliency Programme' designed by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania for younger children. It was based on cognitive-behavioural theory which explains how a lack of skills in regulating emotions can lead to depression and a lack of belief in efficacy (Cutuli *et al.*, 2006, Reivich and Shatté, 2002). Sue read around the subject particularly concentrating on Martin Seligman's work (1990, 2007) and revisiting Carol Dweck's 'Self Theories' (2000) which is often referred to as a framework for understanding 'learned helplessness'.

Initially Sue collaborated with the Inclusion Co-ordinator, Head of Year, Assistant Head of Year and form tutors, all of whom had a real interest in empowering students by developing their emotional strength. She started by using the material from the course which had been designed for Year 7 students. Perhaps not surprisingly, the feedback from students showed that she would have to adapt the material to meet the needs of the older students. Asking students to write about their feelings was not a positive experience for them as they had, by Year 10, developed barriers to writing. She adapted the programme to include visual demonstrations and worked with the students to agree ground rules for group discussion, both of which were more effective. The programme of lessons enables students to

explore the link between thoughts and feelings and learn how to analyse their own emotional responses to challenges and develop assertiveness. Lessons feature, for example, guidance on how to avoid jumping to conclusions and how to use relaxation techniques to build coping strategies.

As the programme gathered momentum, Sue had a meeting with the Senior Leadership Team which gave her an opportunity to explain the concept behind the programme and discuss the practical aspects of teaching it. This allowed her to stand back, consider the successes of the programme so far and think about ways to improve it. The issue of some students' perception of the course as being 'not a proper lesson' was also discussed. She sought the support of the Inclusion Co-ordinator who subsequently discussed the programme with the students, highlighting the life skills they were developing.

To evaluate the programme Sue began by seeking the views of the students and those of the Year 10 tutors who know the students well since they see them daily. She wanted to avoid questionnaires and use more creative and kinaesthetic tools that might elicit deeper responses. She decided, therefore, to ask the tutors for a thumbnail sketch of each student's progress and she used the 'Blob Tree' method to help them to identify where they thought their students were in relation to others.



Sue used the Blob Tree as a tool for discussion with the students themselves. It was very encouraging to see the change in students' attitude towards the programme. Following the changes she had made to the programme, the students seemed more positive and had grasped the principles behind it. This gave her the confidence to move on and address ways to develop students' assertiveness which, until this point, they had been confusing with aggression.

Next, Sue planned a relaxation session in the drama studio. She consulted the students first and they all agreed to take part, although two girls subsequently withdrew. The first half of the session involved discussing ways of dealing with stressful situations by using relaxation techniques. One student did not want to take part and watched from the sidelines, but the majority of students responded positively and asked if they could do it again. She fed back the outcomes from the session to her SLT colleague who felt that such a skill should be made more readily available to all students in line with the emphasis on emotional wellbeing in the 'Every Child Matters' policy (DfES, 2003).

Evaluating the success of an emotional wellbeing programme is always going to be difficult, but there had been very positive feedback from the students themselves and from colleagues. The group dynamic had improved markedly: the students had changed from being a collection of disparate individuals to being a cohesive group with a distinct identity. Sue shared her work with a wider audience by making a presentation at a HertsCam Network Event. She also shared her work at school through a 'speed dating event' attended by the whole staff. She received positive comments following this event and felt her work was validated when she was asked to teach the programme to several groups of students in the following academic year.

## References

- Cutuli, J. J., Chaplin, T. M., Gillham, J. E., Reivich, K. J. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2006) Preventing co-occurring depression symptoms in adolescents with conduct problems: The Penn Resiliency Program. *New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094, 282-286.
- DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*. London: DfES.
- Dweck, C. (2000) *Self-Theories: their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia PA: Psychology Press.

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Seligman, M. E. P. (2007) *The Optimistic Child: Proven Program to Safeguard Children from Depression & Build Lifelong Resilience*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Seligman, M. E. P. (1990) *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

### **Further reading**

Roberts, Y. (2009) *GRIT: the skills for success and how they are grown*. London: The Young Foundation.